

Downtown Building Study

An Assessment of the Urban Characteristics of Downtown
Lexington, Kentucky

Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government
Department of Housing and Community Development
Division of Historic Preservation

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I. Introduction/Overview

Introduction

The physical character of Downtown Lexington, Kentucky is comprised of two very different parts. One part, rooted in the 19th century, shows the physical development of the commercial downtown as a center for business in Central Kentucky. The second part is defined by the presence of the automobile as a major transportation source and is therefore more closely aligned to 20th century development patterns. The Downtown Building Study is an effort to delineate the characteristics of these two important facets of the Downtown community and to draw conclusions about opportunities which exist to further refine the relationship between these two physical environments. The main focus of this report is an assessment of blocks of buildings in the Downtown core. Following this analysis, a number of issues are delineated which impact the potential re-use of historic buildings and the creative use of open spaces in the area. These issues are followed by a number of recommendations to facilitate the re-use of buildings and spaces, as defined appropriate by the Downtown Building Study Committee.

Downtown Building Study Committee Named

In September 1993, Mayor Pam Miller announced a Downtown Building Study to be completed by the Urban County Government. Mayor Miller's intent in providing for this study was to address the very real concern of the preservation of historic resources in Downtown Lexington. Mayor Miller stated that the Downtown Building Study was, in part, to "avoid another Ben Snyder Block situation." This committee was put in place to deliberate upon the various buildings and sites in the Downtown core. The Downtown Building Study Committee has the charge of communicating with the broader Downtown Small Area Plan Committee in providing information regarding buildings and sites, their appropriate uses and the relationship of these buildings and sites in a design sense in the Downtown core.

One purpose of the study is to provide data to the various government agencies and private developers with interest in pursuing rehabilitation or new construction in the Downtown area. The second purpose of the study is to provide a framework for evaluating the various buildings and spaces in the Downtown. A third purpose of the study is to provide the rationale and recommendations for the re-use of existing buildings and for the use of open space within the Downtown area.

Downtown Small Area Plan

Although named as an independent body, the Downtown Building Study Committee is well aware that the important information contained within this report will greatly aid the formulation of issues and actions plans by the Downtown Small Area Plan Committee (DSAPC). The DSAPC addresses much broader issues than the defining of character and the recommendations for re-use of buildings and spaces. In this relationship, the Downtown Building Study Committee will present information to the DSAPC for their consideration. Information garnered from this dialogue will then be incorporated into this document.

Downtown, the Center of the Bluegrass Region

Lexington is located within the heart of the rolling hills of the Bluegrass region of Central Kentucky. Lexington is both the symbol and the physical center for this region -- an idea which is reflected in the physical development of the community, including its radial, umbilical-cord-like roads to surrounding communities in adjoining counties, its focused commercial development along three primary streets Downtown, and the compact nature of the core of commercial buildings located Downtown. The community is further noted for its wealth of historic resources, mostly in an area concentrated inside New Circle Road, although a great number of historic structures stand in what was and what is rural Fayette County. These historic resources are mixed with more modern buildings and with open space throughout the community. The urban built resources are of two types -- commercial and residential.

Commercial

The Lexington community has relatively few historic commercial structures standing, mostly due to rapid growth in the Downtown core in the late 1950s and the resulting Urban Renewal Program demolitions, the subsequent improvements along the Vine Street Corridor and in the Civic Center area, and the demolitions which resulted from private development in the 1970s and 1980s. The resulting commercial core of the Downtown is quite fragmented -- new buildings standing next to old, large buildings next to small, residential buildings next to commercial buildings, etc. This didactic character of the commercial downtown is the most prevalent characteristic in defining the commercial structures within the community. This character of this commercial core is the main purpose of this study.

Residential

The residential areas which surround this commercial core are a very different story -- they are the "glue" which binds together the urban fabric of Lexington. The residential neighborhoods which surround the commercial downtown are greatly diverse -- representing residential development in a variety of patterns for a period of more than two hundred years since the founding of the community. This residential character is more carefully described in section IV of this document.

Downtown Building Study Boundaries

Because the Downtown Building Study Committee recognized the integral relationship between the commercial Downtown core and its adjoining residential areas, the committee opted to include a broader area in the study area. However, recognizing the constraints of time and resources, the DBS Committee worked to develop two levels of study -- a broad brush/overview combined with a block-by-block assessment for specific areas of the study. The Downtown Building Study boundaries are Third Street on the north, Euclid Avenue and Bolivar Street on the south, Woodland Avenue and Midland Avenue on the east, and Newtown Pike and the Southern Railroad line on the west. Correspondingly, the residential areas which received a broad brush evaluation are in the four quadrants -- northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest -- adjacent to the Downtown core. A map delineating these various areas is included in section IV of this document.

II. Evaluating Buildings and Spaces



Evaluating Buildings and Spaces

The Downtown Building Study Committee debated at great length about the mechanism to evaluate buildings and spaces in the Downtown area. Initially, criteria were developed which addressed the historic character of the buildings in the Downtown area. The committee and the consultant concluded that these criteria should be modified to address the character of all buildings and spaces in the Downtown area. The significant issue which becomes apparent is that the assessment of the character of the commercial core necessitated an agreement on the part of the DBS Committee as to the various components of the urban environment and their level of importance in understanding the development of the community and in providing a framework for current and future development in the Downtown.

For purposes of this study, buildings and spaces are categorized as follows:

Outstanding

These properties are of extreme importance architecturally and/or historically. They have undergone relatively little alteration since they were built, or the alterations themselves have gained significance.

Significant

Also of importance architecturally and/or historically. Significant buildings and spaces retain important design features and contribute to either the historic or modern scale of the Downtown. Some significantly altered buildings and spaces were placed in this category because of overriding historical importance.

Contributing

Buildings and spaces which contribute to the character of the Downtown and which contribute to the context and development themes, but which may lack individual distinction. Buildings and spaces were placed in this category when alterations diminished their architectural integrity without altering the overall character of the building or space, nor compromising its major significant design features. In most cases, when altered, alterations have been major.

Non-Contributing

Buildings and spaces which do not contribute to the character of the Downtown.

The following additional questions are useful in assessing the significance of each resource:

If the property is significant for its architectural or aesthetic qualities, what are those qualities and why are they significant? Does the property retain enough of its significant design to convey these qualities? If not, how have additions or alterations contributed to or detracted from the significance of the resource?

If the property is significant for its association with historic events, what are the historically significant events or patterns of activity associated with the property? Does the existing building reflect in a tangible way these important historical associations? How have alterations or additions contributed to or detracted from the resource's ability to convey the feeling and association of the significant historic period?

If the property is significant because of its association with an individual, how long and when was the individual associated with the property and during what period in the individual's life? What are the significant contributions of the individual? Are there other resources in the vicinity also have strong associations with the individual?

How does the property compare with other resources in Lexington, the region and the state?

Additional Criteria

Following this initial assessment of significance for individual structures and sites, the committee and the consultant determined that various buildings and open spaces in the Downtown should be subject to an additional level of evaluation on a block-by-block basis. This second level of evaluation is to help the committee assess these various buildings and sites in the broader physical context of Downtown. These evaluation criteria also touch on the type of building and its ability to be re-used.

These additional criteria are:

Type

Is the building/block a commercial, industrial, institutional, residential, mixed, or other type of structure?

Relationship

How does the building/block relate to adjacent and surrounding buildings/blocks? Is there pedestrian and vehicular access? Do these coordinate or are the types of access in conflict? Is the building/block in proximity to amenities or to other facilities? Is the building/block in proximity to open spaces, surface parking areas or development sites?

Re-Use

Is the building/block capable of sustaining adaptive uses? If so, what types of uses are appropriate?

Condition

Is the building/block currently occupied and in sound condition? If not currently occupied, is the building/block in sound condition?

The Planning Context

Downtown Lexington has been an environment in which relatively little regulation has been imposed. The Downtown area is primarily zoned B-2A, an extremely permissive business zone with the important concept that parking requirements are much less stringent than in other zones throughout the community. The Downtown itself has been excluded from the Comprehensive Planning process in the last two decades. Instead, the Downtown area has been a "free for all" development opportunity. This lack of regulation has resulted in a greatly diverse physical character. Throughout the Downtown are 20+ story high rise buildings, 2-1/2 story residential buildings, large surface parking lots, old and new institutional buildings on a grand scale, and 19th century commercial buildings with empty upper stories. While the diversity of the physical environment of Downtown is viewed by some as a strength in the community, there are many disadvantages of a poorly defined center city. The current administration of the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government, its various departments, divisions and programs, as well as the Mayor and Urban County Council, have initiated planning efforts and discussions about the Downtown to insure that the future growth of this highly visible and symbolic portion of the community is well thought out and responds to the needs of the community.

Character -- More than a Sum of It's Parts

The tone of some streets within the Downtown is set by the historic buildings which are located there. This is primarily the case around the Courthouse Square area north to Gratz Park, along Limestone from Short to Third Streets and along Main Street west of Limestone Street to the Courthouse. Outside of these areas, buildings heights and sizes vary considerably throughout the Downtown.

Historic Buildings

Most of the historic buildings (pre-1950) include structural divisions and decorative elements which break up their scale into smaller "human scale" components. There is a remarkable consistency in the architectural character of the facades of both older and newer buildings, whether large or small. The historic buildings have large storefront windows on the first floor facing the sidewalk. Above the first floor, windows of consistent size punctuate the facade, with masonry or cast-iron piers and columns separating them. These buildings have a highly decorative facade, fronting the main thoroughfare on which the building is located. These buildings also have a special base which distinguishes the lower floors from the upper floors. Many historic buildings have handsome ornamentation -- columns, column capitals, detailed cornices, stone or metal trim around windows and doors, carved decorative flowers, animals, human faces, etc. In block is where historic buildings remain intact, the rhythms of sun and shadow are consistent throughout the length of the street. As all of these older buildings are built up the sidewalk edge, the street has a consistent feeling of enclosure.

Modern Buildings

The modern buildings, ca. 1950 and later, are of a much larger scale. From six stories to more than thirty stories, these buildings incorporate windows of consistent size, often in strips at each floor level. Materials tend to be fairly monochromatic with most buildings including just a few building materials. Most modern buildings have little distinction between the base of the building and its upper floors. The buildings tend to be viewed in three dimensions--not just a facade adjacent to the sidewalk. There is little to no ornamentation incorporated into the design. Buildings are not built to the edge of the sidewalk. Often, parking garages or other types of pedestrian/vehicular conflicts exist in conjunction with these modern buildings.

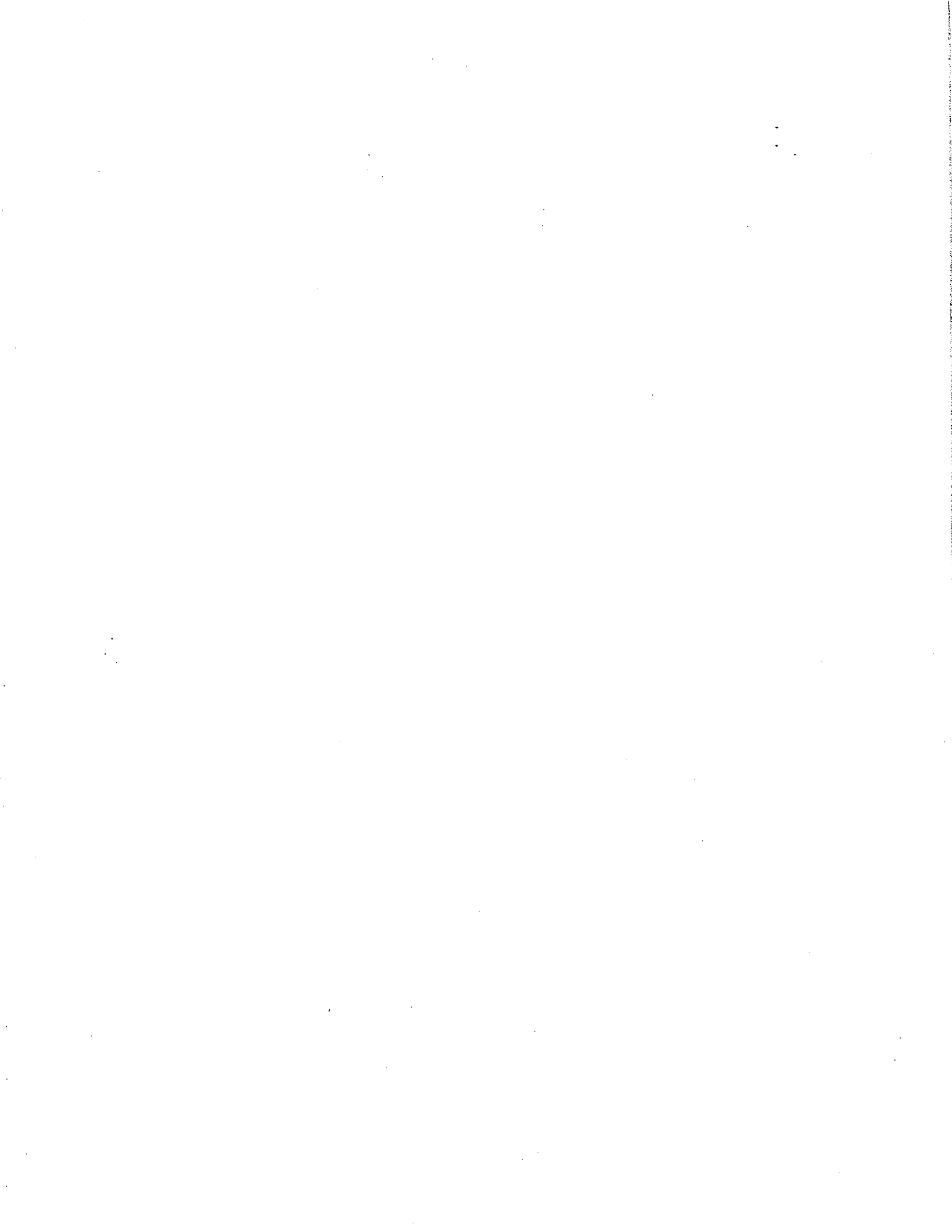
Open Spaces

There are a number of open areas within the Downtown area. Some are the result of government or private business intervention to provide parks in the urban environment. Examples include Thoroughbred Park, Phoenix Park, "Ben Snyder" Block Park, the Courthouse Square, and Triangle Park. To a lesser extent, pocket parks are included as part of larger building development. One example of this type of open space exists on the east and west sides of the Bank One building.

The majority of open space in the Downtown is comprised of surface parking areas and vacant development sites. Although found throughout the Downtown, the surface parking tends to be north of Short Street from Midland Avenue west to Broadway. Both large and small development sites are scattered throughout the Downtown. Both of these types of open spaces are extremely detrimental to the understanding of the community as an urban center. These vacant areas are gaps within the Downtown and should receive concerted study for appropriate infill construction.

The combination of historic buildings, new buildings, parks, surface parking lots, and empty development sites define the current character of Downtown Lexington. It is important to understand that it is the relationship among these various components which truly characterizes the physical environment -- the whole of the downtown is greater than the sum of its parts.

III. History of the Built Environment



How are "Historic Resources" Defined?

Criteria used in making determinations regarding the importance of buildings and groups of buildings were established nearly 30 years ago in the field of historic preservation and are generally accepted in communities throughout the United States. Most historic buildings of 50 years of age or more are eligible either individually, or more commonly as part of a larger district, for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, the official list of the nation's historical, architectural, archaeological and cultural resources. Lexington-Fayette County's criteria for local designation are very similar to these National Register criteria.

Because Downtown Lexington is an equal combination of old and new buildings, it is impossible to evaluate only the historic buildings and have the same sense of the Downtown area. As a result, the National Register or local designation criteria are only a benchmark for older buildings. Indeed the problem is how to extend the same evaluation to both historic and modern buildings so that there is a more consistent and logical approach to the definition of urban design characteristics in the community. It is possible to use the "historic" criteria by modifying the wording of these criteria so that they address both old and new construction. All structures in the study area have been evaluated by assessing:

- 1) the **design integrity** of the building --
 - a) the building is in original location of construction;
 - b) the building is an example of design in a style associated with development in Lexington;
 - c) the building is in its setting from the time of construction or if the setting has changed, the setting remains in character with the building;
 - d) the building is constructed of materials which define it as the product of a particular period of development in Lexington and those materials have been retained;
 - e) the building is well constructed and is a good example of construction industry techniques at the time of its construction.
- 2) the **association** of the building with important local events or persons;
- 3) the **architectural style, building type and construction period** of the building.

In understanding each structure and block of structures within the study areas, one must understand the development themes noted throughout these criteria. These themes -- are developed through research of an area's background and history -- its design and development context. A theme is a means of organizing and grouping properties based on elements such as environment, technology, development patterns and influences, or political activities that have influenced the evolution of an area through various periods of history. The styles of the buildings and the character of the Downtown area as a whole result from association with particular development patterns and influences. The following history outlines the major periods of growth and development in Downtown Lexington.

Institutions, Retailers Forge the 19th Century City -- 1770 to 1860

Lexington was a rural outpost of western Virginia at its founding in 1775. As a primary fort for the area, Lexington was quickly identified as the center of a thriving hunting and trading industry. It served as a destination for travelers from the east over the Allegheny mountains and later through the Ohio Valley. As the center settlement in rural Kentucky, a number of religious, educational and cultural institutions were founded in the community's settlement years. Lexington was officially established as a community by

