



III. GUIDELINES FOR SITE DESIGN





A. Introduction

Site design is the relationship between a historic building and its site features, such as landscaping, outbuildings, and other elements within the property boundary. These site features help define the historic character of the property and may be considered an important part of any project reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission. As you plan your project you will need to consult the Zoning Ordinance for detailed requirements on many of the site features discussed in this chapter.

Olde Towne's historic site character reflects the early development of Portsmouth's urban residential core. The 1752 Crawford plat shows a grid layout of small rectangular blocks divided into four lots each. The dense concentration of buildings on these early sites left little room for site improvements and frequent flooding even precluded kitchen outbuildings.

Olde Towne's tree-lined streets, edged with granite curbs and brick or stone slab sidewalks, often take the place of site plantings. Stairs to the main level of early "basement house" residences often connect directly to these sidewalks. In a few instances, later residences were built with a moderate setback allowing for a small front yard.



This illustration of a street shows the close spacing and consistent setback of the houses in Olde Towne. Street trees in planting strips provide a green canopy.



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This street view shows a block with varying setbacks. The house in the foreground has a small planting area bisected by steps to the sidewalk. In the background, a higher set of steps lead to the entry of a basement house.



This hinged picket gate obscures site parking for the accompanying house. Off-street parking is a rarity in the Olde Towne district.



This driveway uses brick in two paving patterns to relate to the historic character of the district.

B. Walkways and Driveways

Wooden or masonry stairs of varying heights directly connect most of Olde Towne's houses to the streetscape. In very few instances the space between two townhouses, or entry to a rear yard from a corner lot, has been paved to allow for on-site parking.

⊘ Inappropriate Treatments

- 1 Avoid placing driveways on small narrow lots if the driveway will have a major visual impact on the site.
- 2 Do not place paved areas for parking in the front yard.
- 3 Avoid using large expanses of bright white or gray concrete surfaces or asphalt in visible areas.
- 4 Do not demolish contributing historic buildings for parking.

✓ Guidelines

- 1 Retain existing historic walkways and driveways.
- 3 Replace damaged areas with materials that match the original paving material in color, size, texture, and finish.
- 4 Locate driveways only on large or medium size lots that can accommodate such a feature.
- 5 New parking should be located to the side or rear of existing buildings and should be screened with plantings if visible from a public right-of-way.
- 6 Ensure that new paving material is compatible with the character of the district. The most historically appropriate material in Olde Towne is brick.
- 7 Use the same materials in both walkways and driveways to provide a uniform appearance and continuity of design.



C. Sheds and Garages

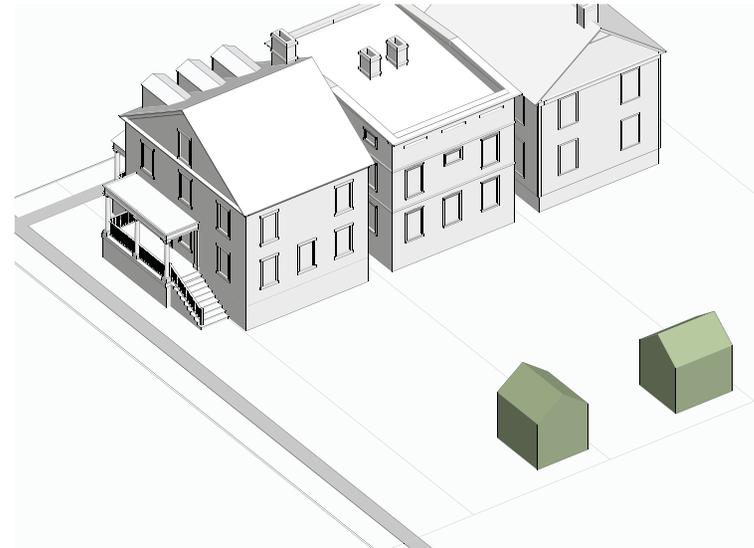
Outbuildings, common to many early Virginia towns, were not prevalent in Olde Towne Portsmouth due to the frequent flooding of the area. Over time, small sheds and garages have been added to sites that can accommodate them. These outbuildings are most often located near the intersection of rear lot lines and adjacent property lines.

Inappropriate Treatments

- 1 Do not tear down existing historic outbuildings.
- 2 Do not place prefabricated outbuildings where they are visible from the street.
- 3 Do not construct new outbuildings that are out of scale with the lot and house.



The brick structure and dark green paneled garage doors depicted here complement the building materials and color scheme of the accompanying house.



Small sheds may be placed near rear lot lines as shown above.

Guidelines

- 1 Retain and repair historic outbuildings following the *Guidelines for Existing Structures* found in *Chapter IV*.
- 2 Place new outbuildings to the rear of lots that are large enough to accommodate them, following the applicable zoning requirements as found in *Chapter II*.
- 3 Design new outbuildings to be compatible with the style and character of the primary building on the site, especially in scale, materials, and roof slope. For more information on appropriate new construction, see *Chapter V*.



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Streetscape and site elements blend to create an urban residential environment softened by mature trees and traditional materials.



Seasonal plantings in bump-outs at corners and mature street trees soften the appearance of the necessary on-street parking in Olde Towne.



A specimen magnolia has graced this lot for many years and should be retained.

D. Plantings and Trees

Like the placement of a structure on its site, the character of the landscape and accompanying plantings contribute to the identity of the historic district. By virtue of its original compact plan, many Olde Towne lots allow limited, if any, space for ornamental plantings.

Street trees in planting strips and medians provide a green canopy throughout much of the neighborhood.

⊘ Inappropriate Treatments

- 1 Avoid planting large trees and shrubs in the small front yards of those properties that have setbacks.
- 2 Do not allow foundation plantings to grow out of scale with existing front porches.
- 3 Do not park vehicles in the front yard area.
- 4 Do not replace grass in front yards with paving or gravel.

✓ Guidelines

- 1 Retain existing trees and plants that help define the district's character. Mature trees and other plantings can also help to shade the house or protect it from wind.
- 2 Replace diseased or dead plants and trees with indigenous species.
- 3 Repeat the dominant landscape design (plant, size, and species) found in Olde Towne when installing new plantings.
- 4 Use new plants that, when mature, will not be too large for the small lots of Olde Towne. Many common plants are available in dwarf varieties that may be more appropriate to the lot size than their full-size counterparts.
- 5 Identify and take care to protect significant existing trees and other plantings when constructing new buildings.



On blocks where front yards exist, plantings should reinforce the historic character of the architecture.

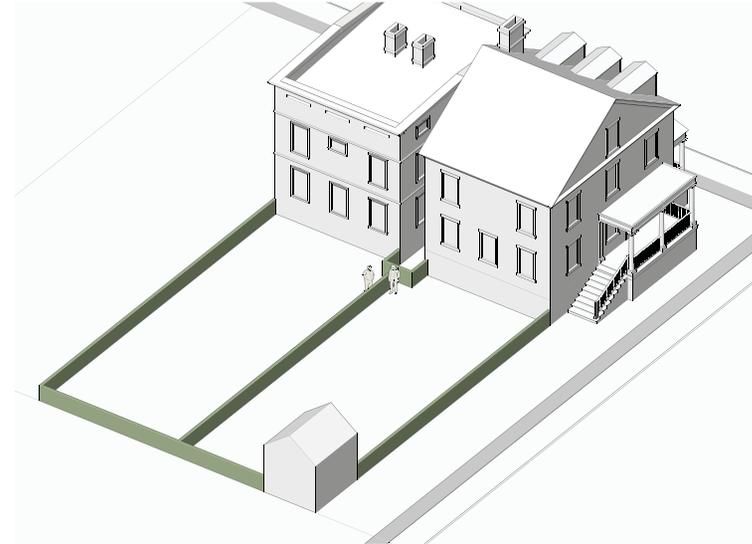


E. Fences

Historically, the rear portion of many Olde Towne house lots may have been fenced to prevent livestock from straying. Today, some rear yards, especially on corner lots, have been fenced, most often with simple wooden pickets or restrained ironwork styles. Where front yards exist in the district they should generally not be fenced. In general, fence materials should relate to the original materials used on the structures and those styles available at the time the houses in the district were constructed.



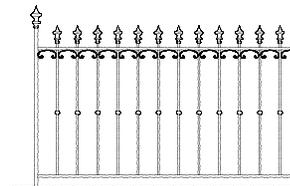
A traditional picket fence, painted white, complements the simple forms of these early buildings.



When fencing a backyard in the historic district, it is appropriate to align the fence with the rear wall of the house.

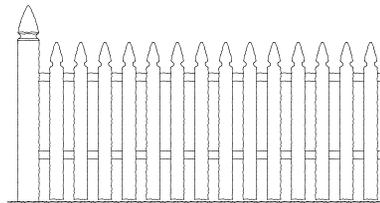
⊘ Inappropriate Treatments

- 1 Do not exceed the average height of other fences and walls of surrounding properties with the height of the new fence or wall. Fences should also conform to zoning regulations.
- 2 Do not use chain link, vinyl, split rail fences or concrete block walls.
- 3 Do not use solid masonry walls that visually enclose the property from surrounding more open neighboring sites.
- 4 Do not use unpainted wood fences in the historic district.
- 5 Do not fence front yards.

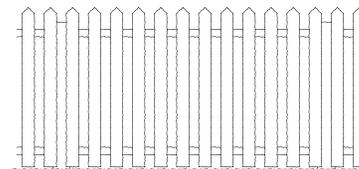


Wrought Iron - Decorative

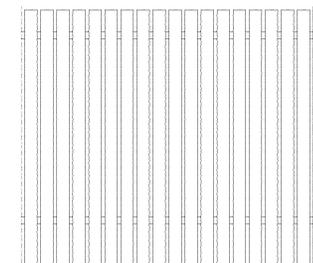
Wrought iron fences may be appropriate in certain areas of the district. Designs should be based on historic examples.



Picket - Decorative



Picket - Plain



Privacy Fence

Fence designs should relate to the architectural character of the dwelling.



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The simple, classical lines of this new metal fence make it a suitable design for many properties in the Olde Towne district.



The gentle curve fashioned from the boards and finials on the posts lend a traditional feeling to this privacy fence.

E. Fences *continued*

✓ Guidelines

- 1 Retain any existing historic fences. Wood fences, especially picket fences, are the most appropriate fences for the historic district.
- 2 Repair existing historic fences and walls by salvaging original parts or materials for a prominent location from a less prominent location, when possible.
- 3 Replace existing historic fences by matching the material, height, and detail. If this is not possible, use a simplified design of similar materials and height.
- 4 Relate fence materials to those used elsewhere on the property and on the structure. Painted wood picket or board fences or iron fences are the most appropriate choices in Olde Towne.
- 5 Relate the scale and detail of the design of any new fences to the scale and detail of the historic building. Simpler and smaller designs are most appropriate in Olde Towne due to the small lot sizes.



A simple Colonial style street light is set back from the street, almost to the adjacent property line.

F. Lighting

Many Olde Towne houses were built long before the advent of electricity. Over time exterior lighting has been added to many sites. In addition to Colonial style street light poles furnished by the City, small fixtures are often attached to either the wall adjacent to the front door or to a porch ceiling to provide illumination for the entry.

Inappropriate Treatment

A series of small fixtures lining the walkway or driveway is not appropriate.

Guidelines

- 1 Retain historic light fixtures.
- 2 Repair and refurbish historic light fixtures when possible.
- 3 Replace a historic light fixture only when parts for the existing fixture can no longer be found or replicated.
- 4 Use fixtures that are compatible with the character of the historic building and the surrounding area.
- 5 Choose light levels that provide for adequate safety but do not overly emphasize the residential site or building. Often, existing porch lights may be sufficient.

A pair of lantern style fixtures provide appropriate levels of illumination to this classically detailed entry.

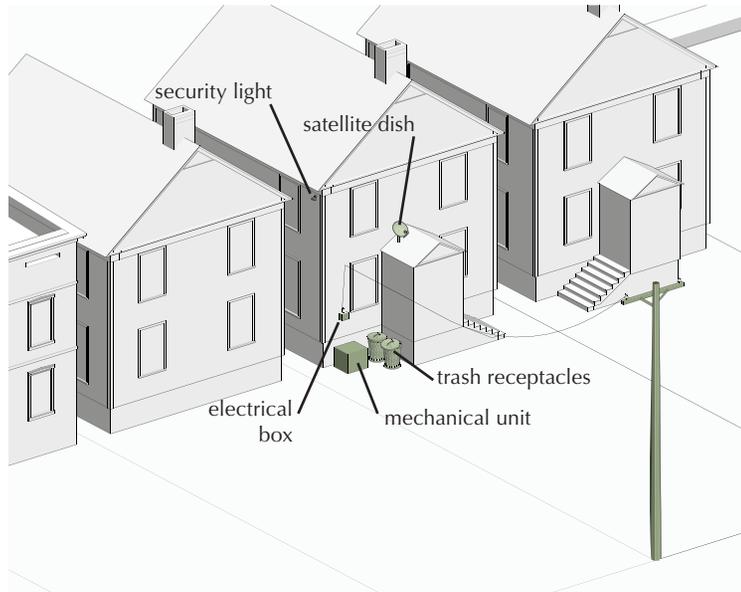


A pendant fixture attached to the ceiling of a porch or portico should coordinate with the architectural style of the dwelling.





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By placing as many appurtenances as possible out of sight, the historic appearance of the site and the district is maintained.

G. Mechanical and Utilities Screening

Site appurtenances, such as overhead wires, fuel tanks, utility poles and meters, antennae and satellite dishes, exterior mechanical units, and trash containers, are a necessary part of contemporary life. The placement of these items can either have a neutral impact on the character of the site and structure or detract from their historic appearance.

Site features fall into two categories; those features that can be controlled by the property owner – antennae, satellite dishes, mechanical units, trash containers, etc.; and those that cannot – overhead wires, utility poles, etc.

⊘ Inappropriate Treatments

- 1 Avoid placing satellite dishes on roof areas or on porch roofs visible from public rights-of-way.
- 2 Avoid placing miscellaneous site objects, such as trash containers, in front yard locations.

✓ Guidelines

- 1 Place site appurtenances, such as certain mechanical units, in inconspicuous areas on the rear of the building and screen with appropriate plantings or fencing. Allow for appropriate air-flow to these units.
- 2 Consider placing overhead utilities underground wherever possible.
- 3 Place antennae and satellite dishes on inconspicuous rooftop locations.
- 4 Store trash containers in locations not visible from public rights-of-way.



H. Accessibility

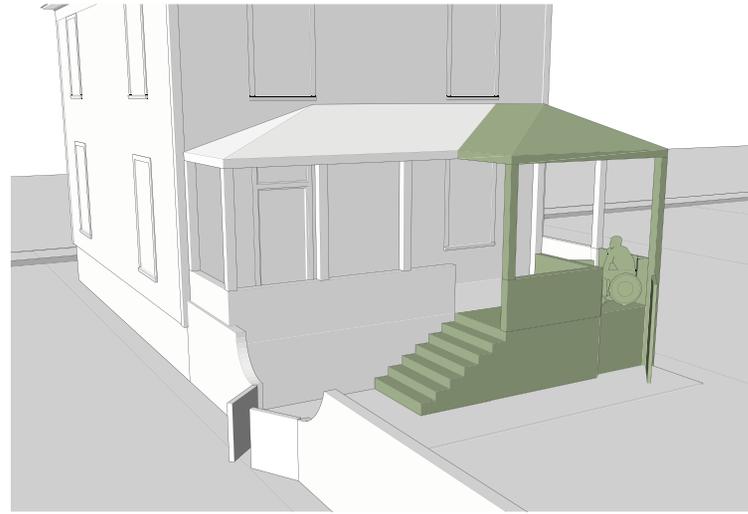
Access ramps are sometimes a necessity for residents of an older house that does not have an at-grade entrance. These ramps can often be added to historic buildings in a design that relates well to a historic porch and without substantially altering significant features of the building.

Prior to construction of a ramp, you should seek advice from the Planning Staff in the Department of Planning. This office may be able to direct you to professionals that have experience in designing accessibility solutions.

These guidelines are simply recommendations. The City of Portsmouth is prohibited from reviewing wheelchair ramps for the purpose of design/historic preservation by the Code of Virginia.

✓ Guidelines

- 1 Locate access at a well-defined entrance to the building and where providing that access will not cause permanent damage to character-defining features of the building.
- 2 Design wheelchair ramps to have the least visual effect on the building and/or setting.
- 3 Construct ramps using materials compatible with existing materials on the building.
- 4 Ensure that any solution is reversible; that it may be built, used, and removed without permanent damage to the historic features of the building.
- 5 Retain and preserve historic elements, such as porch railings, so that these original features may be restored to the structure when a ramp is removed.



It may be necessary to install a mechanical lift in order to provide handicapped access to many Olde Towne residences.