

Major Components of Vieux Carré Distinctiveness

The distinctiveness of an area is created by its predominant characteristics, not the exceptions or deviations. While the Vieux Carré has variety in building designs, this variety is within discernable limits. Uncontrolled variation or designs out of context will not preserve the Quarter's distinctiveness.

Though change is inevitable, even in a historic district, accommodating the Vieux Carré to the requirements of contemporary life should not be achieved at the expense of the integrity of the historic district's unique environment.

While a statement in the Introduction suggests that defining the "quaint and distinctive character" of the Vieux Carré is difficult, the major physical components of the Vieux Carré's distinctiveness are not mysterious or elusive. The Vieux Carré Commission, in attempting to fulfill its legal responsibility to preserve the "quaint and distinctive character" of the physical environment within the legally defined boundaries of the Vieux Carré, recognizes the following as major physical components of the distinctiveness and uses them in evaluating the appropriateness of all physical changes proposed within the district.

Historic Street Pattern - Basic fabric of the area.

The grid pattern of narrow thoroughfares creating relatively small squares was the beginning of a predominately pedestrian environment where distances were measured in human footsteps, and increments clearly established by intersecting streets within sight of the pedestrian. Disruption of this pattern, such as building on street beds or overhead connections between buildings across streets, is not permitted.

Scale of the District - A collection of buildings predominately one to four stories in height.

Vertical as well as horizontal distance is measured in human footsteps. Human size and untaxed physical capability, along with available technology and material, established the scale of the district. This human scale, reflected in the size of buildings, contributes more to the distinctiveness of the Vieux Carré than any other single component.

The Vieux Carré is threatened on several fronts by the construction of buildings exceeding the height allowed by zoning. Currently, high rises are proliferating on the Canal Street block that is outside of the VCC's legal jurisdiction. While these buildings are touted as the savior of the Canal Street business district, they are equally the demise of part of the historic context of the Vieux Carré. Even though this block is outside of the VCC's jurisdiction, it is part of the National Historic Landmark District. Concerns have been expressed that this erosion of the Canal Street edge of the Vieux Carré can lead to further erosion of the historic context and scale along Rampart Street and the Riverfront, creating an island in the midst of high-rise construction.

Likewise, the addition of penthouses on existing structures in the Quarter threaten not only the scale of the district but the actual historic significance of individual properties as well as the roofscape of the district. Existing exceptions to the fifty foot maximum height limit shall not be justification for new exceptions.

Texture of Typical Street Scene - Patterns created by openings, balconies, ironwork, cornices, etc

The typical street scene is a row of attached or closely spaced buildings built directly at the sidewalk line. A rich visual quality and three dimensional interest result from the rhythm of architectural elements, pattern of detail, and a limited variety of cornice heights and balcony and/or gallery projections over the sidewalk.

The predominant ratio of solid wall area to area of openings, proportions and directional emphasis of wall openings and roof, parapet, floor, and balcony lines shall be respected and maintained wherever possible.

Typical Building Materials - Walls of masonry or stucco finish and roofs with slate or tile shingles.

Design unity within the Quarter is greatly enhanced by the use of relatively few materials and their repetition in a block face. Materials for exterior walls, doors, windows, roofs, paving, etc. shall be compatible in quality, color, composition, and texture with existing prevalent materials.

Typical Building Site Plan - Erected on front property lines with internal ground level open space.

The predominate site plan has the front of the main building on the street property line with a courtyard behind the main building between the main building and a rear ancillary building, or alongside the ancillary building, and sometimes also between the ancillary building and rear property line.

Occasional views from the street of sunlight and planting at the end of dimly lit passageways or narrow alleys provide unexpected and delightful glimpses for the passerby.

The intimate patios for each individual building site should be preserved. Consolidation of open space of adjoining building sites shall not be permitted. A minimum of thirty percent open space for interior sites and twenty percent for corner sites shall be maintained, as required by the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance of the City of New Orleans.

Rear buildings should not exceed main buildings in mass nor dominate them.

Liaison with River - Primary determinant of the Vieux Carré's location and critical to its identity.

Visual Contact

Because of the earth levee and now the flood wall, the river is not visible from street level, but its presence is still evident from the views of the superstructure and rigging of passing ships.

Unobstructed views along streets toward the river shall be maintained by prohibiting structures in street beds and overhead connections between buildings within street lines extending to the river.

Physical Access

Regaining public open space between the flood wall and the river is a major historic preservation objective of the Vieux Carré Commission.

The VCC holds that this publicly held land should remain in public ownership and be redeveloped for public use. Toward this end, the VCC recommends that development riverside of the flood wall between Iberville Street and Esplanade Avenue be designed as open green space, with public promenades and low density and scale developments not higher than 35' above grade level at Decatur Street, creating a unique and distinctive area of the Vieux Carré not imitative of other riverfront developments. Building in the natural street extensions along Decatur Street is prohibited.