



CITY OF
METHUEN
Where History Meets Progress

MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING DESIGN GUIDELINES

JUNE 2025

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*Prepared by Innes Associates.
for the City of Methuen.*



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INTRODUCTION

Design Purpose

The purpose of these multifamily design guidelines is to support high-quality, context-sensitive housing development in Methuen that aligns with the city's long-term goals for livability, inclusivity, and resilience.

By adopting its MBTA Communities zoning in compliance with Massachusetts General Law (M.G.L.) 40A Section 3A and establishing its 40R Smart Growth Zoning District, Methuen is proactively guiding residential growth to meet regional housing needs while reinforcing local identity.

These guidelines provide a clear design framework to ensure that new multifamily housing, ranging from small-scale infill to larger multifamily developments, enhances the character of existing neighborhoods, supports walkable environments, and contributes to a diverse and affordable housing stock.

By promoting thoughtful design, Methuen seeks to accommodate growth without compromising the integrity of its built environment or quality of life for current and future residents.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES



Integrate with Neighborhood Character

New multifamily developments should reflect the scale, rhythm, and architectural language of surrounding buildings to create a seamless visual transition within the neighborhood. This includes using materials, rooflines, setbacks, and façade articulation that echo local traditions while allowing for contemporary interpretation. Designs must be sensitive to context and reinforce the sense of place unique to Methuen's neighborhoods and future goals.



Encourage a Mix of Housing Types and Affordability

A healthy housing ecosystem offers diverse options for residents of all ages, incomes, and household sizes. By incorporating a range of building forms—such as duplexes and fourplexes—communities can accommodate varied lifestyles while promoting economic inclusivity. Design guidelines should ensure that affordable units are indistinguishable in quality and design from market-rate housing.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES



Design for Walkability, Connectivity, and Human Scale

Well-designed streets and buildings should prioritize the pedestrian experience, with frontages that activate the street, clear paths that connect to the broader neighborhood, and building proportions that feel comfortable and accessible. Elements like stoops, porches, small setbacks, and tree-lined sidewalks help foster a vibrant public realm and encourage daily walking, social interaction, and neighborhood cohesion.

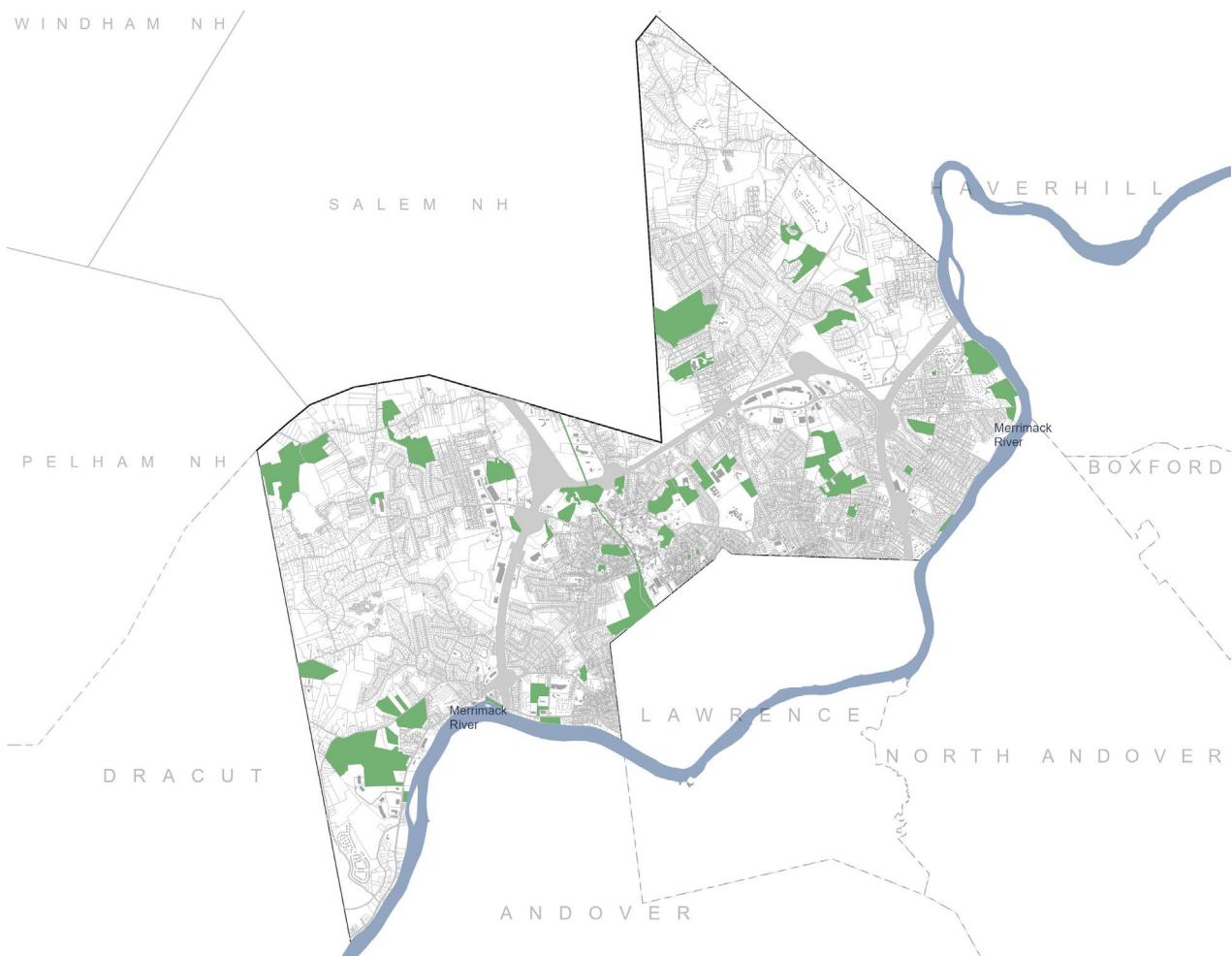


Support Mixed-Use and Resilient Design

Mixed-use developments contribute to a more dynamic and self-sustaining community by bringing housing, services, and jobs closer to each other. Ground floors can accommodate small businesses or community amenities, while upper levels provide residential units. Resilient design means preparing buildings for long-term adaptability – through energy-efficient systems, durable materials, and flexible layouts – so that they can respond to changing needs and conditions over time.

DISTRICT TYPE

General



Methuen's neighborhood varies widely in scale, form, and historical context, and multi-family housing should respond to these distinctions. In the historic downtown and older residential areas, new developments must respect traditional patterns – buildings close to the street, with consistent heights, and details that align with the area's architectural language. Infill should reinforce the walkable character of these districts through appropriate massing, rhythm, and materials.

DISTRICT TYPE

Housing types like duplexes, triplexes, and townhouses can add needed diversity without disrupting neighborhood scale in transitional and residential fringe areas. Designs in these contexts should reflect existing rooflines, lot patterns, and setbacks and carefully examine entries, landscaping, and side yard conditions to preserve privacy and neighborhood continuity.

More substantial buildings may be appropriate along commercial corridors and in larger redevelopment areas. However, they must still relate to street patterns, avoid blank facades, and provide meaningful pedestrian connections. Design should prioritize compatibility over replication—new housing must contribute to a coherent streetscape while supporting long-term growth and housing goals across all district types.

DISTRICT TYPE

Riverside Drive

The Riverside Drive district, spanning roughly 27 acres along the Merrimack River, is a transitional area with low-scale residential and light commercial uses. Its proximity to the river and regional roadways makes it a strategic location for modest infill development.

Under Methuen's MFOD zoning, the area permits multifamily housing at up to 12 units per acre and a maximum of three stories.

New development should be context-sensitive, maintaining neighborhood scale through pitched roofs, articulated facades, and landscaped edges. Site planning should enhance pedestrian access along the corridor.



DISTRICT TYPE

Pleasant Valley Corridor

At around 58 acres, the Pleasant Valley Corridor is Methuen's most commercially active district near the Loop shopping area and key highway interchanges. The zoning here allows for up to 30 units per acre and buildings up to four stories, enabling mid-scale development suited to mixed-use formats.

All new developments and any redevelopment should prioritize walkability and urban frontage, incorporating wide sidewalks, clear pedestrian crossings, and active ground floor uses where applicable.

Building massing should step down near residential edges, and design should soften the commercial landscape with trees, lighting, and publicly accessible open space.

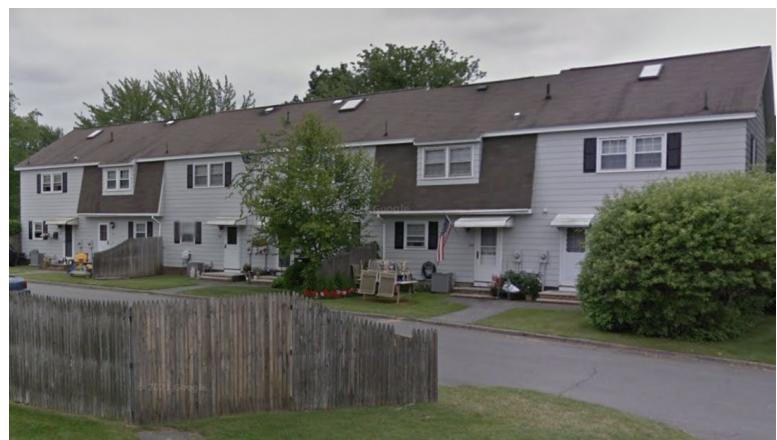
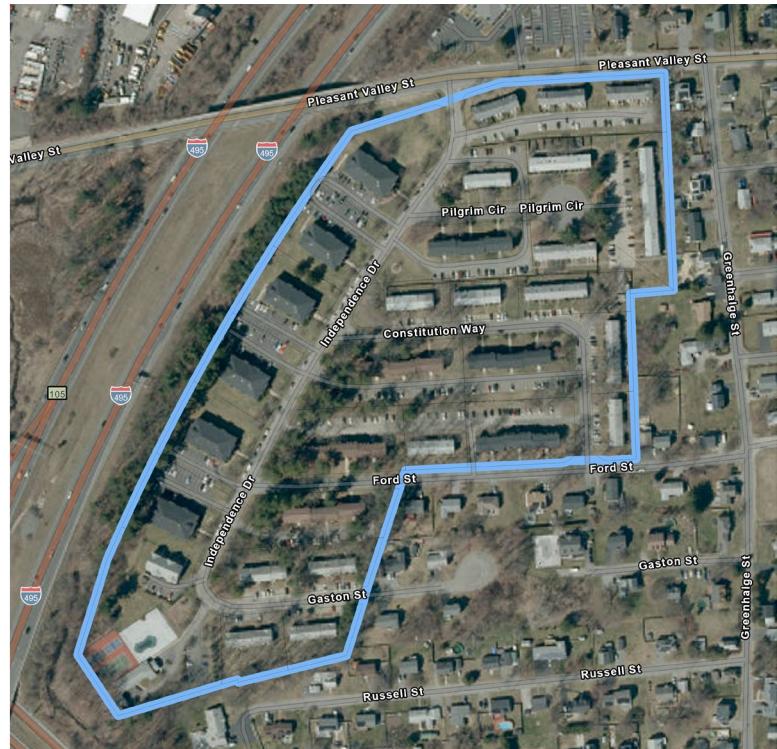


DISTRICT TYPE

Colonial Village

Colonial Village, covering approximately 26 acres, is an established residential neighborhood with a mix of older multi-family buildings and small-lot homes. The updated zoning permits up to 19 units per acre in subdistrict A and 25 units per acre in subdistrict B, with building heights of three stories in both subdistricts. This provides opportunities for thoughtful infill and small-scale redevelopment.

New buildings should be designed to reinforce the area's residential character through traditional forms, contextual materials, and consistent front setbacks. Shared green spaces, street trees, and pedestrian scale lighting can help maintain livability and ensure that new density supports, rather than overwhelms, the existing community fabric.



HOUSING TYPES

Building Orientation (1): Align townhouses parallel to the street to maintain cohesive streetscapes.

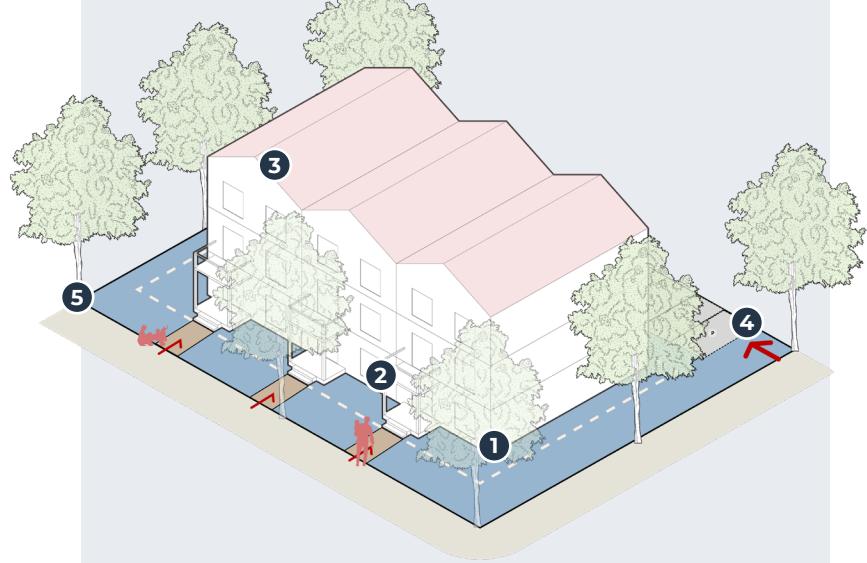
Entrances (2): Each unit should have a distinct, street-facing entrance with a covered porch or stoop to enhance individual identity.

Facade Articulation: Incorporate variations in materials, colors, and rooflines every 2-3 units to break up massing and add visual interest.

Roof Design (3): Use pitched roofs with dormers or gables to reflect traditional New England architecture.

Parking (4): Place parking at the rear of the units, accessed via a shared driveway, to minimize the visual impact on the streetscape.

Landscaping (5): Include front yard landscaping with native or adapted plants to soften building edges and enhance curb appeal.



Townhouse

A row of at least three (3) one-family Attached Dwelling units whose sidewalls are separated from other dwelling units by a firewall or walls. Each unit in the row, or town house, may be owned by a separate owner and shall have its own access at grade level.

HOUSING TYPES

Massing and Scale (1): Design duplexes to resemble single-family homes in scale and form to blend seamlessly into existing neighborhoods.

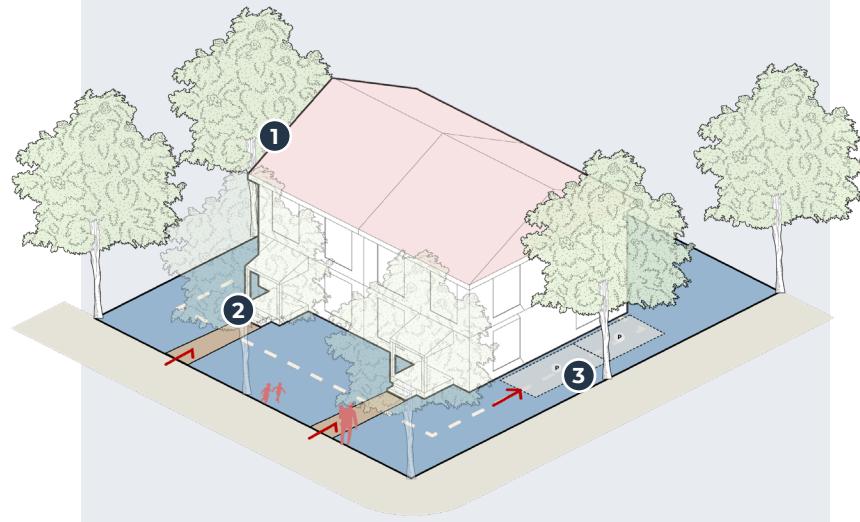
Entrances (2): Provide separate, clearly defined entrances for each unit, preferably on different facades, to maintain privacy.

Rooflines: Employ varied roof forms, such as cross gables or hipped roofs, to reduce perceived bulk.

Materials: Use materials consistent with surrounding homes, such as clapboard siding and brick foundations, to maintain neighborhood character.

Setbacks: Align front and side setbacks with adjacent properties to preserve the rhythm of the street.

Parking (3): Locate parking behind or beside the structure, avoiding front-facing garages when possible.

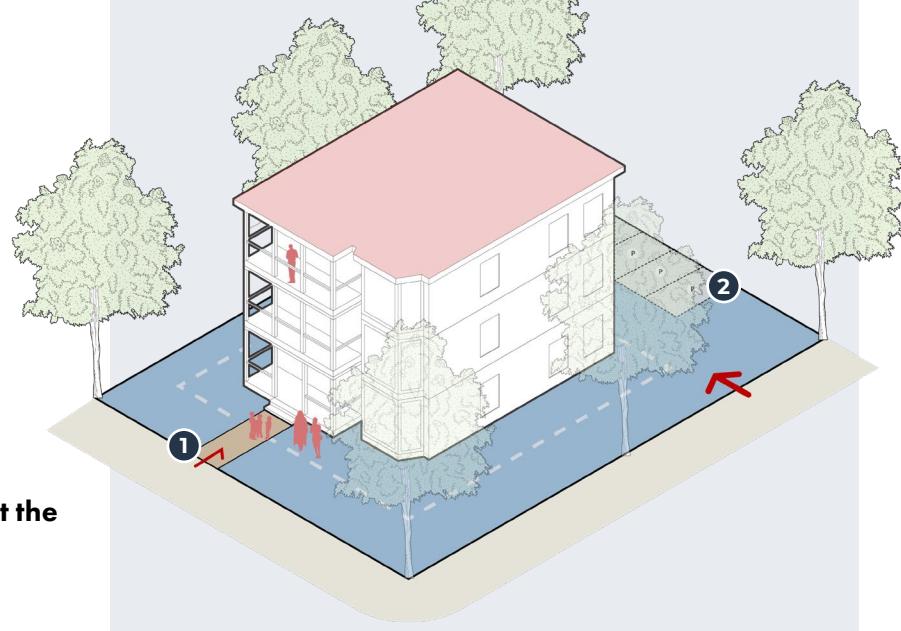


Duplex

A house containing two dwelling units adjoining side by side; that is, in which no part of one dwelling unit is over any part of the other dwelling unit and which is totally separated from each other by an unpierced wall extending from the ground to the roof. A duplex house shall be considered as one (1) principal building occupying one (1) lot for the purpose of determining yard requirements.

HOUSING TYPES

Form and Massing: Design triplexes to reflect the scale and appearance of large single-family homes or duplexes.



Triplex

Entrances (1): Provide individual entrances for each unit; if shared, ensure the entry is prominent and well-lit.

Facade Treatment: Use architectural elements like bays, porches, and varied rooflines to reduce perceived bulk.

Setbacks: Maintain front and side setbacks consistent with neighboring properties.

Parking (2): Situate parking to the rear or side, minimizing its visibility from the street.

Landscaping: Incorporate landscaping to buffer the building from adjacent properties and enhance aesthetics.

A residential property with three separate living units, each with its own entrance and living space.

HOUSING TYPES

Design (1): Emulate the appearance of large homes, using features like porches and varied facades to break up massing.

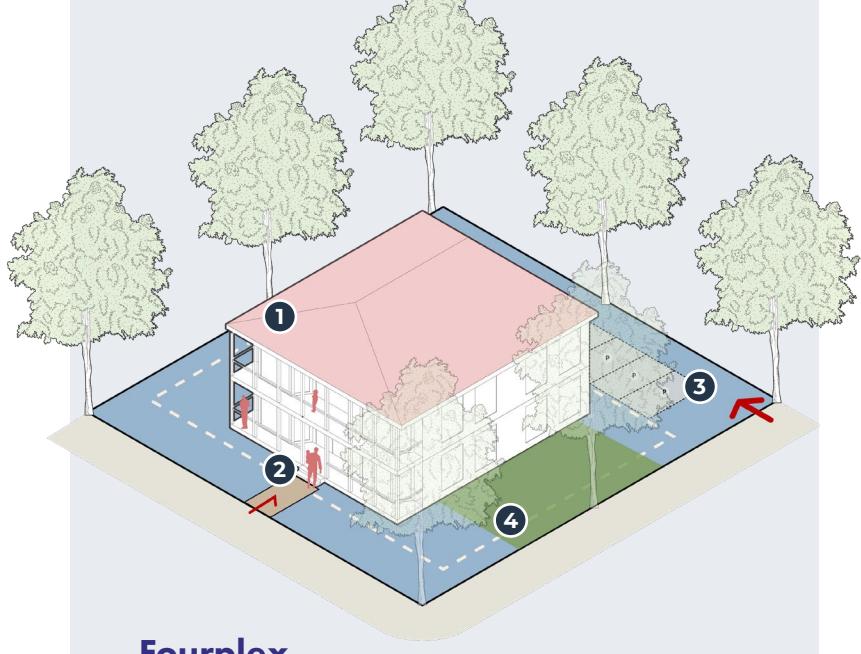
Entrances (2): Offer individual or shared entries that are clearly defined and accessible.

Scale: Ensure the building's height and width are compatible with surrounding structures.

Setbacks: Align with neighborhood patterns to maintain a cohesive streetscape.

Parking (3): Place parking areas at the rear, using landscaping to screen them from view.

Open Space (4): Provide communal outdoor space for residents, enhancing livability.



Fourplex

A fourplex, also known as a quadplex, is a multi-family building containing four separate, self-contained apartments.

HOUSING TYPES

Contextual Fit: Design buildings to reflect the neighborhood's character, using appropriate scale and materials.

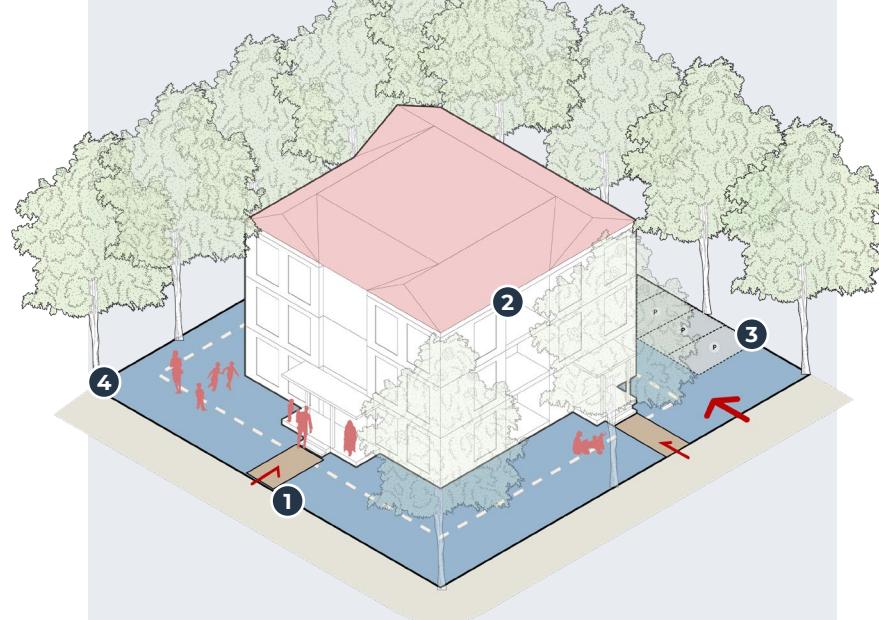
Entrances (1): Feature a prominent main entrance, supplemented by individual unit entries where feasible.

Massing (2): Break up larger facades with architectural elements to reduce visual impact.

Setbacks: Respect existing setback patterns to ensure compatibility with adjacent properties.

Parking (3): Locate parking behind the building, minimizing its presence along the street.

Landscaping (4): Use landscaping to buffer the building from neighboring properties and enhance the site's appearance.



Small Density Multi-Family

A small-density multi-family is a multi-family building containing four (4) to seven (7) separate, self-contained apartments intended for occupancy by separate households.

HOUSING TYPES

Massing (1): Use architectural techniques to break up large building volumes, such as step-backs and varied facades.

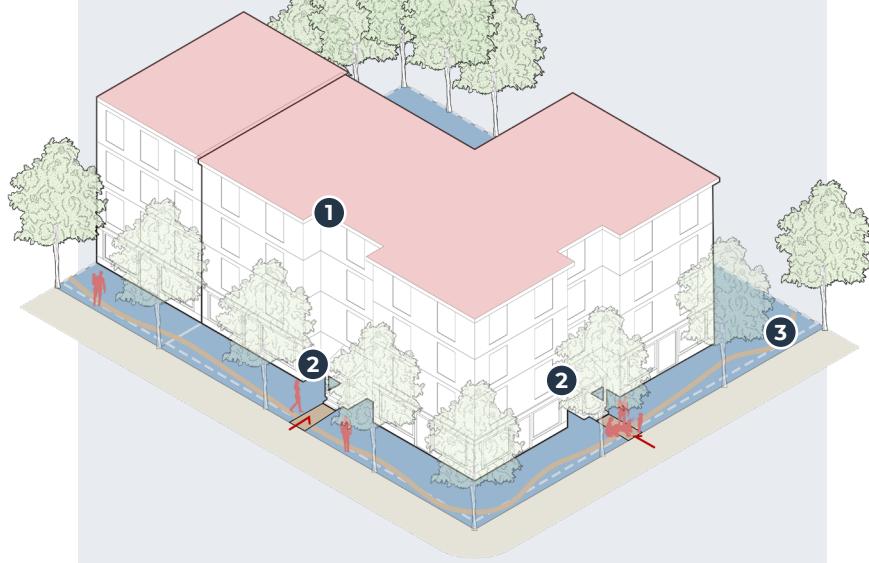
Entrances (2): Feature a prominent, welcoming main entrance that is easily identifiable from the street.

Scale: Design building height and bulk to transition smoothly to adjacent lower-density areas.

Setbacks: Provide substantial setbacks to create open space and reduce the building's visual impact.

Parking: Use structured parking solutions to minimize surface parking areas. These could include underground parking, strategic use of topographical changes, and podium parking.

Landscaping (3): Incorporate extensive landscaping to soften building edges and provide outdoor amenities for residents, such as communal and rooftop gardens, trail networks, and pocket parks to enhance their quality of life.



Apartment Building

A residential structure containing eight (8) or more dwelling units within a single building or group of connected buildings on a single lot designed for separate household occupancy.

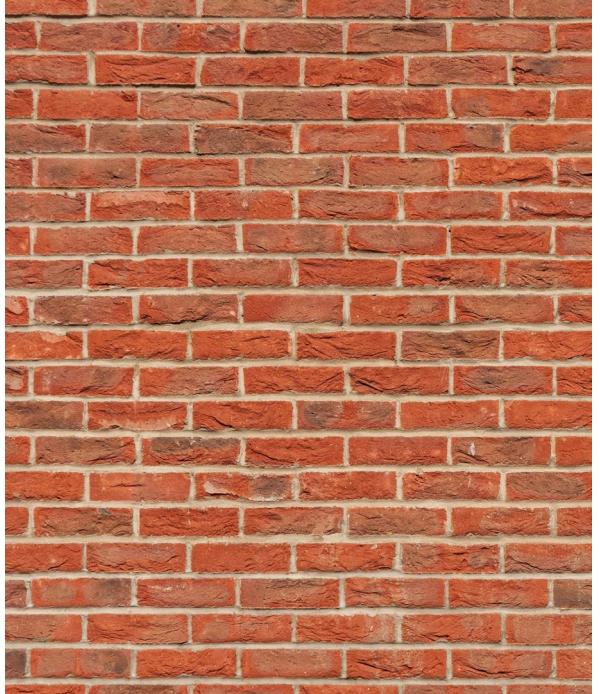
*Units in an apartment building may be rented or owned.

GENERAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

Building Elements: Materials

Durability and Quality

Select long-lasting materials that require minimal maintenance, such as fiber cement siding, brick, or stone veneer. These materials should withstand New England's climate and contribute to the building's longevity.



Contextual Compatibility

Use materials that reflect the architectural character of Methuen's neighborhoods. Incorporate textures and colors harmonizing with the surrounding buildings to maintain a cohesive streetscape.



Sustainable Choices

Prioritize environmentally friendly materials with recycled content or those sourced locally. This approach supports sustainability and reduces the environmental footprint of new developments.



GENERAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

Building Elements: Windows and Doors

Proportional Design (1)

Ensure that windows and doors are proportionally scaled to the building's façade, maintaining a balanced and aesthetically pleasing appearance.



Natural Light and Ventilation (3)

Design window placements to maximize natural light and cross-ventilation within units, improving indoor air quality and reducing reliance on artificial lighting.



Accessibility (2)

Incorporate doors that comply with accessibility standards, providing ease of entry for all residents, including those with mobility challenges.



Energy Efficiency (3)

Install high-performance windows and doors with low U-values and appropriate Solar Heat Gain Coefficients (SHGC) to enhance energy efficiency and indoor comfort.

GENERAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

Building Elements: Roofing

Form and Slope (1)

Design roofs with forms and slopes that complement Methuen's architectural styles. Pitched roofs are encouraged to align with traditional residential designs.

Materials (2)

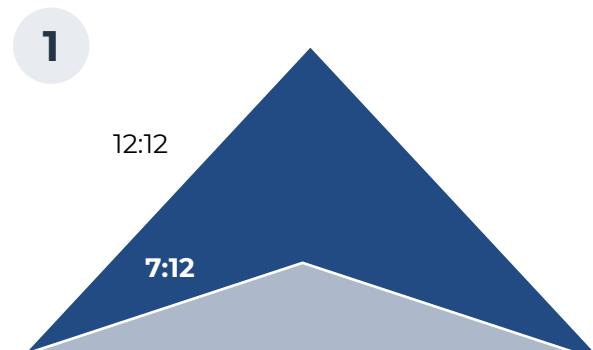
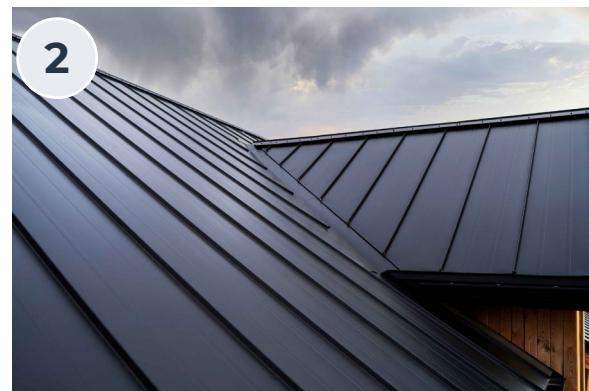
Use roofing materials that are durable and suitable for the regional climate, such as asphalt shingles or metal roofing. Materials should also contribute to the building's overall aesthetic.

Sustainable Features

Consider incorporating sustainable roofing solutions, such as cool roofs or solar panels, to enhance energy efficiency and reduce environmental impact.

Integration with Building Design

Ensure that roof designs integrate seamlessly with the building's overall architecture, including considerations for drainage, insulation, and potential rooftop amenities.



Refer to the Massachusetts Building Code 780:CMR for further guidance.

GENERAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

Building Placement and Site: Setbacks

Setbacks should be context-sensitive, balancing the need for privacy, light, and air with the desire to create a cohesive streetscape.

Front Setbacks

Position buildings to engage the street, promoting pedestrian activity and neighborhood interaction. Avoid deep setbacks that disconnect buildings from the public realm.

Side and Rear Setbacks

Ensure adequate spacing between buildings to provide privacy and access to natural light. The spacing also facilitates emergency access and maintenance.

Buffer Zones

Incorporate landscaped buffers adjacent to differing land uses to mitigate potential conflicts and enhance visual appeal.

GENERAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

Building Placement and Site: Orientation

Building orientation should foster a strong connection between private residences and the public environment.

Street Engagement (1)

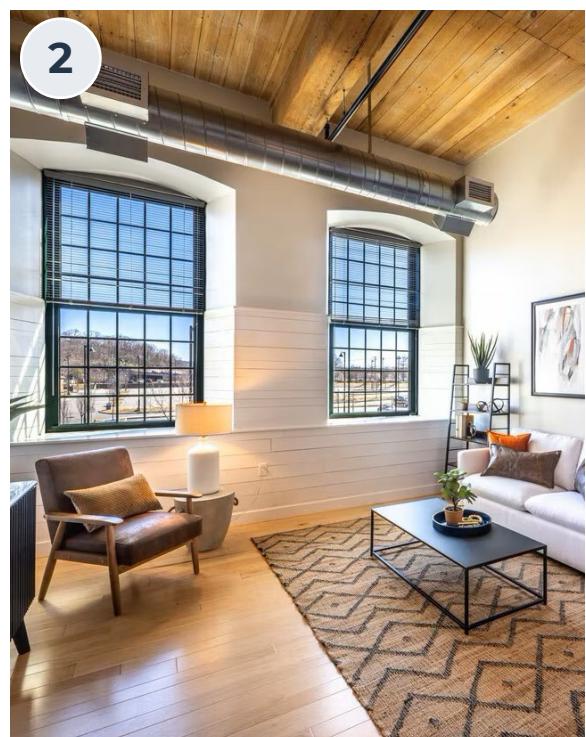
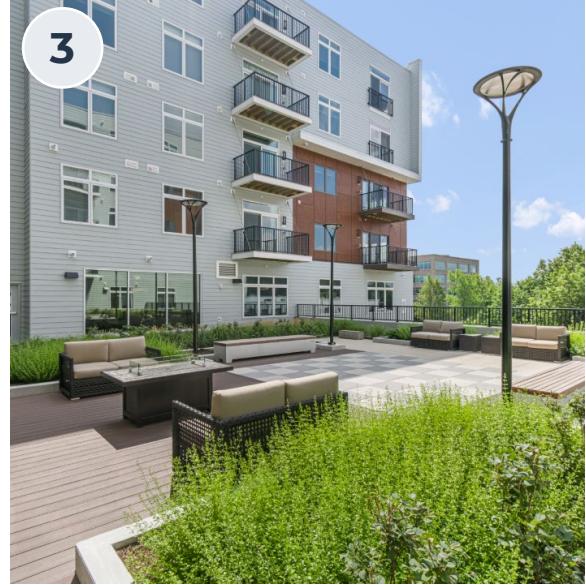
Orient primary entrances toward public streets or communal spaces to enhance visibility and accessibility.

Daylight (2)

Design building layouts to maximize natural light and passive solar heating, improving energy efficiency and resident comfort.

Privacy Considerations (3)

Arrange windows and balconies to respect the privacy of neighboring properties while maintaining natural “eyes on the street” of public areas.



GENERAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

Building Placement and Site: Parking Lots

Parking design should minimize visual impact and support a pedestrian-friendly environment.



Blue arrows indicate entrances to back alleys and parking lots.

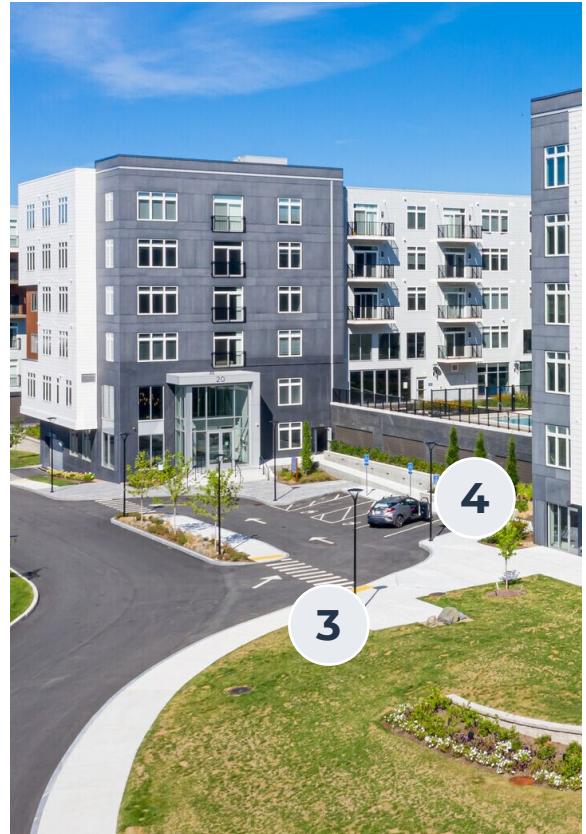
Location (1)

Place parking areas behind or beside buildings, away from primary street frontages, to prioritize pedestrian access and streetscape continuity.



Landscaping (2)

Integrate landscaped islands, swales, rain gardens and perimeter plantings within parking lots to break up large expanses of pavement, minimize runoff, and provide shade.



Pedestrian Safety (3)

Design clear, well-lit pedestrian pathways through parking areas to ensure safe and direct access to building entrances.

Shared Parking (4)

Encourage shared parking arrangements to reduce the total number of required spaces and promote land use efficiency.

GENERAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

Building Placement and Site: Connections

Connectivity enhances mobility and integrates developments into the broader community fabric.

Pedestrian Networks

Develop comprehensive sidewalk systems that connect residences to amenities, transit stops, and neighboring areas.

Bicycle Infrastructure

Provide secure bicycle storage and consider dedicated bike lanes to encourage alternative transportation modes.

Transit Accessibility

Design sites to facilitate easy access to public transportation, including safe pedestrian routes to transit stops.

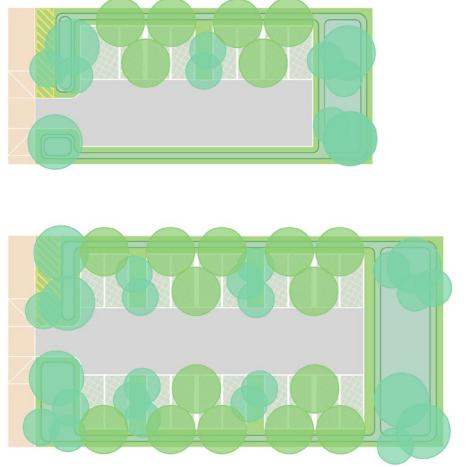
Internal Circulation

Ensure that internal pathways are intuitive and accommodate all users, including those with disabilities.

GENERAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

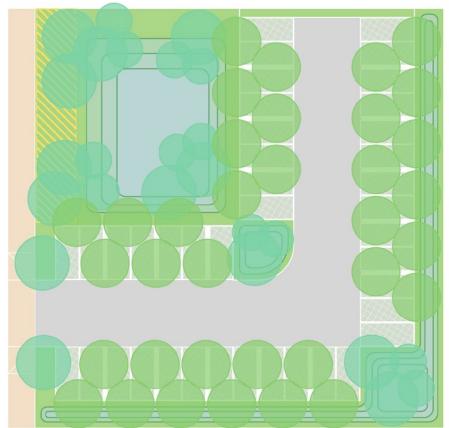
Building Placement and Site: Landscaping

Thoughtful landscaping contributes to environmental sustainability and resident well-being.



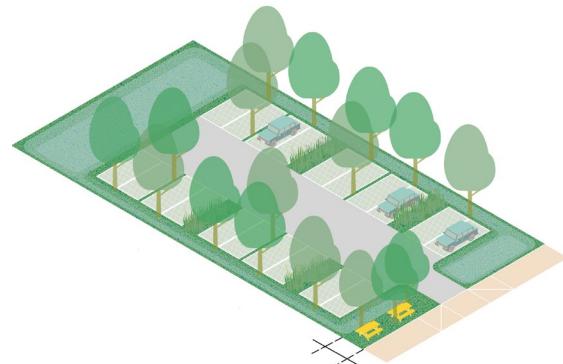
Native Plantings

Use native and adapted drought-tolerant species to reduce maintenance needs and support local ecosystems.



Green Spaces

Incorporate communal green areas for recreation and social interaction, enhancing the quality of life for residents. Design plantings to provide visual interest throughout the year, contributing to the aesthetic appeal of the development.



Stormwater Management

Implement green infrastructure solutions, such as rain gardens and permeable pavements, to manage runoff and improve water quality.

Utilities

Integrate the utilities into the building design, screened from public view using materials and placement consistent with the primary structure, and located to minimize visual and physical impact on any streetscape or open spaces.

SOURCES

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