



Decorative Crosswalks

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Some communities are fielding requests from citizens for decorative crosswalks. Can art co-exist with traffic safety? If done carefully and thoughtfully, the answer is yes. This article will discuss the pros and cons of decorative crosswalk treatments, review regulations for their use, and provide some practical food for thought for traffic engineers.

Why use decorative crosswalks?

Communities use decorative crosswalks to make an area look more attractive, feel more historic, or to communicate something about the character of the community. For example, in Watkins Glen, NY, home of a road race through its city streets, some crosswalks have a checkerboard design like a racing flag. Other communities have used a brick pattern in crosswalks in historic districts. Or a rainbow design to celebrate diversity. Or an art deco pattern to indicate the era the neighborhood was built. These are just a few examples.



Above photo taken in Gevena, NY.



state standard as well.

Chapter 3G, Section 3G.01 of the 2009 MUTCD contains standards and guidance for the use of colored pavements, reprinted below. (Note that the MUTCD addresses colored pavements separately from colored pavement markings. Markings are addressed in Chapter 3A, Section 3A.05.)

Very little is mentioned about decorative crosswalks in the section below – the last paragraph specifically mentions them.

CHAPTER 3G. COLORED PAVEMENTS Section 3G.01 General

Support:

Colored pavements consist of different colored road paving materials, such as colored asphalt or concrete, or paint or other marking materials applied to the surface of a road or island to simulate a colored pavement. If non-retroreflective colored pavement, including bricks and other types of patterned surfaces, is used as a purely aesthetic treatment and is not intended to communicate a regulatory, warning, or guidance message to road users, the colored pavement is not considered to be a traffic control device, even if it is located between the



Above photo taken in Watkins Glen, NY.



Regulations pertaining to design of decorative crosswalks

The Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) is the national standard for design and placement of traffic control devices, including pavement markings. Kansas adopts the MUTCD as its

lines of a crosswalk.

Standard:

If colored pavement is used within the traveled way, on flush or raised islands, or on shoulders to regulate, warn, or guide traffic or if retroreflective colored pavement is used, the colored pavement is considered to be a traffic control device and shall be limited to the following colors and applications:

A. Yellow pavement color shall be used only for flush or raised median islands separating traffic flows in opposite directions or for left-hand shoulders of roadways of divided highways or one-way streets or ramps.

B. White pavement color shall be used for flush or raised channelizing islands where traffic passes on both sides in the same general direction or for right-hand shoulders.

Colored pavements shall not be used as a traffic control device, unless the device is applicable at all times.

Guidance:

Colored pavements used as traffic control devices should be used only where they contrast significantly with adjoining paved areas.

Colored pavement located between crosswalk lines should not use colors or patterns that degrade the contrast of white crosswalk lines, or that might be mistaken by road users as a traffic control application.

The FHWA has provided subsequent, more detailed guidance about decorative crosswalks in an official ruling dated August 15, 2013 titled Interpretation Letter 3(09)-24(I) – Application of Colored Pavement. https://mutcd.fhwa.dot.gov/resources/interpretations/3_09_24.htm

The letter addresses the “considerable ambiguity [that] continues regarding how colored pavement can be used, especially between the white transverse lines of a legally marked crosswalk.” The letter provides more detail about what design elements are considered by the FHWA to be a distraction to safety. The letter also reviews prior FHWA rulings on the topic.

The gist is that the pavement marking used for traffic control at a crossing (such as the white transverse

crosswalk lines) must be prominent, and the decorative design should not compete with it. The design should be uniform and repetitive as opposed to freeform, which could be a distraction to drivers. Colors should be muted, nonreflective, and not the same colors of pavement markings used for traffic control. A buffer gap between the design and the outside white crosswalk lines is recommended.

The FHWA has asked some cities to remove decorative crossings that do not meet their guidelines. For example, St. Louis has leaf designs in a crosswalk

Some cities that are installing decorative crosswalks

Decorative crosswalks in larger cities like Austin and Seattle have been featured in national publications, and requests for them are growing across the country. Several cities actively promote decorative crosswalks.

Seattle has a program is called “Community Crosswalks,” intended to depict neighborhood character. More information is at this link: <https://www.seattle.gov/transportation/projects-and-programs/programs/pedestrian-program/community-crosswalks>.

Milwaukee, WI has a decorative sidewalk program. (<https://city.milwaukee.gov/mpw/infrastructure/Decorative-Crosswalks.htm>)

Austin, TX has a program called Creative Crosswalks, but that program is currently paused for review, per their website.

Closer to home, Olathe, KS, has a decorative crosswalk downtown across from the Johnson Administration Building. We spoke with Cheryl Lambrecht, Senior Traffic Engineer with the City of Olathe, about her thoughts about decorative crosswalks.

Lambrecht said her supervisor thought the 3-D design “looked really cool,” and they decided to try one. Lambrecht said their pavement marking contractor is also an artist, so it was relatively easy for him to create.

3-D crosswalks originated in Iceland, India, and China, and were intended to slow down drivers who were speeding. They have gained traction worldwide, with applications in Mozambique, Montreal, and New Delhi, to name a few.

near the city’s botanical garden that the city is letting fade away, as they do not comply with the MUTCD.

The FHWA allowed 3-D crosswalks as an experiment in the past, but no longer does. For more information, see https://mutcd.fhwa.dot.gov/knowledge/faqs/faq_part3.htm At one location it was reported that drivers were confused and swerved to avoid what they thought were obstacles in the road.



Above photo from Iceland.

Lambrecht said they have not had swerving problems at the Olathe installation. “The reason we didn’t see any drivers swerving or stopping abruptly is that drivers don’t see the 3D effect,” she said. The concept of a single point perspective drawing works when standing still, like looking at a painting hanging on a wall. For a crosswalk, drivers cross the vanishing point in fractions



Above photo taken in St. Louis, Missouri.

of a second. They see flat, colored paint on a street. For pedestrians using the crosswalk, they don’t experience 3D because they aren’t aligned to view the vanishing point. They see traditional crosswalk markings with some extra geometric shapes of color.

She said although the idea is that a 3-D crosswalk will slow people down, in her experience, it doesn’t. “The main benefit is that you can take really nice photos when people cross.” Lambrecht said She said Olathe residents have been generally underwhelmed with the crosswalk.

When considering installing a decorative crosswalk in your community, besides following FHWA guidance about the design, Lambrecht said you need to think about skid resistance for walkers and bicycles and motorcycles. “For me, as a traffic engineer, you have to be careful about what you are doing, and where,” she said. She said the best location for decorative crosswalk would be on low speed, low volume road.

Another important aspect of decorative crosswalks is maintenance. “Maintenance is the life of a street,” Lambrecht said.

“Cracks need to be sealed. Holes need to be patched. Paint will go away after a while—sometimes sooner than you expect. There are a lot of everyday issues.” So, when it comes to maintenance, decorative crosswalks “can be a pain in the... neck,” she said.

Lambrecht shared



with us the photo below of 10th and Locust Streets in downtown Des Moines from October 3, 2019. She said this image illustrates the challenges – “the hole, the patch, the spray-painted lines from a utility locator.”

From a maintenance perspective, Lambrecht said there are two paths a city can follow. She said: “The first path is that the decorative crosswalk is temporary. When street maintenance occurs and as traffic wears away the paint, that’s okay. The other path is that the artwork has to be maintained until a new design is applied or until a decision is made to remove the artwork. In this case, someone has to touch up the artwork every time a utility locator marks a line, a utility digs a hole, a crack is sealed, and a snowplow scrapes the pavement. Who does that work depends on whether city staff is available or if the city has to hire a contractor. In my opinion, it doesn’t make sense to try to maintain the artwork to its original condition. A decorated crosswalk is a different type of public art. It’s intended to be temporary. The priority is maintaining the white crosswalk markings.”

Conclusion

Decorative crosswalks are allowed by the MUTCD, but there are conditions on the design to preserve roadway safety. 3-D designs are no longer allowed. If you choose to install a decorative crosswalk, be sure to consult the 2009 MUTCD and subsequent guidance/rulings to learn what regulations and guidance you need to follow. And also important: consider what it will take to maintain the crosswalk once it is in place. The FHWA has asked some cities to remove decorative crossings that do not meet their guidelines. For example, St. Louis has leaf designs in a crosswalk near the city’s botanical garden that the city is letting fade away, as they do not comply with the MUTCD.

Sources

- Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, 2009. <https://mutcd.fhwa.dot.gov>
- MUTCD Q&A about decorative crosswalks. https://mutcd.fhwa.dot.gov/knowledge/faqs/faq_part3.htm
- Photos of decorative crosswalks from Geneva and Watkins Glen, NY (taken by Lisa HF in June 2019).
- Interview with Cheryl Lambrecht, Senior Traffic Engineer, Olathe, KS. calambrecht@olatheks.org
- St. Louis will let crosswalk art that violates federal rules fade away. https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/st-louis-will-let-crosswalk-art-that-violates-federal-rules-fade-away/article_f878de6d-0c3c-5320-afd6-26d8099f6933.html
- 3D Zebra Stripe Crosswalk in Iceland Slows Traffic with Stunning Optical Illusion. <https://mymodernmet.com/3d-crosswalk-iceland/>