



Merchant Street

Historic District Plan

Physical Description & Boundaries

The Merchant Street Historic District is located within Sacramento’s original 1848 street grid and is bounded roughly by 7th Street to the west, Improv Alley to the north, 8th Street to the east, and Kayak Alley to the south.

The district contains a portion of Sacramento’s downtown core and consists primarily of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century commercial buildings, situated along J and K streets, and Ali Youssefi Square.



Figure 175. The Neoclassical D.O. Mills Bank building at the corner of 7th and J streets.



Figure 176. Pioneer Hall, sandwiched between the Capital National Bank building and Merchants National Bank on 7th Street.



Figure 177. Ali Youssefi Square.



Figure 178. Commercial buildings and light rail tracks running on K Street face Ali Youssefi Square.

Brief Historic Context

The Merchant Street Historic District preserves a portion of Sacramento's central business district, which centered around J and K streets as early as the 1840s. The district is named for Merchant Street, the narrow alley between J, K, 7th, and 8th streets around which many of Sacramento's most prominent commercial and civic buildings were constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most notably, the stretch of 7th Street between J and K streets became an epicenter for banking, where monumental banking halls lined the street.

J and K streets were the principal threads along which Sacramento developed as its population grew after the outbreak of the California Gold Rush in 1848, the same year the city's grid was laid out. K Street sat at the foot of the levee where passengers disembarked from riverboats on the Sacramento River and became the center of California's stagecoach network, while J Street was the primary route to the gold fields to the east. Discerning entrepreneurs set up businesses along these routes, recognizing the profit they could make selling goods to gold seekers who were heading east in droves.¹

In 1852, a fire destroyed almost all of the city of Sacramento, most of which had been constructed of wood and canvas. The fire engulfed J Street as far as 9th Street and K Street to 12th Street. As part of the city's efforts to prevent future fires from destroying its downtown, blocks within the central business district were zoned within the city's "fire limits," an area in which buildings were required be constructed of fire-resistant materials, such as brick or stone. Because

1 William Burg, *Sacramento's K Street: Where Our City Was Born* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2012), 18-20.



Figure 179. St. Rose of Lima Church, looking east along K Street (1869). Source: Center for Sacramento History, Frank Christy Collection, 1998/722/1323.

of the high cost of building with such materials, commercial and civic development dominated blocks within the city's fire limits.²

The corner of K and 7th streets was also a hotbed of cultural activity. The new brick building of the St. Rose of Lima Church was completed on a half-acre of land at the intersection's northeast corner in 1861. As the city's only Catholic church until 1887, it became the heart of Sacramento's Irish community and is the namesake for the public plaza that is located on the site today.³

2 Sanborn Map Company, Sacramento, California [map], vol. 1, 1895; "Fire Limits," Encyclopedia of Chicago, accessed September 7, 2018. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/457.html>.

3 Steven Avella, *Sacramento: Indomitable City* (San Francisco, CA: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 44.

Disaster struck Sacramento again in the winter of 1861-1862 when devastating floods left much of the city underwater for three months. In response, the city undertook a number of major projects to protect itself from future floods. From 1863 to 1868, Sacramento's streets were raised by as much as 14 feet.⁴ Seventh Street between J and K streets and K Street from 4th to 10th streets were raised to the new high level in 1868.⁵ Portions of the hollow sidewalks that were built as part of this process survive, and many are accessible from the basements of existing buildings.

The construction of Pioneer Hall at 1011 7th Street coincided with the raising of the city's streets in 1868. The building was designed by Nathaniel Goodell, architect of the Governor's Mansion, to be the headquarters of the Sacramento Society of California Pioneers. The society, now the Sacramento Pioneer Association, has owned the building since its construction, making it the oldest continuously owned building in Sacramento. As membership rose and fell over subsequent decades, Pioneer Hall was leased out and used as a cigar store, shoe shop, barber shop, dance studio, saloon, bar, and the offices of the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency. The building was renovated in 1987 and continues to be owned by the Sacramento Pioneer Association.⁶

Sacramento's improved stability after the flood control improvements of the 1860s and 1870s and

4 Page & Turnbull, "Raised Streets & Hollow Sidewalks," (report, Sacramento, CA, 2009), 7.

5 *Ibid.*, 13.

6 "Sacramento Pioneer Association Pioneer Hall," Sacramento Pioneer Association, accessed September 7, 2018. <http://www.sacramentopioneer.org/pioneerhall.html>.



Figure 180. The Post Office building, looking northeast on K and 7th streets. The National Capital Bank building, Pioneer Hall, and Ochsner building are visible in the background (1916). Source: California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.

the introduction of new transportation options encouraged new commercial development in the city's central business district. Electric streetcar lines began operation on J and K streets in 1891 and were joined soon after by interurban railroads. The Northern Electric interurban railroad depot was located 8th and J streets, and the depot of the Central California Traction, another interurban railroad, opened half a block south in 1909. The interurban railroads offered passenger service from outlying towns and rural areas and brought increasing numbers of people to Sacramento's burgeoning commercial corridor around J and K streets.⁷

7 Burg, 60-61.

By 1895, the blocks around these streets were filled with narrow, two-story commercial buildings with saloons, restaurants, drug stores, and other small commercial businesses located on the first story and lodgings for shop owners on the second story.⁸ A well-preserved example of the commercial development of the period is the Ochsner Building, located directly east of Ali Youssefi Square. The first three stories were designed by architect Rudolph Herold and completed in 1904; an additional two stories were added in 1922.⁹

Large-scale civic construction also took place at the turn of the century. In 1891, St. Rose of Lima Church was demolished, and in 1894, a new Richardsonian Romanesque post office building with a red sandstone exterior opened on the site. The building was expanded from 1910 to 1912, by which time it included a seven-story meteorological observation tower and was also in use as a federal office building.¹⁰

Seventh Street, meanwhile, developed into Sacramento's banking center with grand banking halls designed by prominent local architects lining the street. A Neoclassical banking hall designed by Willis Polk for the National Bank of D.O. Mills and Company opened on the northwest corner of J and 7th streets in 1912. Three years later, the Capital National Bank Building, designed by Rudolph Herold, was completed on the corner diagonally across from it.¹¹ The Classical

8 Sanborn Map Company, 1895.

9 "Ochsner Building," [photograph], 1940, 8x10 in, Sacramento Public Library, Sacramento Room, accessed September 7, 2018. <http://cdm16362.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15248coll1/id/1498>.

10 Sandra M. Walton, "Post Office, 7th and K Streets, Sacramento, Sacramento Co.," *Historic American Buildings Survey, 1961, 1-2*; Sanborn Map Company, Sacramento, California [map], vol. 1, 1915.

11 Sanborn Map Company, 1915.



Figure 181. Capital National Bank under construction with Pioneer Hall and other nineteenth-century commercial buildings in the foreground (1916). Source: California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.

Revival-style Merchant's National Bank building, by architect H.H. Winner, was completed in 1921 at 1015 7th Street.¹²

The peak period of development around 7th, J, and

12 "Merchants National Bank of Sacramento," (National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, California Office of Historic Preservation, 1996), 3-6.

K streets coincided with the popularity of streetcar service in Sacramento, which peaked in the 1920s.¹³ Built up during the era of pedestrian and streetcar travel, the blocks were ill-suited for the transition to automobile traffic as almost none of the businesses had parking lots or parking garages. As automobile ownership accelerated after World War II and commercial businesses began to relocate to new suburbs outside the city center, the demand for public transportation declined. Regular passenger service on the Northern Electric interurban railroad and riverboat service to San Francisco ended in 1940. By 1947, all streetcar service in the city had also ceased.¹⁴

In 1948, the sandstone of the post office at the corner of K and 7th streets had eroded to the point that the building had become a safety hazard, and the tower and some of the exterior ornamentation were selectively removed. The building continued to deteriorate and was demolished in 1967.¹⁵ The cleared site was converted into a public plaza and renamed St. Rose of Lima Plaza.¹⁶

Redevelopment projects in the 1960s altered the landscape surrounding the 700 blocks of J and K streets. In 1967, construction began on the Downtown Plaza shopping mall that stretched down K Street from 4th to 7th streets. Two years later, K Street from 7th to

13th streets was redeveloped into a pedestrian mall. Meanwhile, the completion of Interstate 5, Interstate 80, and Highway 50 through the city diverted traffic away from the historic central business district and pulled commercial traffic to new shopping centers in outlying suburban developments.¹⁷

The twenty-first century has brought reinvigorated commercial development to the blocks around J, K, and 7th streets. In 2016, the Golden One Center sports and entertainment facility and Downtown Commons development replaced much of the Downtown Plaza mall that borders the historic district west of 7th Street. The D.O. Mills Bank building has been adaptively reused as a restaurant, and the row of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commercial buildings on the south side of the 700 block of K Street have been incorporated into The Hardin housing and commercial development project.¹⁸ In 2019, St. Rose of Lima Plaza was renamed Ali Youssefi Square after a local developer who specialized in affordable housing.



Figure 182. 7th and J streets, looking north, with the D.O. Mills Bank building visible on the left (1938). Source: California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.

¹³ Reed Parsell, "Going Public," *Sacramento Magazine*, July 21, 2006, <http://www.sacmag.com/Sacramento-Magazine/August-2006/Flashback-Going-Public/>.

¹⁴ Burg, 107.

¹⁵ Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center and the Historic Old Sacramento Foundation, *Old Sacramento and Downtown* (San Francisco: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 123.

¹⁶ Frank Christy, photographer, "Post Office at 7th and K Street is gone," [photograph], 1967, Center for Sacramento History, <https://sacramento.pastperfectionline.com/photo/43DDA8F7-8ECC-4473-8311-405328781786>.

¹⁷ Burg, 137-183.

¹⁸ Mark Glover, "Historic downtown bank building converted to food, beer showplace," *Sacramento Bee*, March 10, 2017, <https://account.sacbee.com/static/paywall/stop?resume=137841488>; Ryan Lillis, "Golden 1 Center downtown Sacramento development," *Sacramento Bee*, Jun 2, 2018, <https://account.sacbee.com/static/paywall/stop?resume=212297119>.

Significance

The Merchant Street Historic District was designated for listing on the Sacramento Register of Historic and Cultural Resources by the City Preservation Commission in 1985 in Ordinance #85-076.

The following table provides a current evaluation of significance under the requirements and considers the factors based on the above historic district context and the 2018 historic district survey. Additionally, this historic district relates to the Railroad Context Statement of the city’s General Plan Technical Background Report.

(B) Listing on the Sacramento Register – Historic districts	
(1) Requirements	
(a)	The Merchant Street Historic District meets requirement (a) for listing on the Sacramento Register, because it is a geographically definable area.
(b)(i)	<p>The Merchant Street Historic District meets requirement (b)(i) for listing on the Sacramento Register as an area that possesses “a significant concentration or continuity of buildings unified by: (A) past events or (B) aesthetically by plan or physical development.”</p> <p>The buildings within the district are unified aesthetically by their physical development as part of Sacramento’s main commercial district on J and K streets. All of the surviving buildings in the district were built for commercial uses and constructed with fire-resistant materials that reflect their location within the city’s fire limits. Buildings that were constructed in the nineteenth century are characteristic of commercial construction of the period with public shopfronts on the first story and evidence of residences for business owners on the upper stories. Later-period construction reflects 7th Street’s identity as the city’s banking center, starting in the first decade of the twentieth century. A number of monumental banking halls that were designed by prominent early twentieth-century architects are located along the street from K to J streets. These buildings are unified by their similar use, age, monumental scale, marble and granite exteriors, and incorporation of Classical design details.</p>
(b)(ii)	<p>The Merchant Street Historic District meets requirement (b)(ii) for listing on the Sacramento Register as an area “associated with an event, person, or period significant or important to city history.”</p> <p>The district is associated with the period of Sacramento’s history in which the city developed from a burgeoning Gold Rush town into a modern twentieth-century city, as reflected by the emergence of J and K streets as Sacramento’s primary commercial corridors. Surviving hollow sidewalks in the district recall the city’s efforts to protect the city from periodic devastating floods by raising its streets in the 1860s, a project that allowed for a boom in development in the city’s central business district in the subsequent decades. The district preserves several examples of nineteenth-century commercial buildings that were constructed in the period immediately after the streets were raised, as well as monumental banking halls that made up the city’s banking center, which was concentrated around 7th Street in the early decades of the twentieth century.</p>

Period of Significance: 1868-1948

The period of significance for the Merchant Street Historic District begins in 1868, when efforts to raise the street levels to protect the city from floods introduced stability that encouraged new development on J and K streets, and ends in 1948, when demolition of the U.S. Post Office building on K and 7th streets began and the commercial building at 726 K Street was remodeled into its current configuration.

Property Types from the Period of Significance

- Commercial
- Recreational

Architectural Styles from the Period of Significance

- Italianate
- Queen Anne
- Neoclassical
- Beaux Arts
- Italian Renaissance
- Art Deco
- Vernacular
- Commercial Styles:
 - Two-Part Commercial Block
 - Enframed Window Wall
 - Three-Part Vertical Block
 - Temple Front
 - Vault

(B) Listing on the Sacramento Register – Historic districts	
(1) Requirements	
(c)	The Merchant Street Historic District meets requirement (c) for listing on the Sacramento Register as it aligns with the goals and purposes of historic preservation in Sacramento, as well as the city’s other goals and policies. Per the Sacramento City Code, the preservation of the district enhances the “city’s economic, cultural and aesthetic standing, its identity and its livability, marketability, and urban character.”
(B) Listing on the Sacramento Register – Historic districts	
(2) Factors to be considered	
(a)	Factor (2)(a) states that “a historic district should have integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship and association.” The Merchant Street Historic District retains sufficient integrity to meet this factor for consideration as a historic district.
(b)	Factor (2)(b) states that “the collective historic value of the buildings and structures in a historic district taken together may be greater than the historic value of each individual building or structure.” The Merchant Street Historic District meets this factor because its buildings and structures represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose collective historic value is greater when taken as a whole.

Character-Defining Features

Element	Character of Historic District
Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commercial uses located on publicly-accessible first stories with some commercial or residential use on upper stories
Mass & Form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Predominately two- or three-story commercial buildings One five-story building and one seven-story building Two- or Three-Part Commercial Block style buildings typically vertically massed Classically-styled buildings typically horizontally massed
Cladding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Predominately brick, stone, or other fire-proof materials
Roofs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flat roofs, many with simple, square parapets
Entries & Doors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrances face principal street and are commonly recessed and centrally located; although some are situated at corners or placed to one side Wood or metal doors with integrated glazing
Windows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Picture, double-hung, or casement windows with steel or wood-frames
Ornamentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neoclassical details, such as Greek or Doric columns, pilasters, roofline balustrades, dentil or bracket courses along cornice, Classical statuary, floral garlands, flat roofs, and arched windows Italianate and Queen Anne style details, such as turrets, cutaway bay windows, hood molded windows, and overhanging eaves supported by brackets
Property Landscape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimal or no property landscaping
Streetscape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rows of medium-sized sycamore trees planted along 7th Street and K Street Extant hollow sidewalks and sunken alleyways dating to the street raising campaigns of the 1860s

Boundaries & Location

The following map shows the boundaries and location of the Merchant Street Historic District.

To view the statuses of individual properties as contributing or non-contributing resources to the historic district, refer to the Sacramento Register of Historic and Cultural Resources.

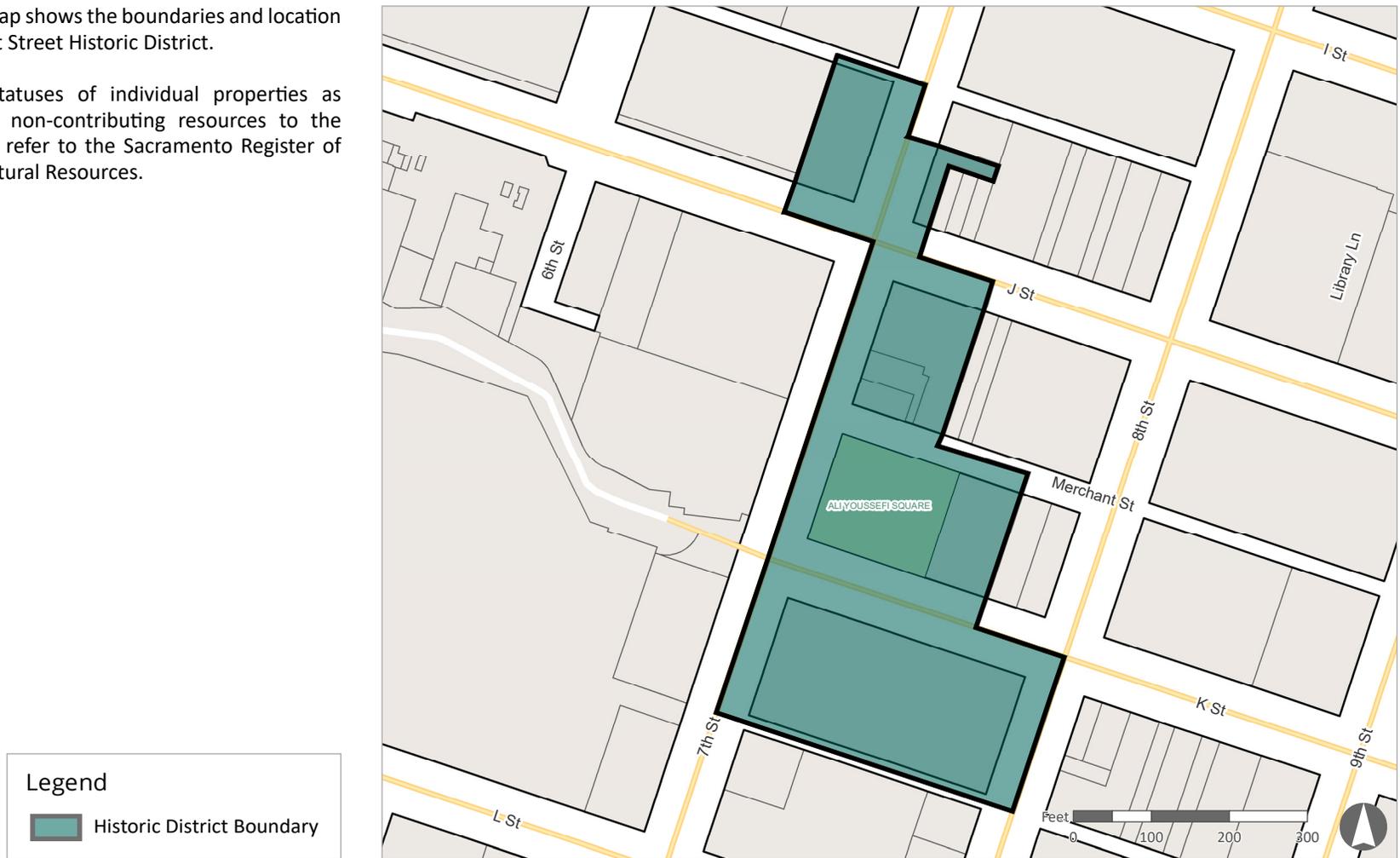


Figure 183. Map of the Merchant Street Historic District. Source: City of Sacramento and Page & Turnbull, 2019.

District-Specific Standards & Criteria

Design Principle

Maintain and preserve the contributing resources in the historic district while encouraging the integration of new uses that enhance its character as part of the historic heart of commercial activity in Sacramento.

Rationale

The Merchant Street Historic District contains a group of commercial buildings that date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of which are related to the history of banking in Sacramento. The contributing buildings vary in scale and height, but share a similar commercial focus, zero-lot-line setback, and use of high-quality masonry materials. The district also contains Ali Youssefi Square, the former site of a church and federal post office. As Downtown Sacramento continues to evolve and grow, the contributing buildings in the district provide opportunities to introduce new uses that enhance the character of J and K Streets the historic center of commercial and cultural activity in Sacramento.

In addition to the Standards & Criteria Common to Sacramento's Historic Districts in Section 1, the following district-specific standards and criteria apply when planning a project in the Merchant Street Historic District.

1. Rehabilitation of Contributing Resources

- 1.1 Maintain, preserve, and, where necessary, repair and restore historic facade features, especially decorative ornamentation.
- 1.2 Make every effort to preserve, repair, and maintain any surviving steel or wood frame windows, which significantly contribute to the commercial character of the district.
 - Re-instate multi-lite steel or wood frame windows, where they have been removed, if there is adequate documentation and if feasible.
- 1.3 Avoid filling in or obstructing historic window or door openings.
- 1.4 Re-open historic window and door openings that have been filled in.
 - Use compatible new windows and door materials, types, and forms.
- 1.5 Avoid painting or applying new finishes on historically unpainted exterior masonry.



Figure 184. Many contributing buildings in the district feature decorative ornamentation on their facades.



Figure 185. Many of the historic exterior features of this contributing building have been preserved and maintained; however, the windows and front facade have been partially covered by a ventilation duct.

2. Additions & Accessory Structures for Contributing Resources

- 2.1 Where rooftop additions are desired, use step backs in order to maintain the existing street façade height of the contributing building.
- 2.2 Use durable, high-quality materials that are compatible with the materials of adjacent contributing buildings in the district such as stone or brick.

3. New (Infill) Construction & Alterations to Non-Contributing Resources

- 3.1 Preserve the historic pattern of siting new buildings with a zero-lot-line setback from the street.
- 3.2 Design the scale, massing, and proportions of new construction to be compatible with those of adjacent contributing buildings on the same block.
 - Where taller buildings are desired, consider using step backs in order to maintain the existing street façade height of adjacent contributing resources.

- 3.3 Draw inspiration for the design of multi-family residential properties from contributing multi-family residential properties in the district
- 3.4 Align windows, doors, and variations in façade treatments to the extent feasible with that of adjacent contributing buildings in order to maintain the existing pattern of door and window openings found on the block face.
 - When not possible, utilize the average datum lines of contributing properties.
- 3.5 Consider using materials that are compatible with the materials of contributing buildings in the district, such as brick or stone and steel or wood framed windows.
- 3.6 Consider corner entries that face the primary street frontages for the primary entrance of a new building that is sited at an intersection of two streets or abuts a public plaza.
- 3.7 Design awnings that reference the form, scale, and materials of historic awnings.



Figure 186. Contributing buildings exhibit a range of heights but share a similar material palette, zero-lot-line setback, and orientation to the street.

4. Site Features, Streetscape, & Landscaping

- 4.1 Maintain, preserve, and, where necessary, repair and restore historic lighting and signage features.
- 4.2 Use signage methods, materials, and proportions that are reflective of those of historic signage used on contributing properties within the district.
- 4.3 Encourage a streetscape palette, including lighting, street furniture and street tree planting pattern, that is compatible with the materials, scale, and architectural character of the district.



Figure 187. Corner entrances are common on contributing buildings in the district that are located at street intersections.