



HDC BEST PRACTICES # 1 | AUGUST 2021 | MICHIGAN.GOV/SHPO

Changes to Existing Buildings: Murals and Historic Buildings

Like other public art, murals can contribute to the vibrancy and vitality of an area, support the cultural identity of a community, provide opportunities for interpreting history, and encourage public interaction and exploration. However, murals are not appropriate for all locations. A historic district commission (HDC) must carefully consider the role of murals in a local historic district to ensure that they complement and enhance rather than detract from or diminish the qualities of the district.

Each HDC must decide whether murals are appropriate for areas under its jurisdiction. Where murals are allowed, sensitive design approaches are key to achieving compatibility and harmony. Because each mural is an individual, expressive work intended for a specific location and every building has different constraints, each project requires careful review to ensure compatibility. In general, there are three aspects that should be considered when reviewing a mural project:

- **Compatibility with the Project Site:** The location, scale, and materials of the mural should be reviewed for compatibility with the project site.
- **Relationship to the Historic District:** The relationship to and visual impact on surrounding areas should be reviewed for compatibility with the district at-large.
- **Ongoing maintenance:** Selected media, techniques, and project location all impact the longevity of a mural, as do weather patterns, light intensity, and maintenance. Long-term maintenance should be considered for all projects.

A Note on Historic Murals

Murals were historically used on the sides of buildings to advertise a business, product, or service. These remain in many communities as faded remnants (“ghost signs”) and contribute to the history of the area. Obscuring, altering, or removing exposed historic murals is not appropriate. Likewise, extensive touchups or overpainting such murals to make them look new creates a false sense of history and is generally not appropriate.

HDC Design Review Responsibilities

SHPO’s “HDC Best Practices” series is intended to encourage informed decision-making and promote best practices in historic preservation in consideration of the “Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation” (Standards). All content is provided for informational purposes only.

In accordance with Public Act 169 of 1970, as amended, the local historic district commission should evaluate the merits of each proposed project in its jurisdiction in consideration of the particulars of the project, the local context, potential impacts to historic resources and the overall district, the Standards, and local historic district design guidelines, if applicable.



Design Considerations: Best Practices in Mural Design

Mural Location

1. Locate murals only on masonry buildings that have historically been painted. Painting contributing masonry buildings that were not historically painted is not appropriate and does not meet the Standards.
2. Use smooth wall planes. Locating a mural on a building with siding features such as bevel, lap, or board and batten detailing or split-faced stone is not appropriate.
3. Locate murals on side, rear, or alley elevations only. Murals on the primary street façade of a building are not appropriate. However, temporary storefront window murals may be appropriate. Murals on secondary street façades of a corner building should be carefully considered for visual impact on wraparound storefront elements, where present.
4. A mural is most appropriate for non-contributing buildings. However, potential impacts to the overall district must still be considered.

Mural Design, Scale, and Compatibility

1. Design a mural so that it does not obscure, detract from, or cause damage to character-defining features. Murals should not impair one's ability to interpret the historic character of the building or the overall area.
2. Carefully scale a mural to the property on which it is located so that its proportions and size are compatible with the building. A mural should complement, not compete with or overwhelm the architecture or character-defining features of a building.

3. A mural is most appropriate for blank walls or areas of a wall where there is no fenestration (window and door openings) so that it does not distract from the visual integrity and spatial organization of the building.
4. Accent lighting compatible with the scale, style, materials, and context of the building may be appropriate so long as any lighting is shaded, shielded, or directed to minimize glare and impacts to neighboring properties.
5. Consider the visibility and prominence of a mural from adjacent locations within the historic district. A mural should be sensitive to the overall context.

Mural Materials

1. A mural should utilize treatments and materials that promote the district as an area of high-quality design. For example, properly prepare surfaces and use appropriate masonry primers and exterior grade paints to ensure proper adhesion. Power washing or blasting to prepare surfaces is not appropriate and murals should not be used in lieu of repointing a deteriorated wall.
2. Luminescent, neon, and reflective paints and finishes are not appropriate and can pose a safety hazard.
3. Avoid affixing dimensional and imitative materials such as artificial stone, sidings, and metals.
4. Encourage murals on removable materials such as canvas or a wood frame as an alternative to directly painting on a building. Anchor the framing through mortar joints (not the masonry face) and install the framing with a small gap between the building so that water can weep between the mural surface and the wall.



MURALS AND MAINTENANCE PLANS

Murals that are not appropriately maintained can quickly become a visual nuisance. As such, long-term maintenance needs should be carefully considered when choosing a project location. For example, murals that face direct sunlight will fade and peel quicker, and murals in heavily trafficked areas may be subject to smog and chemicals that can alter paint colors. Maintenance plans that provide guidance on ongoing upkeep and, if applicable, future removal are encouraged as part of any mural project.



MURALS VS. SIGNS

Although a HDC does not regulate content, careful distinction must be made to make sure a mural does not require review as a sign. As a best practice, murals should not include commercial product names, service names, business names, symbolic logos, and other such information that can be perceived as an endorsement or advertisement.



WHAT SHOULD THE HDC ASK FOR IN A REVIEW?

Because of their unique nature, murals have special considerations. It may be appropriate to require applicants seeking a COA for a mural to submit additional detail with the COA application. Such information may include:

- Written approval from the property owner (if the applicant is not the owner)
- An agreement between the artist and property owner identifying responsibilities
- A scaled drawing showing the proposed location and size of the mural
- A color drawing or rendering of the proposed mural
- Photos of the subject property, the proposed mural location, and views from adjacent streets and neighboring properties
- A maintenance plan that includes ongoing treatments/obligations for the life of the mural