

Design Review

Cities small and large work hard to encourage quality development. Without the tools to assess how new projects will fit into the community, a city's planning objectives could be undermined. Jurisdictions need flexible and creative approaches for guiding the character and appearance of development. Today, many local governments maintain aesthetic review ordinances for the city as a whole and also for specific areas, including residential subdivisions, conservation areas, central business districts, commercial corridors, etc.

Definition. Design review is a strategy for managing the details of new development in an efficient and timely manner. The focus is on the appearance of new construction and site planning details, as well as traditional zoning concerns, such as landscaping, parking, traffic, signage, and lighting. Design review nurtures community character by holding developers to approved urban design and architectural principles. Design review processes should not employ strict, narrowly focused controls. Rather, they should provide a framework that helps guarantee fairness and consistency in the approval of new development.

Why Design Review? Jurisdictions reap tangible benefits from having rules for improving community appearance. By establishing a design review system, communities improve both the consistency and the predictability of the development evaluation process. Design review can also reduce the length of time necessary for project approval by streamlining decision-making processes while maintaining a community's standards.

Design Review and the Law. Increases in the practice of design review are attributed to a growing acceptance by the courts of a local government's interest in guiding aesthetic quality. However, when agencies fail to establish standards and regulations in advance, there is a greater chance for denial of due process or regulatory taking claims. A process for ongoing evaluation is necessary once a jurisdiction has review guidelines in place. Evaluations ensure that regulations do not go too far or become outdated, making the jurisdiction vulnerable to litigation.

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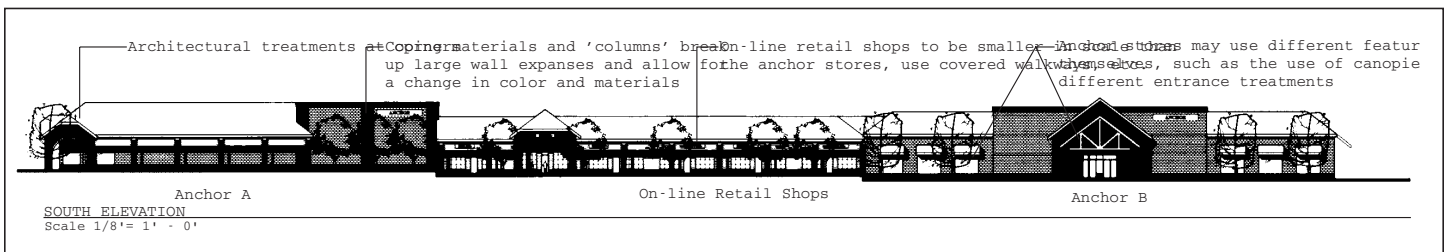
QuickNotes

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Several cities have implemented design standards for large-scale retail that require the incorporation of windows, awnings, and other architectural elements.

DESIGN REVIEW AS A FUNCTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Design review is part of the development permit process. It ranges from controls on demolition of existing structures to review of final plans for new construction. Design review can be either discretionary, in which case the decision is made on the basis of the reviewers' personal judgment, or administrative, in which case the project must satisfy measurable standards. Discretionary review is problematic, leaving a city vulnerable to legal charges that decisions are arbitrary, capricious, or vague. Clearly stated administrative guidelines avoid this problem, allowing for a fairer and more legally sound procedure.

Design Review Boards. In some communities, the planning commission or agency staff reviews development design. This strategy is well suited for communities that anticipate only a small number of design review proposals. Cities with a higher frequency of new development proposals may appoint separate review boards. Such boards possess both the technical expertise and community knowledge to consider the design of projects. A well-balanced board typically includes at least one architect, a land-use attorney, a historic preservationist, an area developer, and a community resident.

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The Design Review Process. The process cannot begin without a published set of concise review guidelines explaining design procedures to the public. Design review processes are set in motion with preapplication meetings intended to inform developers of the jurisdiction's expectations early in the process. Next, the public should be notified because a proposal will likely affect the character of the nearby area. Notice should be made in a number of ways, including mailers, newspaper advertisements, a listing on the Internet, and signs at the project's proposed location. At this point in the process, planning staff review the proposal to determine compliance or noncompliance with design criteria. Before any decisions are made, there is a process of communication, cooperation, and negotiation that identifies problems and works to solve them to the benefit of both the developer and the community. Review boards often approve projects based on a series of conditions attached to the proposal. After the review board has declared its verdict, citizens or rejected applicants may appeal.

DEVELOPING DESIGN GUIDELINES

The guidelines should set standards for at least the following five features:

- Overall Site Design
- Use of Planted Materials
- Building Orientation and Form
- Signage
- Public Spaces

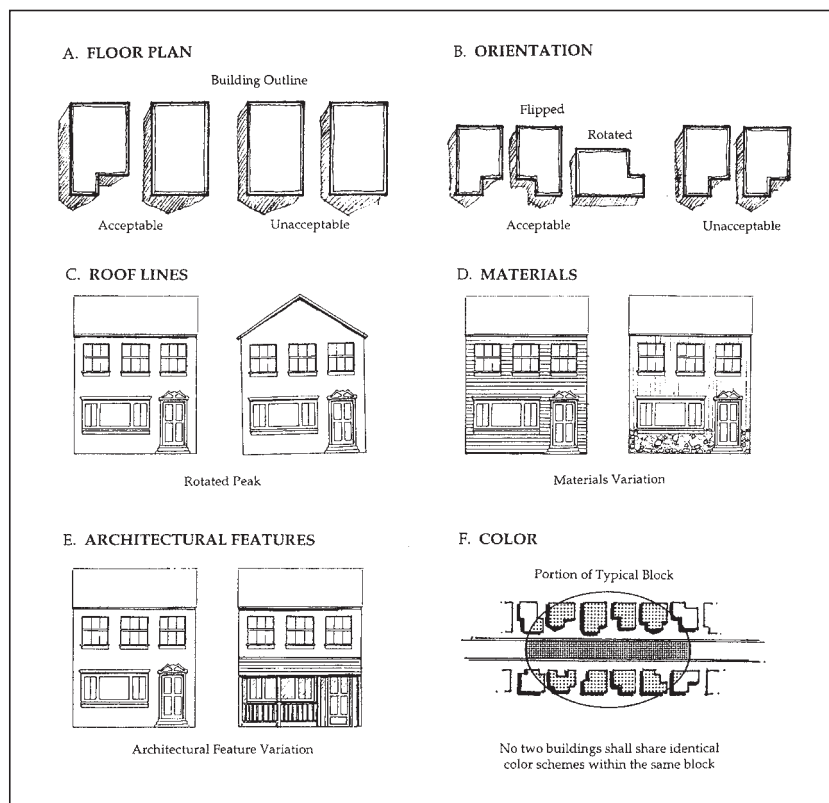
Design guidelines should integrate graphics with the text to clearly illustrate requirements. Like other plans and ordinances, design guidelines should be created through a public process with input from a variety of stakeholders.

Large-scale Retail and Corporate Franchises.

Large-scale retail and corporate franchises can pose particular problems for the visual character of the community. Oversized parking lots and garish signs do little to enhance areas visually. Design review guidelines are a means for addressing local dissatisfaction with the size, layout, and style of large-scale retail and corporate franchises. Cities across the country have applied a variety of standards to such uses, addressing issues of color, architectural features, building materials, parking, signage, outdoor storage, and more. In order to be effective, design guidelines must be in place prior to the arrival of new large-scale retail and corporate franchises.

Monotony. Without adequate design review and guidelines, large-scale residential developments can become monotonous subdivisions made up of rows of identical houses. Guidelines should establish standards of architectural form that promote general uniformity without resulting in the proliferation of identical models on a given street.

Recommendations for Success. Successful design review guidelines incorporate area-specific standards reflecting the community's own vision of what the city should become. A clear definition is needed of what the community means when it requires "compatibility" with existing surroundings. After deciding on design criteria that convey the qualities valued by the community, commissioners, reviewers, and planning staff should continue to work together in making guidelines explicit and easy to understand, including, most importantly, illustrations and photos that show what the application of the standards will look like. ■ Patrick C. Smith



Design guidelines can be used in the design review process to combat residential monotony.



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