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**GUIDE TO THE THOUGHTFUL**

**EVALUATION OF ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN**

Design review processes have been proven to be effective means toward achieving better design. They can also help achieve the goals and objectives communities have established regarding the built environment. The processes and criteria by which proposed designs are reviewed are intended to help improve the quality of design and not obstruct the development process.

The legitimate concerns of governments, communities and individual property owners are frequently embodied in the empowering legislation that creates the design review boards and commissions. Designers and the reviewers, each with different abilities, play a central role in the process since poor quality design limits the potential effectiveness of its review just as arbitrary or capricious critique risks delegitimizing the design review board or commission. Clear, easily understood design guidelines and regulations that have been developed and formally adopted with community involvement and boards and commissions that are representative of their communities have been shown to improve the design review process.

This guide is written in the hope that it will be useful to members of design review committees, property owners, designers, public officials and residents. As participants, all share a responsibility to make the design review process constructive and meaningful. Its purpose is to improve the quality of our built environment. A frequent failure of the process comes from compromising the purpose and the legitimacy of the process by trying to be “nice” rather than providing meaningful constructive criticism in reaction to a poor quality design.

The following questions and their answers will be useful in a design review process. The responsible evaluation of architectural design is entirely dependent upon the presentation of adequate information describing that design. There may not be right or wrong answers to each of these questions, but it is a fact that some proposed designs are very good and some are very bad. Despite notions that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, some projects will be objectively beautiful, and some will be downright ugly. Any substantial conclusion made regarding the quality of architectural design will be the result of weighing the answers to a wide range of questions such as these.

PRELIMINARY DESIGN REVIEW

Are the applicants and reviewers informed about the regulatory restrictions effecting the project and property, such as:

1. Zoning Use, Floor Area Ratio, Yard and setback or Form limitations
2. Legal Easements
3. Design Review Guidelines
4. Environmental regulations
5. Floodplain, coastal/tidal restrictions
6. hazardous materials, lead and asbestos, brownfields
7. Endangered species
8. Design Review Guidelines
9. Work requirements/rules/limitations effecting the construction project site
10. Covenants pertaining to the property
11. Historic District Restrictions
12. Overall development goals of the community
13. Review and permitting process, schedule, timing, etc.
14. Design Review Fees, Permitting Fees, etc.

Site Plan

Does the project fit on the site and relate to its context?

Floor Plan Diagram

Does the project’s basic floor plan diagram make any sense?

Massing

Does the proposed massing address any contextual issues?

Materials and construction type

Do the proposed materials and construction type make sense for the project?

Is the project well-scaled to its site?

Are the parts of the composition in a suitable proportion to one another or does one part of the basic composition seem larger or smaller than it should?

Is the basic approach to the building site and to the project appropriate and does it warrant moving forward in the direction being proposed?

INTERMEDIATE AND FINAL DESIGN REVIEW

1. Does the project comply with existing zoning regulations regarding
   1. Floor area ratio?
   2. Building Height?
   3. Setbacks?
   4. Proposed use?

In most jurisdictions, failure to comply with zoning regulations would require a variance prior to proceeding with design review. If the project does not comply, it would typically require one of three things:

i. A change to the design or use to comply,

ii. A zoning variance of as much as 20% from the particular limit, and based on a demonstration of hardship or difficulty, or

iii. A legislative change to the zoning of the parcel, sometimes called “Spot-Zoning” when the parcel is singled out and the zoning is not similar to its surroundings.

In some jurisdictions, variances from zoning regulations are further limited by the authority or lack of authority of the Board of Appeals, in others, strict application of zoning regulations is waived in favor of guidance from a Board or Commission governing Landmarks and Historic Preservation regarding compatibility with existing conditions which themselves may not comply with more recent zoning regulations.

1. Is the project fully illustrated and described?
   1. Site plan, floor and roof plans, all elevations, building sections?
   2. Dimensions, materials, details?
2. Does the design meet the requirements of the owner or occupant?
3. Does the design have a clear “parti” or basic organizing diagram, principle or idea?
   1. Is the plan organized around a recognizable diagram? Circulation pattern? Hallways? Room layout?
   2. Is the plan organized around solar orientation, views, and/or other contextual alignments or with any relationship to other buildings or natural features?
   3. Does the massing of the building make sense?
      1. Does the outer form of the building have a relationship to its context?
      2. If it is free-standing, are the form or forms compatible with or in contrast to the surroundings?
      3. Are the forms which make up the building or group of buildings proportionate to each other?
   4. Can the entrances and exits be identified? Are they appropriately located in terms of access to the building and its parts? Is the main pedestrian entrance located convenient to main walking routes, mass transportation or parking facilities?
   5. Do delivery trucks have any space to park during deliveries?
   6. Are building service and utilities located (transformers, utility meters, fire sprinkler connections).
   7. Are there accommodations for the storage of garbage, trash, recycling, dumpsters and their service and removal by garbage trucks?
4. Does the project fit into its context?
   1. Is the building’s massing similar to adjacent buildings?
   2. Is the building’s height and floor area to lot size similar to adjacent buildings?
   3. Are the architectural details and styling similar to existing buildings?
   4. Are the materials used similar to adjacent buildings?
   5. Is the building visually appealing?
5. Is the design of the building meant to be in contrast to its surroundings or challenge conventions?
   1. If so, is the artistic or aesthetic goal of this distinction appropriate and is the project worthy of granting an exception to the convention?
   2. What is the designer’s motivation for the differentiation?
   3. Is the differentiation needed?
   4. Will the differentiation contribute positively to its context?
   5. Is the sculptural or artistic aspect of the design sufficiently justified on purely theoretical grounds?
   6. Is it justified when evaluated in its context?
6. Does the design embody ecological sustainability and environmental responsibility?
   1. Does the design of the building respond to its natural surroundings and the sun?
   2. Is the building capable of being naturally illuminated and ventilated?
   3. Will the building have negative effects on its neighbors? Shadows, reflections, wind diversion?
   4. Is the proposed building to be constructed using design details and materials that will weather well, be easily maintained and last indefinitely? Are passive water-shedding details rather than sealant-dependent details incorporated into the design? Do sacrificial finishes and details allow for their easy and inexpensive repair?
   5. Will the configuration of the building foster public safety and well being?
   6. Is the proposed building to be constructed using materials that are created in a sustainable manner? Are materials used in a wasteful manner?
   7. Does the proposed building incorporate plastic products, PVC, vinyl, out-gassing products, toxic or volatile organic compounds?
7. If the building is located within a district with distinct architectural characteristics that distinguish it from other areas, or if it is in a locally or nationally designated historic district, is the new work compatible with the materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing of the neighboring, contributing properties within the district, and its environment?
   1. Has the design of the new building responded to the district as a whole?
   2. Will the new construction reinforce the significance of the district, relating to and strengthening the core characteristics of the district? If it is within a designated historic district, these core characteristics are identified in the National Register’s “Statement of Significance”
   3. Will the new construction complement and support the district?
   4. Does the infill building deviate in a detracting manner from the aesthetic rhythm of massing, scale and siting that is characteristic of the district as a whole?
   5. In a historic district, will the new construction be differentiated from the adjacent historic structures?
   6. Has style been used as the primary indicator of differentiation?
   7. Will the new construction detract from or compete with the buildings of the district’s character or its “Period of Significance”, or will it complement those structures?
   8. Does lot size, massing, floor area ratio and height correspond to the contributing buildings within the district?
   9. Does the exterior envelope and the pattern of the new building reflect the characteristics of the contributing buildings within the district?
   10. Have the fenestration, building divisions, setbacks and landscape that are characteristic of the district informed the design of new infill building(s)?
   11. Have historic or characteristic buildings been purposefully demolished to create the new building site? (this is generally considered a disqualifying aspect when evaluating “compatibility” in its formal sense).
   12. Are the architectural details properly executed? This might include window trim, cornice work, the size and mounting detail of shutters or blinds, etc.

DESIGN REVIEW OF PROJECTS INVOLVING HISTORIC BUILDINGS OR DISTRICTS

If the project involves historic tax credits or will include local, state or federal funding, if it is within a locally or nationally designated historic district, if it is a historic building or if it is a designated landmark or historic site, it may be required to address and comply with:

**THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR’S STANDARDS FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND REHABILITATION OF BUILDINGS AND DISTRICTS**

1. A property shall be used as it was historically, or be given a new use that maximizes the retention of distinctive materials, features, spaces and spatial relationships. Where a treatment and use have not been identified, a property shall be protected and, if necessary, stabilized until additional work may be undertaken.
2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The replacement of intact or repairable historic materials or alteration of features, spaces and spatial relationships that characterize a property should be avoided.
3. Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place and use. Work needed to stabilize, consolidate and conserve existing historic materials and features should be physically and visually compatible, identifiable upon close inspection and properly documented for future research.
4. Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.
5. Distinctive materials, features, finishes and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property should be preserved.
6. The existing condition of historic features shall be evaluated to determine the appropriate level of intervention needed. Where the severity of deterioration requires repair or limited replacement of a distinctive feature, the new material should match the old in composition, design, color and texture.
7. Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials should not be used.
8. Archeological resources shall be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures should be undertaken.
9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic

materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work

will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.

1. New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a

manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

DESIGN REVIEW COMMITTEES

A permit application process will likely involve professional plan examination to determine compliance with building, zoning, health and fire prevention codes, among others, but where aesthetics and landmarks preservation is evaluated, non-professional reviewing bodies may exist. These bodies would ideally:,

1. be sufficiently funded to provide the staffing necessary to make the review process efficient,

2. be representative of the community,

3. employ commonly understood standards for evaluating approaches to historic preservation,

4. use recognized criteria for evaluating new design work and its compatibility to the district,

5. provide clear guidance for both applicants and their members in the form of collaboratively developed and formally adopted Design Review Guidelines.