



Murals in Old & Historic Districts

A Quick Guide

Murals can celebrate community identity, tell powerful stories, support local artists and activate blank walls. Murals are welcome within our city’s Historic Districts, but they must be thoughtfully reviewed to ensure they respect the integrity of our historic buildings.

This guide explains **where review is required**, and **how to apply for approval**.

What are “Old & Historic Districts”?

Property owners within a historic district have a responsibility to follow the additional zoning laws for their property. This includes businesses as well as private residences. Any exterior changes to the buildings on the property, including murals, must come to the **Commission of Architectural Review (CAR)** for approval. The Commission issues Certificates of Appropriateness (COA’s) for approved work. This needs to be obtained before any other permits.



If you’re unsure whether a property is in a historic district, you can scan the QR Code below, or contact Planning & Development Review Staff.

When in doubt, ask first! Staff is ready to help, and early coordination saves time.

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Is my property in a Historic District? Scan to find out

Or visit rva.gov/planning-development-review



The Approval Process: What to Expect

Applying for mural approval is a collaborative and easy process. The goal is not to discourage creativity, it's to ensure long-term preservation and compatibility.

✿ Prepare your application to include the following:

1. Local Historic district
2. Zoning District
3. Type of building (residential/ commercial/ mixed-use/ institutional/ industrial)

Will the mural relate to a business or service? This could constitute signage and could also require a Special Use Permit

4. Building material (Masonry/ Frame/ Other)

Murals cannot be painted directly onto unpainted masonry

5. Location of mural on building (Side/Rear/Facade)

Murals will not be approved on building facades

6. Method of installation (Paint on surface/ panel/ other).

Other forms of art like light projection are encouraged!

Panels and alternate installation methods are required for masonry buildings that have not been previously painted, and must be secured to the building in the mortar joints and not in the face of the brick. A gap should be left between the mural and the wall for ventilation.

7. Images that clearly demarcate the location of the mural on the subject elevation

8. Type of paint being used

9. Color scheme

Iridescent or reflective colors are not permitted

10. Get in touch with staff to submit your application

✿ CAR Review:

CAR meets and reviews proposals during a public meeting, which takes place on the fourth Tuesday of the month, except in December when it meets on the third Tuesday.

The Commission will evaluate proposals based on the City's Old and Historic Guidelines, which can be found on the city's website.

Murals & District Character

Some of the successful murals in historic districts draw inspiration from:

- Neighborhood stories and community life
- Architectural details
- Industrial or commercial heritage
- Historic "ghost signs" (faded historic hand-painted wall signage that remain on several buildings throughout the city)



Painting historic brick requires special care

Historic brick is **more porous and softer** than modern brick. Applying impermeable paint or coatings directly to untreated historic masonry can trap moisture inside the wall, accelerate brick deterioration and cause damage to historic buildings.

For this reason, painting directly on historic brick is discouraged unless proper breathable systems and preservation methods are used, and approved.

Consulting with staff is a great way to discuss techniques and options!

