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#### **D. Brief Overview of Chaska's Business District basic architectural characteristics**

The majority of original "main street" commercial architecture in the Midwest developed in the late 19th century. Sometimes called the Classical or Victorian era, the 1880s and 90s were economic boom periods in most communities. Citizens were hungry for cultural activities and expressed such appetites in the construction of many grand, sturdy buildings. Many typical main street buildings in Minnesota towns and cities are elaborately embellished with details of architectural styles that were popular during that time period.

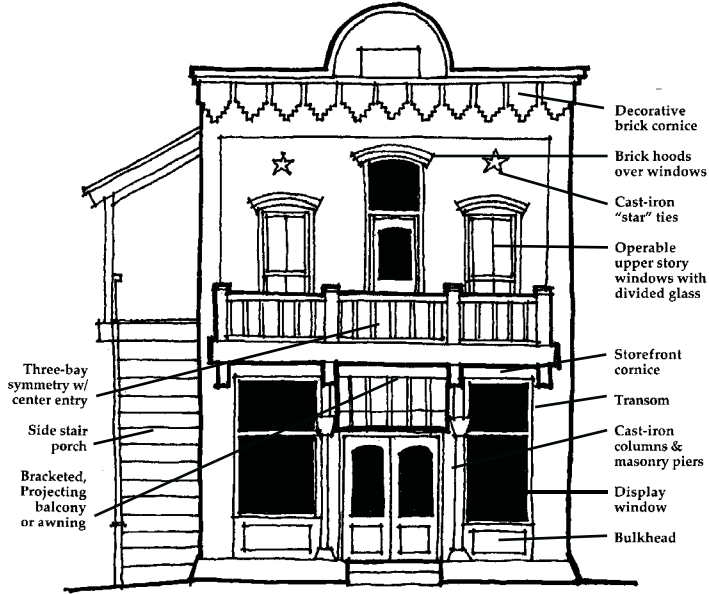
Chaska's downtown commercial area follows a slightly different pattern than most Minnesota main streets because of its earlier date and the scale of Chaska's downtown buildings as a "village" rather than a small city. Most buildings in Chaska reflect a more simplified, modest character that many people would regard

as more practical than high-style. Instead of being influenced by architectural high-styles that applied ornament decoratively, most of Chaska's commercial buildings are more honest and straightforward in using familiar materials in ways that were well-understood by the craftsmen who constructed the buildings.

A good case in point would be the way in which locally made Chaska brick and cast-iron materials from Chaska's Ess Foundry are used in simple, decorative patterns that are consistent with industrial brick buildings in northern Germany and industrial cities of North America (including Cincinnati and Milwaukee) where large concentrations of German-American immigrants were concentrated. This distinctive aspect of Chaska's architecture, and the surprising number of Chaska's earliest buildings that survive in nearly-original condition from the time just after the Civil War, are among the aspects that give your community a character that is unlike

almost any other place in Minnesota. The distinctive quality of Chaska's architecture is a prime opportunity for community redevelopment and commercial activities that celebrate Chaska's local character as a friendly, progressive small town that values its past, present, and future.

In most typical Minnesota towns, "main street" buildings were two or three stories tall with a visual difference between the ground and upper stories to reflect the separate functions of each floor. Ground floors were primarily retail businesses. Storefronts consisted of large glass windows used for merchandise display. Wooden or metal bulkheads were installed at the bottom of these windows. A transom of clerestory glass capped with a horizontal molding was often placed above the display window. Buildings in Chaska follow this character, but Chaska's buildings are limited in almost all instances to two-stories in scale.



Features of a typical Chaska Storefront

Historically, transom windows allowed for added interior light as well as ventilation on hot summer days. The store sign was typically mounted above the transom molding. Signage was confined to the area above the display window because it was meant to be read by pedestrian traffic; not from cars speeding by at 40 mph. The upper stories served as the shopkeeper's apartment or were rented as apartments. The means of

egress from these dwelling spaces is expressed with exterior porches and exit stairs, and through street front balconies that are evident in historical photos.

Strong emphasis was placed on the symmetry of street fronts, and continuity of scale and detail from one building to the next. This was meant to keep the downtown atmosphere on a pedestrian level. Often upper floors were visually separated from the first floor by a "belt course" of brick projecting outward, or more typically by projecting, bracketed balconies. Smaller, evenly spaced windows on upper stories also helped underscore the different purpose of the floors.

Other facade features in a typical Minnesota downtown might include window hoods, ornamental cornices, brackets and columns. In Chaska, these decorative features were constructed, more often than not, by the way the bricks were placed, forming corbels and projections over windows and at the top of a storefront or "cornice". Ornamental cast-iron columns (probably manufactured

at the Ess Foundry) are used as a decorative feature at several building entrances (like the Chaska Herald building at 123 W. Second St.), and cast iron "stars" or other metal shapes are used as tie-rod ends to hold the brick together on other buildings (like the Chaska Mill building; 500 N. Pine St.).

Limestone was used selectively on a few buildings, both for practicality (as on window sills) and for ornament (as with the name blocks atop the cornice on buildings like the Simons block). These elements all emphasize the shape and lines of the facade. Window hoods emphasize patterns and spacing of windows. The limestone is less elaborately carved than on later buildings in other Minnesota towns, and appears to have been quarried from limestone beds in places like Kasota or Ottawa or Mankato, nearby in the Minnesota River Valley. Again, this is a both reflection of practicality and something that gives Chaska a character distinct from most other communities in the region. Ornamental cornices of either brick or stone define the framing and outline of the building. The results provided a unified cityscape.

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The authors of this study observed at least one other pattern that sets Chaska apart from most other Minnesota communities. That is in the way spaces between and behind buildings have been used. The standard assumption about Minnesota downtown commercial districts is that they are always built “lot-line to lot-line”, and that spaces between buildings were never planned for in the way downtown commercial property was laid out. In surveying Chaska, notice the number of buildings that include an exterior egress stair from the upper story, often with an exterior porch constructed of wood at the building’s side or rear (as at the Linenfelser-Faber Building at 116-120 East Second St.).

A higher than average number of freestanding residential properties survive in downtown Chaska, often closely integrated into the fabric of commercial buildings (like the Young House located at 109 E. Second St.). Alleyways and

spaces between many buildings have clearly been undeveloped since the early days, and in many cases seem to have been preserved intentionally to allow ventilation and daylight into windows on building sidewalls (as with the Simon Livery stable building at 123 W. Third St.).

It is clear that, through the years, property owners of many of Chaska’s buildings have maintained their exteriors in excellent, original condition, clearly appreciating what is distinctive and handsome about them. At a time when many Minnesota downtown commercial buildings were being demolished in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s; many Chaska property owners were restoring the buildings’ exteriors to their accurate historic appearance. The effort placed in buildings like the Simons Block and the Chaska Mill is remarkable and is an aspect of community that should continue being capitalized on as a way of celebrating Chaska’s uniqueness.

## **Strategies for enhancement of Chaska’s distinctive downtown**

One objective of the City’s Community Development Department and Heritage Preservation Commission is to encourage treatments of properties that will benefit the community as a whole. By encouraging the kinds of renovation that help maintain the character that makes Chaska unique, economic potential is enhanced that could potentially increase the value of the downtown as a whole. For individual property owners struggling to keep a business property viable, this may not be the first priority that comes to mind, but consider other communities with architectural characteristics similar to Chaska’s; communities that have capitalized on similar heritage and relationship to nearby cities to achieve economic revitalization and increased tourism income potential.

Several Minnesota downtowns (like St. Cloud and Little Falls) have commissioned studies like this one as

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a first step to setting preservation goals for downtown buildings. Perhaps an even more apt comparison can be made to economic development and tourism success stories in communities a little farther away in Cedarburg, Wisconsin (near Milwaukee) and Hermann, Missouri (near St. Louis).

Successful preservation activities in Cedarburg and Hermann are useful comparisons, because of the modest, utilitarian style of the commonplace “working” buildings in those settings, the historical associations they have with German-American culture, and the extent to which they have encouraged new business activities that cater to both full-time residents of the community and growth in tourism potential. The authors feel that these two communities provide worthwhile models for the kind of preservation potential and heritage promotion that should be considered for

Chaska. A visit to Hermann’s web page might stimulate additional interest in this “success story”.

[www.hermannmo.com](http://www.hermannmo.com)

### **Strategies for enhancement of individual buildings**

The first step in planning facade improvements or changes to your building is to evaluate what you have. What condition is the building in? What changes have occurred to it over the years? Research your building’s history. (A few steps for how to proceed with this are touched on in this Manual.) Look for historic photographs. The Chaska Historical Society has photos in its collection for many downtown buildings. The volumes of *Chaska: A Minnesota River City* (v.1 and 2 edited by LaVonne Barac, and volume 3 pending), provide an excellent introduction through photos and text to the events and issues that led to Chaska’s historic architecture and community character.

Check in the attic or storerooms of your building for evidence previous owners or tenants may have left behind. Historic photos, newspaper clippings, repair and maintenance receipts all help to provide “blueprints” for a restoration project.

Once you’ve determined the original characteristics of your building and have a good idea of what it could look like, set a budget for your project. Your plan should encompass the entire project. However, keep in mind that renovation can be done in phases. Remember to check city, state and federal organizations for potential financial assistance. Federal tax credits may also be available and should be explored as part of the planning process. The City of Chaska is also committed to working with individual property owners to encourage the kind of preservation treatment that will enhance the economic value and beauty of the community as a whole.