Traditional House Design Standards



Quality design is important and benefits all Milwaukee neighborhoods with attractive housing that endures and increases in value. These standards apply to most of Milwaukee's older neighborhoods where houses are typically tall and narrow. Different standards may apply for bungalows, cottages, cape cods or innovative designs where appropriateness is determined by neighborhood context. DCD staff with work with buyers to approve these designs on a case-by-case basis.
Following this step-by -step list will help you plan a new house that is appropriate for its neighborhood and will be more likely to pass the City's approval process.

Site Issues – House & Garage Placement

1. Houses must face the street, generally toward the narrow end of the lot. Houses on corner lots should be oriented in the same direction as the adjacent houses, which is usually the street with the least frontage. Orientation should be confirmed before preliminary designs are prepared.
2. House setbacks must conform to the City Zoning Code. Typically the front setback is the average setback of adjoining properties. The Plat of Survey that is required for a building permit will determine the exact setback.
3. Houses do not have to be centered along street frontage. They may be shifted to the North or West to match the setback pattern of the neighborhood and to create a viable side yard.
4. Parking is required behind the house at the rear yard. A detached garage is preferred and often required; otherwise a concrete parking slab is required. Access shall be from the alley, if available.
5. The garage set back shall be at least four feet from the alley.
6. Driveways should be minimal in size to cut down on impervious surfaces. Porous paving is strongly encouraged. Side driveways are required for lots without alley access and should be placed on the south or east side of the house based on the neighborhood site patterns.
7. Accessibility and Visitability should inform foundation exposure and porch placement. While traditional houses were raised on foundations two to three feet above grade, this may make accessing a home difficult. Consider your building sites topography and landscape to accommodate walkways and driveways with no steps. Careful planning can minimize or eliminate the need for future ramps. For more information visit: https://www.independencefirst.org/resources/aging-in-place

House Standards (Single Family and Duplex with some modifications)

Size & Floor Plan

1. House width and height must conform to the City Zoning Code's minimum and maximum requirements for the selected lot size and zoning district (see Table 295-505-2-I in the Zoning Code).
2. Houses are typically two stories plus an attic. One and a half-story bungalows or cape cods are also acceptable house designs. Houses should be based on the design, size and scale of adjacent houses as well as other houses on the block.
3. Houses should have a minimum of three bedrooms and 1.5 baths.
4. Floor to ceiling heights shall be 8 to 10 feet on the first floor and 8 to 9 feet on the second floor and basement.
5. Living Rooms and dining rooms should face the street with bathrooms, utility rooms and storage rooms on the interior of the house. Accessibility and Aging-in-Place should be considered when designing a house's room layout. For more information visit http://www.concretechange.org/

Windows & Doors

1. Street facing elevations should have well-placed, recessed windows and doors that align vertically and horizontally.
2. Broad expanses of wall are prohibited on street facades. The horizontal separation between windows/doors should be no more than eight to nine feet.
3. Windows must have a vertical or square orientation. Tall, narrow windows with proportions that are typically twice the height in relation to width are appropriate.

4. Double hung windows are the preferred window type. Specialty windows, such as piano windows, transoms or bay windows, may be employed if appropriate to the house style. Casement windows are highly discouraged on traditional houses.
5. The main attic gable facing the street must have an appropriately sized window.

Exterior Materials & Details

1. Exterior siding/cladding should be similar to surrounding houses and is typically brick, natural stone, wood clapboards, wood shingles or cementitious clapboards that do not show lap marks or the wood grain. A heavy shadow line should be evident on all clapboards.
2. Vinyl siding is discouraged and may be prohibited in certain neighborhoods such as those that have mostly brick homes.
3. EIFS (exterior insulation and finish system) and concrete block are highly discouraged.
4. Foundations must be brick, cut limestone, stone veneer, rusticated block, patterned concrete or approved decorative block.
5. Traditional architectural details such as cornices, frieze boards, corner boards, window enframements, water tables and raking boards at gables shall be included on elevations visible from the street. Thick (1-3/4 inch) window sills with extended sill ears are encouraged. Horizontal string courses or frieze boards are also encouraged on the break points between floors.

Porches

1. Most houses require a covered porch or stoop, in proportions matching overall house scale.
2. The Porch deck and roof typically extend 6 feet but no more than 10 feet from the front of the house.
3. A traditional porch design includes top and bottom rails made of 2x4 stock, balusters made of minimum 2x2 stock spaced 3-1/2 inches center to center and mounted in the center of the top and bottom rails. Railings must be no higher than 36 inches and mounted in the center of the porch columns. Porch columns should be a minimum 8 inches wide.
4. Front porch steps should be a minimum six feet wide.
5. The preferred porch deck is tightly spaced lumber (such as tongue and groove 5/4 lumber) and appropriate for exterior use. Concrete or metal is acceptable but not encouraged.
6. The area below the deck shall be appropriately skirted with a frame board, have covered foundation posts and be filled with closely spaced vertical boards or framed lattice panels.
7. Unpainted, treated wood is discouraged. Rails, balusters, skirting and columns should be constructed of wood that can be primed and painted. Supporting posts should be clad in 1X boards to create wide columns and painted.
8. On a corner lot, a side porch facing a street is encouraged if the design is similar to the front porch.

Roofs

1. Roofs shall be steeply pitched with a preferred 12/12 pitch with the open gable facing the street. In most cases, the pitch must be a minimum of 8/12 pitch. Other pitches and roof designs may be considered on a case-by-case basis depending on the house design and neighborhood.
2. Roofing material shall be dimensional asphalt, flat tile, metal or slate.
3. Skylights shall not be visible from the street.
4. Chimneys shall be of appropriate scale to the house. Pre-manufactured flues shall be covered in brick or a material similar to the rest of the house.
5. Satellite dishes shall not be mounted within 20 feet of the front façade of the house (and street façade if a corner unit).
6. Roof design should consider maximizing solar exposure for future solar energy adaptation.

Landscaping

1. Sites must be landscaped with a minimum of grass and plantings along all street elevations.
2. Decorative metal or wood picket fencing is the only fencing permitted in front yards. Chain-link or solid wood fencing is permitted in back yards. On corner lots, chain link fencing is discouraged on sides that face streets.
3. Downspouts that feed into lawns or rain gardens are encouraged for storm water management.

Revised 07/06/2015