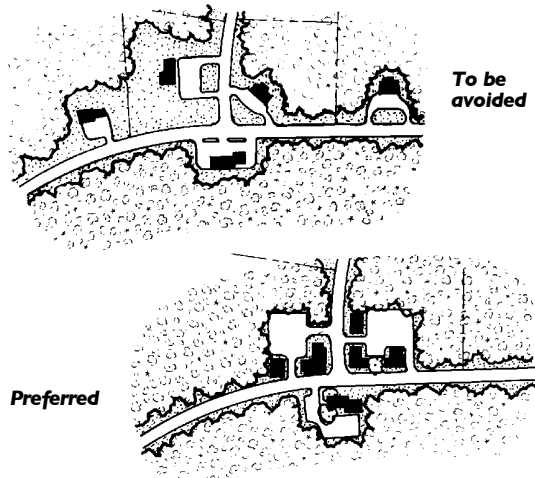


# Highway Commercial

## HC.1 Rear Parking

Roadside commercial development should logically be sited relatively close to the thoroughfare, not be set back behind huge asphalt parking lots where the contents of display windows cannot be readily seen, and where signs must very large to be readable. Because paved parking spaces are undoubtedly the least attractive component of any business, it makes greater sense to downplay them in less visible parts of the property, such as to the side or rear, so that the parts of the business which most customers find really pleasing (such as trees, flowering shrubs, and traditional building facades) and those elements dearest to the hearts of merchants (signs and display windows) can become their most prominent features.



## HC.2 “Maximum Setbacks”

This birdseye sketch shows how the buildings in the “recommended approach” above might look in three dimensions. Such results could be easily achieved by reversing the conventional concept of “minimum front setbacks” contained in most zoning codes and establishing instead a “maximum setback” giving the buildings, signs, and window displays greater visibility from the road. A good rule-of-thumb would be to limit front setbacks to 12–15 feet from the right-of-way, reserving a landscaped, asphalt-free area between the shops and the highway shoulder, for planting a variety of trees, shrubs, and perennial flowers.



Courtesy Lincoln Institute of Land Policy<sup>1</sup>

## HC.3 Traditional Lines, Inviting Landscapes – I

This close-up photo shows a very fine example of a simple building with traditional lines, related nicely to the travelling public, and landscaped in a low-key manner using a blend of native species plants which capture “the spirit of the place.” What could be more in keeping with small rural communities in New York’s loveliest county?



#### HC.4 Traditional Lines, Inviting Landscapes – 2

Even as utilitarian a structure as a car wash can be made to blend in with community values and be planted up in such a way that customers may actually enjoy their visit. Nothing fancy, just plain honest architecture reflecting commonplace building traditions in the Northeast, supplemented by several trees and a couple of planting beds.



#### HC.5 Contemporary Example

This rural shopping center, situated along a two-lane state highway, conceals all of its parking and maximizes the opportunity for shops to be seen clearly and for cars to be out of view. Unless the merchants are in the business of selling cars, making parking areas the most visually prominent feature of a commercial property makes little sense. When shoppers see shops, a driveway entrance, and a small sign pointing the way to “Rear Parking,” they understand that this is a shopping center, without being prompted by the visual cue of parked vehicles along the frontage.



Courtesy American Planning Association<sup>2</sup>

#### HC.6 Keeping Existing Trees

These three photos illustrate how existing trees along the highway frontage were retained as part of the overall development plan. Developers saved money in stump removal/disposal, and on landscaping as well. Mature trees of this size and significance would have cost thousands of dollars to plant, and add enormous value to the resulting projects, which enjoyed “instant,” free landscaping from opening day onwards. Many surveys of shoppers document their general preference to patronize businesses located in areas that are attractive, which they tend to visit more frequently and where they spend more time (and dollars). The ability of such tree stands to mitigate the visual impact of front parking (in two of the examples) is significant. In Cattaraugus County, with its largely forested hills, designing around existing tree stands helps new development seem less “raw” and artificial, and much more in keeping with the area’s natural scenic character. It is this wonderful rural character that draws in tourists and makes native residents reluctant to move to more developed places with broader job opportunities, but which typically look like “Everywhere, USA.”



### HC.7 To Tree or Not to Tree

These two businesses face each other along one of the principal approach roads into town. The contrast in their appearance could hardly be greater. In this case, there were no local requirements for landscaping, and good results were achieved on a purely “hit-or-miss” basis. For communities that really care about how they present themselves to the public, such decisions are not left to chance but are subject to basic design standards that everyone along such corridors is expected to meet.



### HC.8 Rise of Ground

Very gentle berms can elevate new landscaping by a foot or so and give it added height from the start, in addition to helping screen vehicle grills and exhaust pipes in situations where the Town has not yet established maximum setbacks and rear parking as fundamental rules of commercial site design. Most berms, however, are not nearly as subtle, and resemble river levees, so care must be taken when employing this approach.



### HC.9 A Little Depression

Subtle grade changes on a large property can enable imaginative designers to reduce the visual prominence of front parking with retaining walls that permit the asphalt lots to be sunk down by a foot or two. When combined with low plantings along the top of the wall, vehicle screening is very easy to achieve.



### HC.10 Timeless Stone

Existing stone walls can be preserved, or new ones built, to great effect as a low-maintenance device that helps establish a classic “signature” appearance, while also providing landscape continuity across a property’s highly visible “front end.”



### HC.12 Better than “Bathtub Basins”

“Turning lemons into lemonade,” creative engineers shaped this stormwater detention area into a broad, shallow area suitable for landscaping. All too often these facilities resemble impact craters, due to a lack of imagination by designers and an absence of better standards at the community level.



### HC.11 Flowing Water

Natural drainage swales offer splendid opportunities for creating inviting water features. Here a couple of grandparents read the Sunday papers while their grandson and a friend fish — in the middle of a shopping center in a community that cares about retaining its special rural character. The typical engineering response to such situations is to enclose such streams in box culverts and pave over the top of them.



### HC.13 The UnFactory

This pair of photos shows how much can be achieved simply by planting a double row of fast-growing native evergreens (white pines) in front of a basic, boxy industrial plant along the main “gateway” road into a small town. In contrast, the same kind of no-frills building, erected about the same time (mid 1960s), is still as stark and unappealing to the eye as it was the day it was finished — because the owners did all the landscaping that was required (zero) and nothing more, ever.



### HC.14 Message Signs

The unwritten “message” delivered by the plastic box sign with its distinctive blinking arrow is that neither the business owner nor the Town truly cares about community appearance. A practical, low-cost alternative, built by local carpenters with materials from local supply



yards, permits merchants to modify their advertising on a weekly, daily, or even hourly basis. Instead of exporting local earnings to out-of-state sign manufacturers, the alternative approach reinforces the local economy, and is built of pressure-treated timbers, exterior grade plywood, indoor/outdoor carpet, and plastic letters fixed to the carpet with velcro tabs.

### HC.15 A Tale of Two Cheese Houses

Another example of the “Vanna White” approach to land use, in which towns spin their “wheels of fortune” and get whatever happens to come their way, is exemplified here. One community lost while the other won, and — sadly — neither town was in control of the situation. The couple that owned the nicer shop spent money out

of their own pocket so they would not have to work inside an artificial cheese — the building they bought looked exactly like the “cheesy” one, photographed in Wells, Maine. All they added were barn board siding and a conical roof (sensible in areas that experience rain and snow).



### HC.16 Growing Smarter

The landscaping and signage at these two gas stations illustrate the learning curve experienced by one community over a 25-year period. Realizing that the ugliness of past development was directly related to their inadequate zoning



standards, officials updated their regulations to do something extraordinary: to actually require what towns-



people really wanted to see, rather than to permit whatever the lowest common denominator will produce. Communities adopting low standards will achieve poor results all the time. Those that require better results will achieve them routinely. It is that simple.

### HC.17 Links to the Past

These three examples illustrate the benefits of taking advantage of older buildings and incorporating them into plans for new commercial development. The first group of buildings (below) had been ignored and underutilized for decades before anyone recognized their potential and acquired them for a very reasonable price. Their distinctiveness adds interest to the shopping experience and is a large part of their success story. The other two examples feature original farmhouses complemented by new buildings whose designs play off the older vernacular architecture. In one (right, top), the new shops take the form of two barn-like structures set parallel to each other and to the highway, whose doors and display windows face an interior parking courtyard. (The “silo” is purely decorative, but provides a highly visible signage opportunity.) The foreground open space

provides a nice rural touch, but also serves the more practical purpose of accommodating septic drainage fields. In the third example (below, bottom), the architect’s idea was to create a contemporary version of an old stable or milking barn, behind which the parking is located, and onto which the “barn shops” face.



Courtesy American Planning Association (lower left and upper right)<sup>2</sup>

### HC.18 Front Becomes Back

The two photos at right depict two contrasting ways of handling automobile body repair shops. In both cases, the buildings utilize large garage doors and extensive asphalt pavement providing areas for vehicle access, parking, and storage. In the first example (top), typifying the way this kind of business is generally conducted, little thought was given to the manner in which the building and pavement relate to the community. There is virtually no differentiation between, or separation of, the private driveway apron and the public roadway, with nearly continuous blacktop flowing from one to the other. Apart from the lifeless wooden triangle along the front edge, this property is completely unlandscaped, and undoubtedly complies with the community's minimal zoning requirements.

In comparison, exactly the same type of business presents a markedly different public face, and one which fits far more comfortably into the small village where it is located (bottom). This huge improvement was achieved at little or no additional expense through the extremely simple expedient of reversing the building's orientation on the site. Recognizing there was no need whatsoever to locate his large ugly garage doors and the wide asphalt apron on the front facade, the owner of this business decided on his own to turn the situation around (quite literally) and to put his best side forward, so to speak. This photo was taken shortly after construction was completed, and before several trees and shrubs were planted in the front yard. As there were no legal provisions requiring this intelligent kind of approach, this example illustrates the "hit-or-miss" techniques followed by most towns, which usually give as little thought to



visual results and community appearance as did the owner of the less attractive body shop.

The photo at left illustrates the way a small gas station formerly with one service bay added a second bay and greatly improved its appearance in the process. This building was for many decades a typically squat little stucco box, noticeably out of step with the late 19th century homes surrounding it in the heart of this village's quaint historic center. As the business constituted a nonconforming use, its owner realized the only way he could gain Town approval to expand it would be if he offered to give it a major face-lift as part of the deal. His idea to relocate the old front-facing garage door to the back wall and to add another service bay beside it was truly inspired. The originality of the proposal so impressed the local appeals board that it granted the variance, recognizing that if it took a hard line and denied it, the result would be many more years of looking at a much less pleasant building.



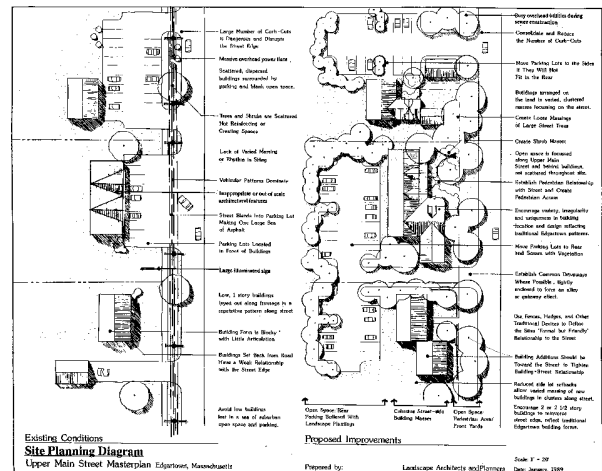
### HC.19 Flats Above Shops

The modest slope on this building site enabled the developer of these retail units to achieve greater construction efficiencies by using his foundation and roof to serve a second level of floorspace — without inconvenient stairs or a costly elevator. Each level is accessed at grade due to the topography, but similar results could be achieved on somewhat less sloping terrain by modifying the grades with earth-moving equipment, elevating the ground on the rear side. Such apartment units cost considerably less to create, using virtually the same land, foundations, and roofs that a single-story structure would require in any case. In resort areas their income potential for winter ski rentals is obvious and it is surprising that more retail developers have not already followed this approach, but even in non-resort areas it offers a viable way to provide affordable housing or rental accommodation for households in transition (moving into town and waiting for new homes to be completed, dealing with marital separation issues, young couples not yet able to buy a home of their own, etc.).



### HC.20 Buildings that Grow

When businesses grow in sales or volume, their owners often first look at ways to expand their premises rather than to incur the added costs of relocating to larger structures. Instead of expanding to the side or rear, as would be the typical response, they can be encouraged or required through zoning standards to reduce the deep front setbacks of their existing buildings — a dimension that could become nonconforming through new zoning provisions that require building additions to be located on the front side with all or part of the current front parking relocated to the side or rear. This drawing also illustrates the principles of shade tree planting along the front edge to establish a more traditional appearance, and linked parking areas behind (to reduce the need for customers to continually enter and exit the highway when patronizing different businesses along the thoroughfare).



Courtesy American Planning Association<sup>2</sup>

### HC.21 Buildings that Disappear

One of the nicest things about commercial strips is that their buildings generally have a design life of no more than 25–30 years, and that most community residents can look forward to seeing them replaced within their lifetimes. Forward-thinking communities learn from their past mistakes or oversights and ensure that history does not needlessly repeat itself, by adopting standards which are more in line with the wishes of their residents, as expressed in visual preference surveys such as the one conducted in Cattaraugus County during the autumn of 1999. The results of that survey revealed strong preferences for more modest front setbacks, parking locations



that are less visually prominent, greater shade tree planting, and signs that communicate messages effectively without dominating the roadside view.

## Village Commercial

### VC.1 Central Green

Village and town centers should always possess a central green or common to serve as a community focal point, both visually and functionally. For example, in Little Valley the village green serves as location for the bandstand and the weekly farmers' market. In Franklinville, it provides an attractive oasis that enhances the center's

character and boosts property values all around it. Opportunities occasionally arise when buildings burn down and when, in the course of redevelopment, existing buildings are razed. When local officials have previously thought about the desirability of creating such greens within existing centers or neighborhoods and are ready



Courtesy Sasaki Associates, Watertown, MA

with “big picture” thoughts when the hour arrives, these opportunities are more likely to be seized for the long-term general good. This aerial perspective sketch from Sasaki Associates illustrates a number of principles described in this section of the design guidebook, including formal community open space, rear parking, infilling, maintaining the street line, modulating building massing, and planting shade trees.