

CHAPTER 20

THE RAILROAD CHARACTER AREA



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Historic Significance

The railroad line and its associated properties represent one of the fundamental reasons for the town's existence. Railroad crews began laying tracks from Sacramento toward the Sierras while Joseph Gray was erecting his log cabin in the Truckee River Basin in 1863. By 1867, Gray and George Schaffer had built the first lumber mill on the river.

☞ Please see page 97 (Chapter 13: General Guidelines for New Buildings) for a map that shows this Character Area in its Truckee context.

Almost a year later the *Virginia City Daily Tresspass* ran an announcement from Coburn's Station: "Last evening...the last connecting rail between California and Nevada...had been laid. Tomorrow the cars will run from Reno to Sacramento."

The railroad continued to figure prominently in Truckee. The Freight Depot, the oldest railroad building in town, was constructed in 1891 and a passenger depot was built in 1896.

Other key businesses and industries located along the rail line. The far eastern portion of this area was originally dominated by the Truckee Power and Light hydroelectric plant which no longer stands. The power station served an important social and economic purpose, for here, many poker games were held which involved significant Truckee land exchanges.



In 1896, a passenger depot was built, and it is still in operation in the center of town.

Historic Character Description

Historically, many more buildings existed within the railroad "right-of-way" than do now. Building types and styles varied. Hotels and depot sported decorative trim while industrial buildings were larger, simple masses. The large rail and industrial buildings found here did not have storefronts or front porches, but rather loading docks. These structures were also accessed from two sides: from the railroad tracks for the loading and unloading of goods, and from the street for the delivery and pickup of these goods.

Just as the entire area is linear, organized along the railroad tracks, the buildings too were often very linear. A clustering of buildings around a single function was also seen (e.g., lumber, ice, repair and maintenance, and hotels). These clusters included separate buildings for storage, offices, manufacturing, livestock, lodging, ice and coal, and were often organized around a central gathering space.

Over time, these buildings would come and go. They were replaced by newer or larger structures, or sometimes weren't replaced at all. This was partly due to cycles of fire, function and economics. Through its history, however, it has remained visually distinct from other part of downtown.



A mix of forms have given variety to this area.

Current Character

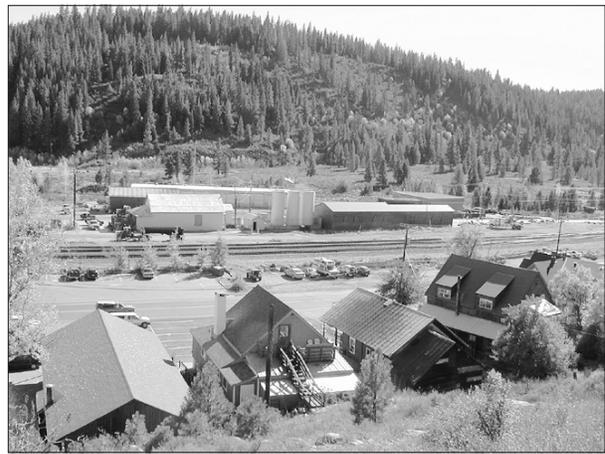
The Railroad Character Area is a mostly linear space except in the balloon track area and is organized around the functions of the railroad. Generally, this area is viewed as open space. Only a few rail and industrial buildings remain; the rest of the land is used for parking or is unimproved. Potential for substantial development exists here.

Some key design characteristics of this Character Area include:

- Visible from most of downtown
- Flat open space
- Minimal vegetative cover
- Railroad and industrial style buildings
- Area runs the length of the downtown



Existing railroad associated buildings located in the railroad right-of-way.



Longer rooflines exist in this area.



The curve of the balloon track definitively shapes the eastern portion of this Character Area.



Industrial features include signal posts.



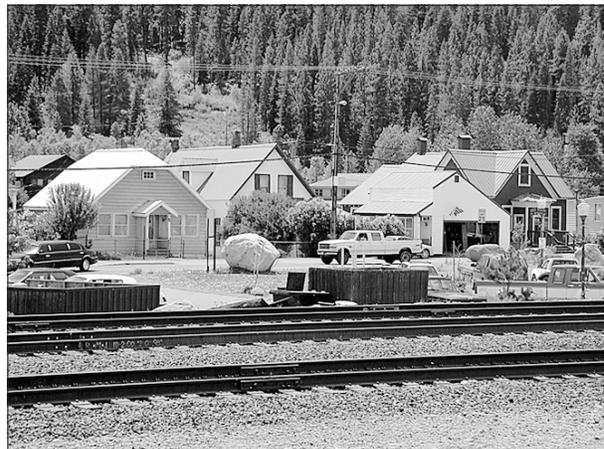
Traditionally, many buildings were "double-fronted," facing the street and the railroad.

Design Goals & Policies

As the Railroad Character Area builds out, the Town wishes to ensure that it appears to be visually related to the community, through building forms and size. It also should reflect its design traditions without directly imitating the buildings that existed before. A mix of uses is encouraged and a mix of building types is also appropriate.

The design goals for the Railroad Character Area are:

- To draw upon the warehouse and railroad building designs seen historically without direct imitation
- To also consider the traditional storefront as a model to mix in among warehouse/industrial building types
- To provide pedestrian amenities
- To provide a scale of projects that is compatible with the overall scale of the downtown



Houses along East River Street look onto the Railroad Area.



Taller structures also appear in this area.

1. Street Layout

The Railroad Character Area represents an area of town that has traditionally contained a mix of industrial and retail establishments. The platting and placement of buildings should reflect the traditional character of the area, while providing a transition between the adjacent character areas.

A. Planning for the Railroad Character Area should extend adjacent streets without mimicking them.

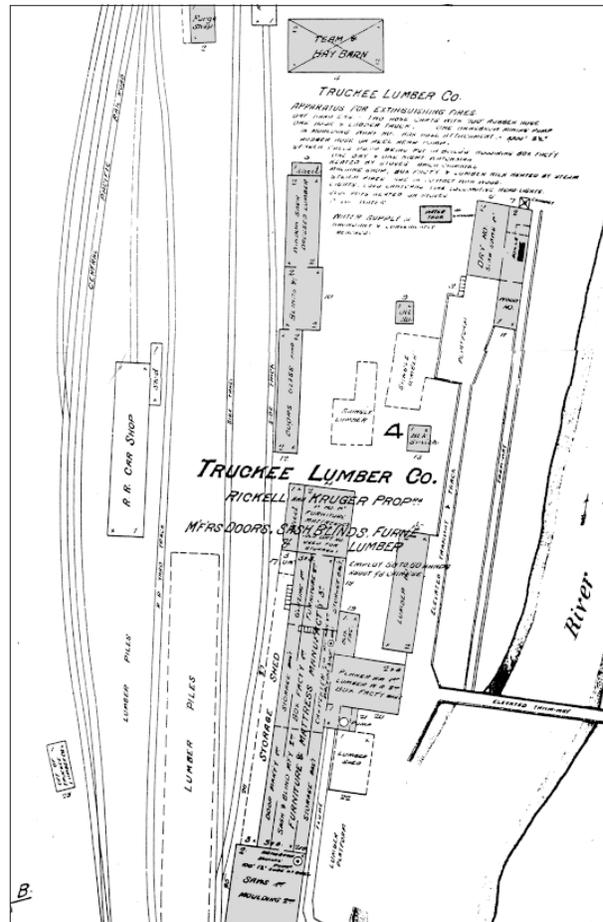
2. Positive Open Space

Open space should be developed to enhance the appeal of the area to pedestrians. This open space should be developed as a public amenity for use by residents and visitors alike.

A. Locate open space on the site so it is visible from the street.

- 1) If multiple structures are proposed, the spaces between the buildings should contribute to the overall positive open space on the site, and be of a size adequate enough to provide a distinct separation between building forms.
- 2) Courtyards should have solar exposure when feasible.
- 3) Courtyards that are totally closed from public view and access are discouraged.

B. The Railroad area should incorporate an open space system that provides a focus for the district



This historic 1885 map of the Railroad Character Area illustrates a typical cluster of buildings that framed an open space.

References:

☞ See also Chapter 10: Design Guidelines for Site Features and Chapter 13: General Guidelines for New Buildings.

3. Building Orientation

The Railroad Character Area developed in association with the railroad and shipping industry. Many of the buildings in this area were oriented parallel to the tracks to facilitate loading and unloading of goods.

A. Large rectangular buildings should orient the long side of the building parallel with the railroad track.

4. Building Setbacks

As a group, the few remaining buildings in this area relate to the street in a similar manner, with loading docks or entries facing the street. Historically they were organized in clusters around a central gathering space. A uniform line of building fronts rarely appeared here. New developments should respect the historic siting patterns of the area.

A. Buildings setbacks may vary.

- 1) Varied setbacks are encouraged as appropriate to accommodate positive open space and clustering of buildings.

5. Mass and Scale

Historic buildings in the Railroad Character Area ranged in scale from large warehouses and depots to small storage sheds. Today, this same variety in the walls of buildings along the street should occur in new projects.

A. New buildings should reflect the range of sizes that appeared historically in the area.

- 1) Structures may be larger than those seen historically if they are designed to appear to be a collection of smaller masses. See the techniques described below.

B. The maximum width of a primary facade shall be 75 feet.

- 1) Primary facades that exceed 75 feet should be differentiated by a significant setback in the wall plane, creating positive open space in these setbacks such that they will enhance the streetscape.
- 2) Variations in facade treatment should be continued through the structure, including its roof line and front and rear facades, such that the composition appears to be a collection of smaller buildings.

C. Create variety in wall planes to minimize the apparent scale.

- 1) Extensive repetition of similar forms on large monolithic surfaces that would lead to the perception of a large building mass is inappropriate.
- 2) Consider varying the setbacks of walls facing the street on large projects that occupy several parcels.
- 3) Also consider varying materials and textures to reduce the perception of large expanses of wall surface.

D. As a means of minimizing the perceived mass of a project, consider developing a set of smaller buildings rather than one large structure.

- 1) This is the preferred method of reducing perceived scale and primarily applies to large projects where several parcels have been combined, and the potential for a large-scale building is greater.
- 2) Although freestanding buildings are preferred, several primary building forms may be linked by "connectors," which should be designed such that they are clearly perceived as separate elements that are subordinate to and smaller than the structures they are linking.

6. Building and Roof Form

Historically, individual building forms were simple linear rectangular solids. Roof forms were simple, either shed, gable or flat. The dominant roof of each building was typically one of these types. These traditions should be continued in new developments.

A. Use building forms that reflect the simple utilitarian forms of railroad buildings and structures seen in the area traditionally.

- 1) One simple form should be the dominant element in a building design.
- 2) Smaller, secondary buildings should be simple rectangular shapes, as well.

B. Gabled and shed roofs are encouraged and should have a pitch that is similar to that seen historically.

7. Pedestrian Systems

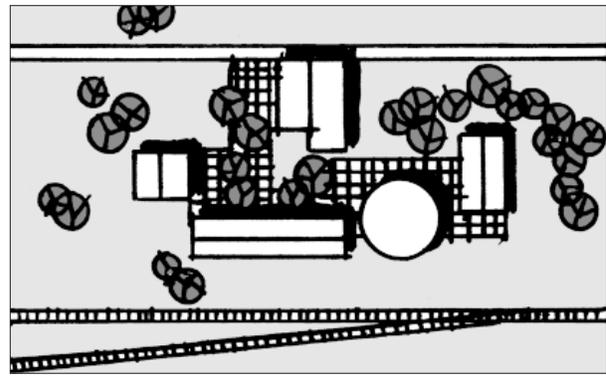
The Railroad Character Area should develop as a pedestrian-oriented environment. Streets, sidewalks and pathways should encourage walking and bicycling within this area. New projects should take this into account by designing for the pedestrian at a human scale and by providing visual interest along the street.

A. Develop the ground floor level of all projects to encourage pedestrian activity.

- 1) Provide variety in setback, height, color, texture of materials and building size and form to enhance the pedestrian experience.
- 2) For a project in which a commercial storefront is to be developed, include elements such as display windows, kickplates, transoms and midbelt cornices.
- 3) Storefront display windows provide visual interest along the street and are encouraged.

B. Consider developing paths within the parcel that encourage pedestrian access.

- 1) Paths to interior courts and terraces are encouraged.
- 2) When developing multiple buildings on a site, it is especially important to provide paths through the site.



Use building forms that reflect the simple utilitarian forms of railroad buildings and structures seen in the area traditionally.

8. Warehouse Character

Many buildings in the area exhibited the simple features of warehouse structures. These included vertically proportioned double-hung windows, large doors and loading docks. New designs that draw upon these traditions without literally copying them are appropriate.

A. Window dimensions that are similar to those used traditionally are encouraged.

B. Upper story windows with a vertical emphasis are encouraged.

C. New construction should incorporate loading docks similar to those seen traditionally.

- 1) Many older warehouses are introducing pedestrian related uses and are incorporating such elements as outdoor seating on the loading docks.

D. Openings similar in size and depth to loading dock doors should be incorporated into new construction.

- 1) Contemporary interpretations of loading dock doors, which are similar in scale and overall character to those seen historically, are encouraged.

