

May 26, 2026

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

I understand that you are still “in process” in terms of reviewing the draft Architectural Design Standards. With this in mind, I would like to offer some comments on the most recent additions. For ease of review, I will offer my suggestions page by page. Thank you for taking the time to consider my thoughts.

Beth

Page 2. A. Findings. Item 1) Aren't Findings supposed to reflect the current state of our town? Adding the phrase “robust and vibrant university town” seems to be visionary rather than a statement of fact. . Does it belong in this section?

Item 6) *Durham is both a historic New England town and a dynamic university community anchored by the University of New Hampshire. Its built environment must reflect both its historic roots and its **evolving, forward-looking character.***

I don't know what “forward-looking character” means. I think “evolving character” would be fine.

Page 4. B) Purpose. *7) **Encourage buildings that actively contribute to community life through outdoor spaces such as balconies, patios, rooftop terraces, and publicly visible gathering areas;***

Throughout this document there are references to balconies and rooftop terraces. I think we would all like to see more outdoor gathering spaces downtown. I suggest the Board invite our Police Chief Rene Kelley to an upcoming meeting to discuss this with him. When I spoke to him last fall, he was not enthusiastic about creating more places for inebriated young people to fall from, having witnessed during his term one fatal fall from a rooftop in Durham and one which resulted in full paralysis from the neck down. The Chief told me he would not prevent a developer from building such rooftop or balcony spaces but he would not want to see them made accessible. I quote him: “No good could come of it.” Please arrange a time to speak with the Chief, perhaps even via Zoom, before adding these options to a list of desirable architectural features.

9) Allow for high-quality contemporary architectural expression that complements, rather than imitates, historic forms;

Two points: 1) Even rigorous historic renovation or infill does not recommend “phony colony” but rather employs time-honored historic architectural design. Designing to reflect our historic traditions does not need to result in cheap imitation.

2) This is one of several places throughout the newly revised document where “contemporary architecture” is introduced and promoted. Previously our Standards encouraged “design compatible with the architectural heritage of Durham and/or our New England traditions.” Looking back at our Master Plan Survey, I see that the current, existing Design Standards were firmly rooted in a community vision. The direct call for “contemporary architectural expression” introduces a whole new direction in vision to what the community has agreed upon.

In the Master Plan Survey, under Community Character, 86% of respondents said that maintaining “small New England town character” was important to them; 71% supported “Traditional historic architectural character.” 81% said Durham should establish architectural and site design standards or guidelines for downtown projects, presumably that reflect the vision of the community.

While our Design Standards can always be waived when some fabulous out-of-the-box architectural design comes forward, I would caution the Planning Board against rolling out the red carpet for “contemporary architecture” which, in this latest draft, appears throughout this document. We are due for a Master Plan rewrite. Until then, given the high percentages of community members who favored traditional design, I don’t believe it is appropriate to make such a dramatic change in direction.

*10) “Foster a sense of vibrancy, energy, and place **appropriate to a university-centered downtown.**”* I believe there is a general consensus among residents that we would like to see our downtown be less “university-centered” and more centered on serving year-round residents, thus I suggest striking “appropriate to a university centered downtown.”

Page 6. Conformance with Standards. I appreciate the recommendation to remove words that introduce uncertainty regarding compliance with our Standards. “Mushy language” like “reasonably” or “overall” can only get us into trouble in the future.

Page 7. Review of proposed designs. I appreciate Michael’s recommendation to bring in an architect or create an architectural review committee when reviewing major projects. Other towns do this and given our Main Street will likely be totally transformed in the coming years, good design is critical. Since our next Planner may not have the same architectural background as our current one, this is an important recommendation. I would add a few suggestions noted in yellow below.

5) *Review of proposed designs. In order to obtain guidance in reviewing a proposed design for conformance with these Standards the Planning Board may, at its option:*

(a) Rely upon the Durham Town Planner (should he or she not have the required architectural expertise);

(b) Rely upon comments from the public and professionals with a background in architecture, architectural history and design;

(c) Hire a qualified professional, including an architect, architectural historian, or other design professional;

(d) Form a committee composed of Planning Board members and/or other persons who have some architectural expertise; or

(e) Rely upon the Planning Board collectively or individual Planning Board members who have the requisite background.

In all cases, the parties above may provide recommendations to the Planning Board, including any prospective changes to the design, and the board shall determine in its sole judgment whether or not a proposed design conforms with these standards.

Page 13. H) General Principles

No single architectural style is required. Buildings should be harmonious with the character of Durham and its districts, which may be achieved through traditional, transitional, or contemporary design approaches. Contemporary architecture is encouraged when it demonstrates high-quality materials, strong proportions, and sensitivity to context. Direct imitation of historic styles is not required.

Here again, I worry about “encouraging” that which the Master Plan does not support. This paragraph contradicts that one above it, which more accurately reflects the communities wishes. Thus, I do not see the need for it. I believe the term “neo-classical” is more encompassing and appropriate. What is wrong with the existing paragraph?

2) Traditional idiom. No particular architectural style is stipulated, but buildings shall be harmonious with traditional Durham, New Hampshire and/or New England architecture. Thus, the general approach ~~should~~ shall express traditional or neo-traditional design. However, innovative design is not discouraged, provided it is respectful of context and these principles, thus allowing for some deviation from traditional/neo-traditional design. Incorporation of distinctive *contemporary* details, materials, and finishes ~~that mark a building as contemporary~~, within an otherwise traditional design ~~is-can be~~ appropriate.

Page 15. H. 1) Public Realm and Community Activision. I applaud the continued call for sensitivity to the pedestrian experience and outdoor spaces. I do think the Board should check with Police Chief Kelley before including items 2 and 3 below.

2. Outdoor Spaces. Balconies, patios, rooftop terraces, outdoor dining areas, and similar features are strongly encouraged, particularly when visible from public ways or contributing to street vitality.

3. Rooftop Activation. Rooftop spaces accessible to occupants—including restaurants, lounges, and gathering areas—are encouraged where appropriately designed to respect neighboring properties.

Page 16. Scale and Massing. I like the additions in addition to the existing sentence on human scale. Including the term “human scale” is important since it is part of our Master Plan recommendations.

Page 20. L. Height

2) *With buildings that are taller than 3 stories architectural techniques shall be employed to reduce the sense of height and mass. These techniques shall include a prominent third-story eave line, created either by a pitched roof or by other design features which accomplish the purpose of this section.*

[Comment from Peyton McManus: We have a building height limit, this language implies that this can be rejected based on these following cases – which seems to nullify the idea of building height.]

I disagree with this interpretation in green above. What L.2 is saying is that for buildings that are taller than 3 stories, these architectural techniques should be employed to mitigate the sense of mass and height. This was a critical part of the information that Doug Bencks presented to the Town Council (and they agreed with) and to the Planning Board in his letters of ([March 25](#) and [April 6](#)). I think Michael’s clarification on page 21 is helpful: *The allowable building height and number of stories is given in the Zoning Ordinance. However, in accordance with these regulations the Planning Board may work to visually mitigate building height. The following criteria should help to determine whether it is appropriate for the Planning Board to seek to mitigate the proposed height.* (Thus the criteria d, e & k are particularly helpful.)

Page 22. I am not recalling why **L. 4) Mitigating height** has been crossed out since that is a particularly sensitive issue in Durham.

~~*4) Mitigating height. Additional height/stories can be mitigated by techniques such as setting back the top story; using a pitched roof; making the top floor visually lighter or less intrusive in some manner; or incorporating more horizontal elements into the design. Incorporating a gable as part of the roof allows for an additional story (or partial story) with less impact than adding an entire floor with a flat roof.*~~

I do agree that some better examples of height mitigation can be provided.

Page 23. Re: Comments re: **#8) Fifth Story Setbacks.** Doug Bencks has been very clear in his comments about University architecture that the context, with its sprawling lawns, large trees, and wooded areas is a completely different context than Main Street, Durham. It was Doug who recommended the use of 4- and 5-story setbacks to mitigate mass and the appearance of height. Note that Huddleston, Fairchild, and Hetzel all have pitched roofs and dormers which that public has been arguing for over the last year, but the Planning Board has rejected.

Page 25 5) Pitched roofs. I appreciate the effort to create alternative language for this item, but since it comes under the heading of Pitched roofs, I believe the paragraph should remain focused on pitched roofs. Why are we talking about flat roofs under this subsection?

Original: *Pitched roofs with street-facing dormers in CB-1, particularly along Main Street, would serve to reflect our architectural heritage and create a transition from Church Hill into the heart of our downtown.*

Suggested alternative: *In CB-1 roof designs shall be either pitched with street-facing dormers, or, if flat, shall include significant mitigating elements as described in M1, above, and in either case shall, in context, produce an attractive transition from Church Hill into the heart of downtown Durham.*

Also, we have examples of flat roofs next to pitched roofs along Main Street and I don't believe they offer an "attractive transition from Church Hill."

Page 25. 8) Balconies and Patios. *Balconies, porches, and patios that are visible from public ways are encouraged, particularly when they contribute to a lively and inhabited appearance.* Again, please check with Chief Kelley.

Page 29. Michael, would you please address this as you are the most architectural schooled among us.

Page 32 2) Inappropriate materials. Thank you Michael for adding thin brick and false brick facades to inappropriate materials.

5) Clapboards widths: Michael, please sharing what is considered generally accepted architectural practices regarding clapboards.

Page 34 on R. Color. I like the rewrite offered.
Bright colors may be used in accent areas if, in the judgment of the Town in its sole discretion, the effect is playful and decorative rather than garish.

Color can have a huge positive or negative impact on the look and feel of a building. I believe the existing regulations are appropriate. Perhaps some might remember the spiteful garish painting of 3 buildings along Main Street in the current location of the Orion Buildings?

Page 42 Definition of human scale. I appreciate the effort to try to meld the two human scale definitions that were offered. To better align with Doug Bencks' teachings, I offer the following edits in yellow.

*Human Scale: A design principle based on the experience of a pedestrian, emphasizing proportion, relationship, detail, and visual engagement at walking speed. Human scale is not defined by building size alone, but also by how a building is perceived and experienced by pedestrians. **people in the public realm. Buildings of any size or architectural style—including contemporary designs—can achieve human scale when they incorporate** Elements such as ground-floor activity, visual interest, articulated façades, transparency, ~~and~~ materials and details that **engage** ~~are legible and engaging to~~ a person on foot **all contribute to creating a human scale experience.** Human-scaled environments feel approachable, comfortable, and connected to their surroundings rather than imposing or disconnected. They invite people to spend time, interact, and participate in public life, contributing to a vibrant and economically resilient town center. Respecting human scale ensures that new development enhances Durham's sense of place as both a historic New England town and a dynamic university community.*

Thank you for all the time and thought that you have put into this important rewrite. I believe, in the end, it will pay off.

Beth Olshansky

PS I do think form-based code is a good idea though I don't know enough about it to understand what is involved. Perhaps our next Planner will be able to help with that?