

Downtown Design Standards

Report on First Year, Sept. 2008-Nov. 2009

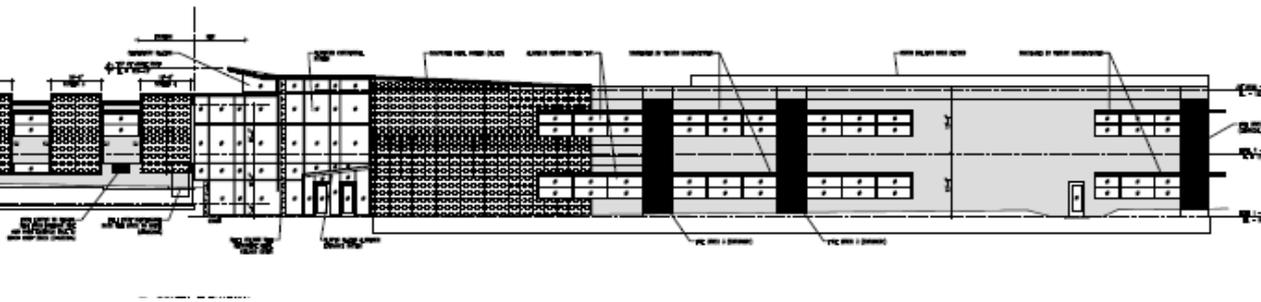
In adopting the Lincoln Downtown Design Standards (LDDS/LMC 3.76) in September 2008, the City Council requested a report on their implementation after the first year.

Building activity in the Sept. 2008-November 2009 period has been impeded by overall economic conditions, so only a handful of projects have been reviewed under the new design standards, as discussed below. Staff has offered advice on or courtesy reviews of a small number of additional projects that have not progressed to the point of seeking building permits. Prior to formal application, developers of those projects typically request and are extended confidentiality.

The projects reviewed in 2008 and 2009 were remodelings or additions to existing buildings, except for the Assurity and Archrival buildings.



The remodeling of the former Eastern Ambulance building at S. 9th and Rosa Parks Way was in process when the Standards were adopted. Staff reviewed it for “practice” in applying the standards and found that it would have qualified for administrative approval of a substantial remodeling by adding durable brick cladding to the street facades (east and south) and by introducing additional windows on the east façade.



Arrow indicates brick “base” requested by Environs Commission; gray material above is synthetic stucco.

Kaplan University: The Kaplan extension had been designed and approved by the Nebraska Capitol Environs Commission before the LDDS were enacted, but a change of zone to O-1 and a “value engineering” of the approved design brought the project back to the Commission and subject to the new standards. The proposed changes met the Design Standards and met with Commission approval, except for a detail on the south façade. The Commission requested and the applicant agreed to a change in materials to introduce a brick base near the south entrance/student plaza, meeting the DDS requirement for durable materials at ground level. The addition has been completed as approved.



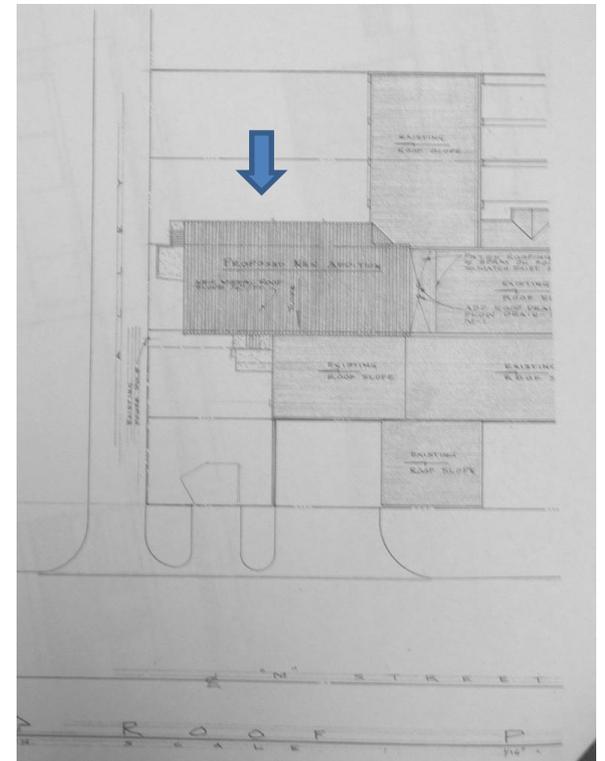
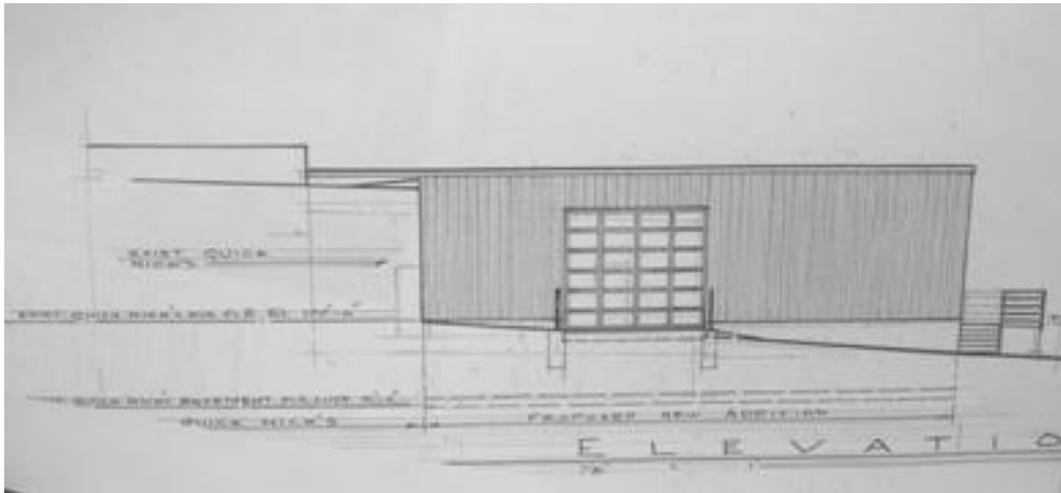
In December 2008, designs were reviewed for a substantial remodeling of the former “Barker Printing” building at 13th & K Streets for **Nebraska Rural Electric Association**.

The redesign retained ample windows and introduced durable ceramic tile over existing stucco finishes. The project met the Design Standards and was approved administratively.





Walker Tire at S. 9th and M Streets sought a building permit for a utilitarian extension on the west side. The project qualified as a minor remodeling and met the design standards as it did not impact a street façade and did “not cause greater deviation from these Design Standards than currently exists.”



Arrow indicates west addition.

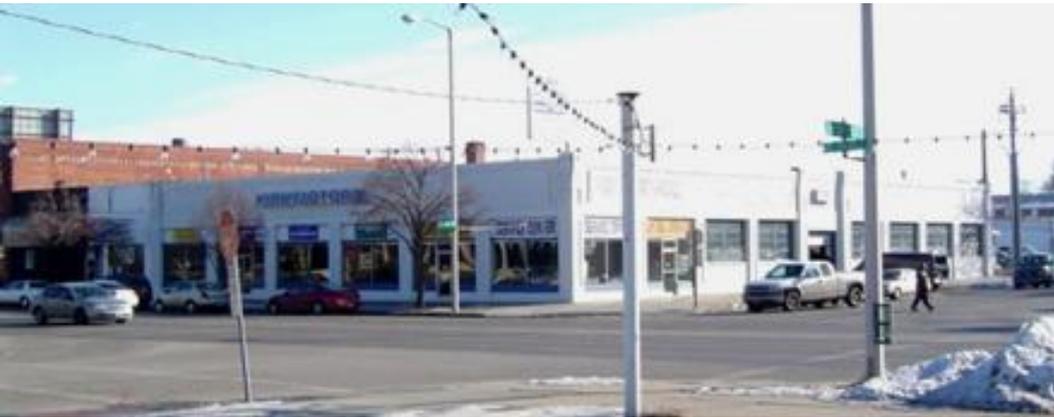


This “major remodeling” was approved administratively as meeting the LDDS.

A building permit was sought for the **Shinn Building** at 126 N. 16th in early 2009, converting it to residential units. The proposed work included reopening the blocked windows and introducing a grade-level entrance.



The remodeling of the former P. O. Pears building as “**Red 9**” at 322 S. 9th Street involved few material changes to the building exterior. The corner of the parcel at 9th and M Street would not have met the screening requirements of the Design Standards if it had stayed a gravel parking area but its development as a fenced beer garden does not deviate from any standard. The grasses planted outside the fence are not required but enhance the pedestrian experience.



2008

An initial courtesy review early in the design process for the renovation of the former Kirk Motors building at 18th & O Streets into the new home of “**N Street Liquors**” raised a question of blocking up the large show room windows. An alternative solution retaining the windows and creating “window boxes” for display behind each one met the Design Standards, earning administrative approval of the design.

This project raised a question about State energy improvement requirements and whether the Downtown Design Standards conflict with State regulations.

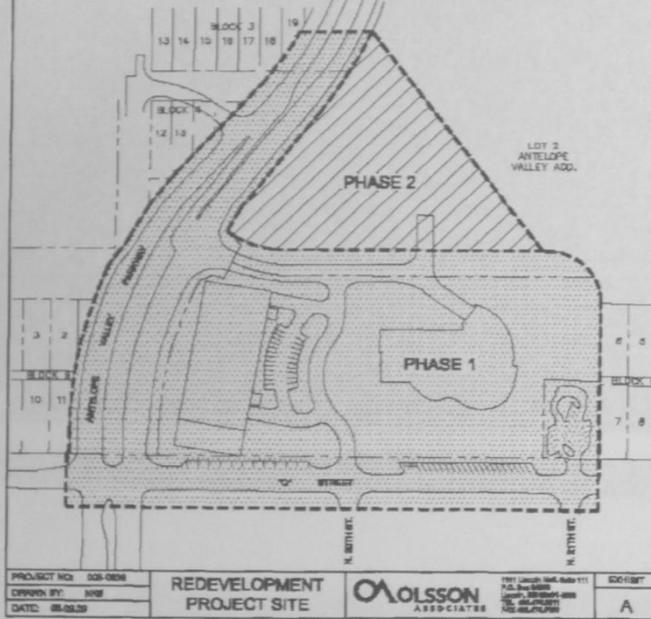
The current energy regulations apparently allow state officials little or no discretion in applying the requirements to renovation projects, despite the inherent energy savings in reusing rather than replacing existing structures. The huge windows on a building like “Kirk Motors” require other upgrades such as extra roof insulation to achieve the required scores, that might be more expensive than simply reducing the size or number of windows. This review was rendered more complicated by the current arrangement of assigning review to the State and enforcement to City building officials. Unifying the review and enforcement at the City level might expedite local projects. The handsome renovation of this building for N Street Liquors demonstrates what can be achieved under current codes.



2009

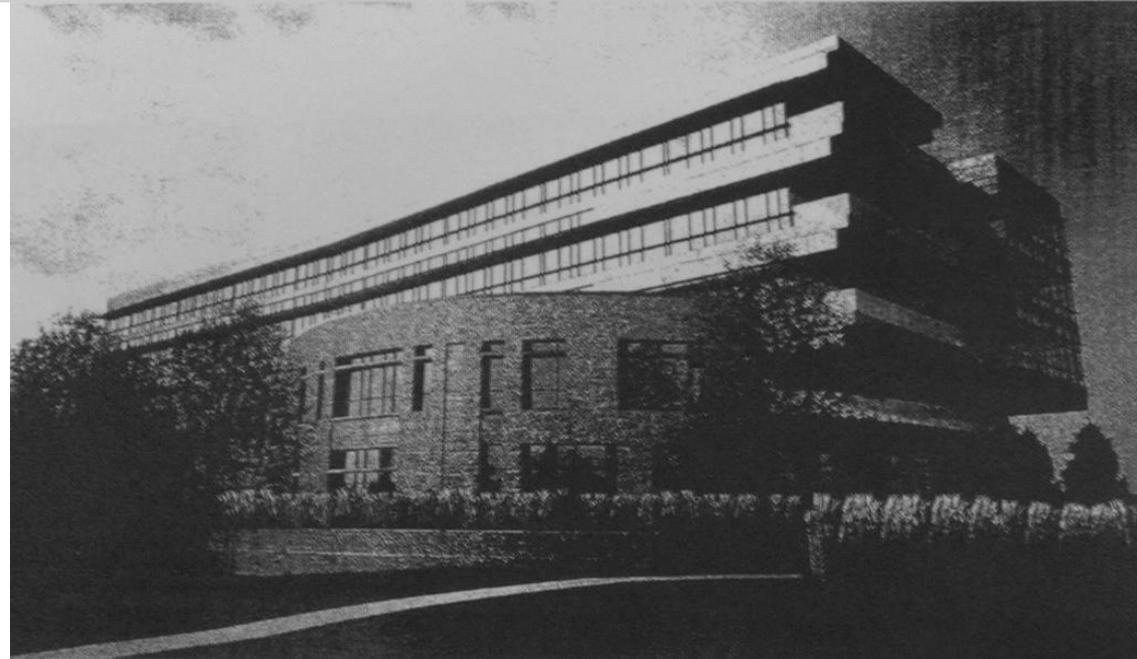
Assurity

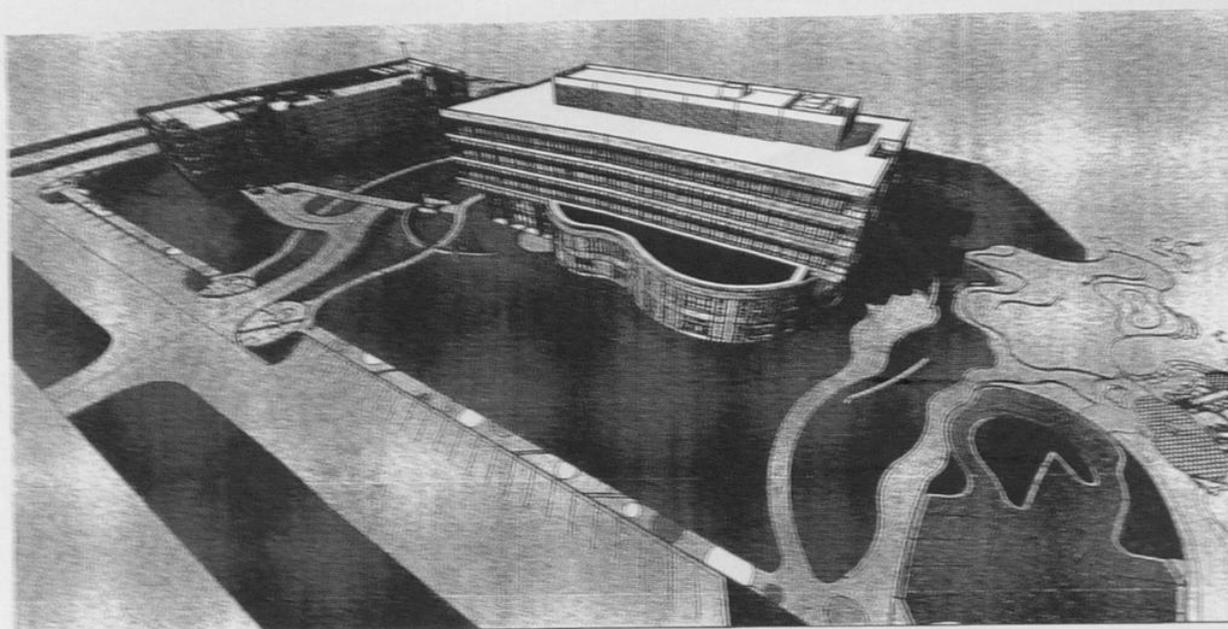
The only new buildings reviewed in the first year of the Downtown Design Standards were the office building and parking structure for Assurity bounded by 19th and 21st Streets, Q and R Streets. As a public-private redevelopment project, the design was already subject to advisory design review by the Urban Design Committee. The LDDS review was incorporated into that existing review process.



The office building is positioned on the east side of the parcel with well-developed facades addressing Union Plaza park.

The site is campus-like and the Downtown Design Standard recognize this possibility by allowing greater flexibility of positioning buildings east of 19th Street/Antelope Valley Parkway. West of the Parkway, buildings are to be “built-to” their front property line. “East Downtown”/Antelope Valley was intended to offer some larger campuses near to but not in the Downtown Core and the Assurity project is just such an opportunity.



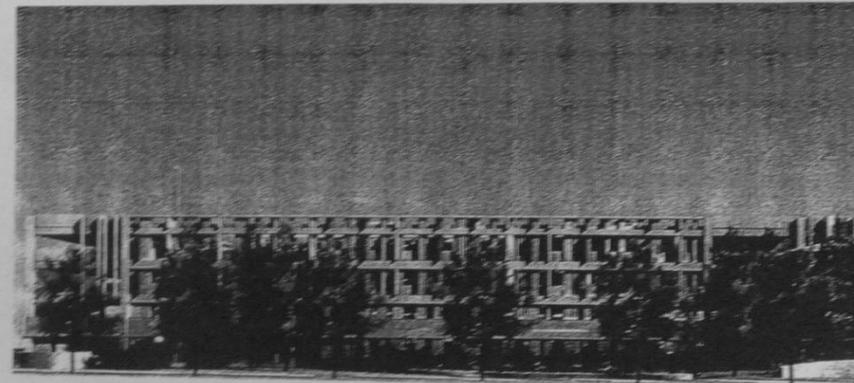


The office building's main entrance is oriented westward, toward the interior of the campus and the parking structure on the west side. Urban Design Committee received a preliminary presentation on March 4, 2009 and offered suggestions regarding the parking structure and the pedestrian connection to Q Street. The project was approved as meeting the intent of the LDDS on April 1, 2009

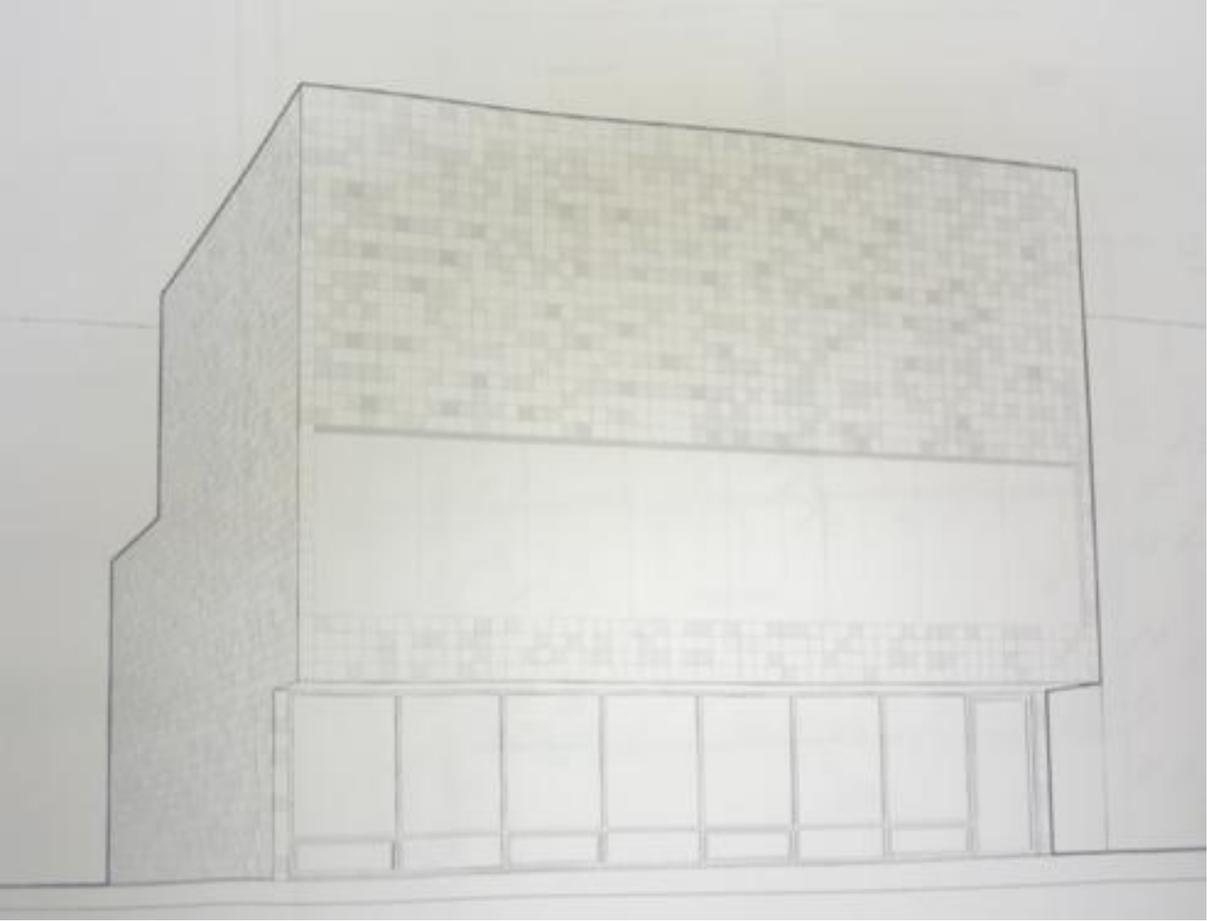


Southeast Corner Overview

Assurity Parking Garage, Antelope Valley Parkway façade (west), as presented and approved April 1, 2009.



Parking Garage West Elevation



Archival, 330 S. 9th St. :

Archival has applied for a building permit for a new structure at 330 S. 9th Street, currently a parking lot in the “Color Court” complex. The process on this application is on-going.

The proposed structure has a recessed storefront at the first floor, a band-window at the second, and concrete block as the primary material of the facades. On the principal, 9th St. façade, the upper portion of the wall would incorporate a “scatter” of glass blocks, so some light would penetrate the wall.

The design meets most of the Downtown Design Standards for its location as it is “built to” the front property line, has ample transparency on the ground floor, and locates parking to the rear. The recessed first floor is permitted as the location is not one of the key retail streets (P Street and N. 21st Streets).

However, concrete block is not permitted as a primary façade material and therefore the design does not qualify for administrative approval. The applicant’s options include modifying the material choice or appealing the design to the Urban Design Committee.



WEST ELEVATION

July 6, 2009

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NeighborWorks Lincoln

The NeighborWorks Lincoln office and condominiums at 23rd and P Streets is not located in the B-4 and O-1 zones subject to the LDDS, but those standards are included as guidelines for review in the PUD (Planned Unit Development) authorizing this project.

The project includes the agency's office and rental commercial space on the ground floor and residences above. The design proposed brick cladding for the ground floor and "cement-board" lap siding on the residential upper floors, to differentiate the uses and provide a transition between downtown and the residences on the rest of the block. Exercising his authority specified in the PUD, the Planning Director accepted the lap siding on this design—a material not allowed in the B-4 and O-1 districts under the LDDS.



The wind turbines which are a prominent part of this building's design cannot meet the LDDS requirement that rooftop mechanical equipment be screened with architectural materials consistent with the overall design, nor are they regarded as "necessary mechanical appurtenances" under the zoning code. Planning staff proposed that the turbines would be acceptable if well-integrated into the original design as clearly "purposeful" features. The applicant accepted that condition and the project designers will offer details to show the turbines' placement and support structures as "purposeful" elements of the design. Energy devices such as wind turbines and solar collectors may need to be more explicitly addressed in both the zoning code and the Downtown Design Standards.



SUMMARY

Only a handful of projects were built in the B-4 and O-1 districts of Downtown and Antelope Valley this year, so the Lincoln Downtown Design Standards have not been very thoroughly tested. Nine projects were reviewed and approved, some with slight modifications to meet standards. The Archrival building has not been approved, pending resolution of the façade material (concrete block). The multiple paths to approval (administrative, Planning Director, Urban Design Committee/Capitol Environs Commission) were helpful in expediting the review and approval of diverse projects that ranged from modest additions or remodels to new construction estimated at over \$40 million. No project was appealed to City Council.

Areas for improvement of the standards may include

- screening of outdoor uses in addition to parking lots, and
- specific language to address wind turbines, solar collectors, and other mechanical appurtenances that cannot or should not be screened in the manner that cooling towers or similar HVAC equipment should be screened,
- continued attention to materials, so as not to disadvantage innovative projects. For instance, applicants might be offered the option of an alternative design review process by one of the citizen design boards—Urban Design Committee, Historic Preservation Commission, or Nebr. Capitol Environs Commission—under a descriptive set of design goals, in lieu of the current administrative process of review under the current prescriptive set of design standards. In effect, that option is available now as an appeal from a negative finding by staff, but a more positive option might be to go directly to a design board with an innovative project.

*Respectfully submitted,
Ed Zimmer, Planning Dept.
November 25, 2009*