

Detailed Urban and Architectural Design Review Principles and Standards

The design process is a collaborative and problem-solving process engaged by a development team. In addition to important questions such as “how do I satisfy my client’s program and budget?” and “how do I solve all the technical aspects of the building?” are a series of questions that must be answered in relation to design. City staff and the Architectural Review Board will also engage in this dialogue with the project team. It’s important to ask the right questions early during the design process.

This handout is intended to assist the project design team to best understand some of the city’s priorities to consider when designing a project, and how that project will be evaluated by City staff and decision makers. The ARB requires a complete submittal package. Refer to the ARB review application for all submittal requirements and contact ARB staff for a sample packet.

In addition to a design that takes into consideration the principles and standards below, the project must adhere to the requirements of the Zoning Code, Building Code and all other City Departments.

SITE AND LANDSCAPE DESIGN

The first consideration in the design of any project should be its relationship to its site and surrounding context. In order to reinforce a sense of place, all new development, renovation and additions should be sited and configured to provide an appropriate response to the surrounding context in terms of building arrangement on the site, existing topography, existing trees or easements, relationship to the street, and vehicular and pedestrian access. In addition, consideration should be given to solar and wind orientation to maximize sustainability and livability/usability of the project.

What is the overall site and landscape design concept?

There should be an urban design and architectural concept governing the site design. This should consider the overall context, development pattern, relationship between buildings/units, placement of private and common open space, vehicular and pedestrian access, etc. The landscape design and building design should work together as an integrated whole. Landscape should create spaces for outdoor living wherever possible.

What is currently on the site, and when was it built?

A demolition permit is required prior to filing an application for any entitlement or for ARB review proposing a new building or major renovation requiring removal of more than 25 percent of the street-facing façade of a property identified on the Historic Resources Inventory and/or overall removal of more than 50 percent of the exterior walls. Here’s a link to the demolition [application and Code requirements for demolition](#).

Is the property identified on the Historic Resources Inventory?

If your property is identified on the Historic Resources Inventory, it is a potential historic resource and alterations may require additional review for compliance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards. It is important to note that identification on the HRI is not the same as formal designation. Designation by the City of Santa Monica is a separate process, which includes property owner notification and public hearings.

What is the development pattern on the surrounding blocks?

A number of factors combine to make up the development pattern of a particular neighborhood, block or street including: block pattern, size, and shape of individual lots; vehicular access to individual sites, configuration of buildings on each site, and relationship of buildings to the street. One or more of these factors can vary in the new development and still maintain respect for and achieve positive association with the existing development pattern. However, if enough of the project's characteristics are significantly different, the proposal may not be appropriate.

What are the special characteristics of the neighborhood and how does the project relate?

Many neighborhoods have unique characteristics that make the neighborhood distinctive. Characteristics that deserve special attention include overall topography, significant landscape characteristics, uniformity or diversity of buildings in the neighborhood, mass, scale and placement of existing buildings on site, character of building including quality and method of construction, craftsmanship, details and materials.

What is the relationship of vehicular access and parking and how does that compare to surrounding properties?

The location and arrangement of the curb cut, driveway, garage entry and location are important aspects of the overall site plan. This arrangement should have a positive relationship to the existing properties in the area. Design alternatives that minimize the view of the garage from the street and/or reduce the amount of driveway area are preferred. Vehicular access from an alley or side street is usually required.

Along the street frontage of the adjacent blocks, what is the relationship of the buildings to the street?

The relationship of the building to the street includes the location of the building in relationship to the property lines and to the sidewalk, location and configuration of entries to the site and the building. While there may be a wide variety within the neighborhood, by looking carefully at the existing context certain common characteristics will likely become apparent. It's not necessary to replicate every characteristic in the new development, but the overall look and feel should be respectful of what exists in order to fit in with the surrounding context. Consideration should also be given to how the building and its design address the street, public and pedestrian realm.

Street Frontage

Does the building appear inviting from the street? The detailing at the street should reinforce the overall design concept and appear inviting as viewed from the street. The City of Santa Monica has a history of buildings that are open and active as viewed from the street, and values openness and pedestrian orientation as an important design feature.

Are there entries, window openings or other architectural features at the street frontage? A sense of openness should be reinforced by open and inviting entries and street facing facades. The main

entry of the building should be visible from the street, and integrated well into the overall design. While an entry feature is important, it should not overwhelm the building or the entire façade.

If the project is on a corner site, does building address the corner? By their nature, corner sites demand special attention because they are more visible than interior lots on the block. Particularly for corner lots, no design of the street-side façade should appear as if it is the rear or side of the building. Projects designed for corner sites should pay particular attention to how the project is viewed from the corner and from both streets.

Does the project minimize its environmental impact? Is the project oriented to maximize natural light and air?

The project should take an affirmative position on environmental design by minimizing material intensity and using demonstrable active and passive strategies to maximize natural light and ventilation. Shadow studies should be employed to ensure natural light to exterior and interior spaces is maximized. This will minimize environmental impact and enhance livability.

If the site has a sloping topography, does the building and site design follow the topography?

When building on sloped sites in the City of Santa Monica, it is important for the massing to respond to the topography. Grading and construction of retaining walls should be minimized.

Does the site design manage stormwater on site (Are Low Impact Development Standards incorporated)?

Permeable paving and retention areas should be used as much as possible to retain water on site. Low Impact Development Standards should be incorporated wherever possible to retain stormwater on site and is required in the City of Santa Monica.

Additional site planning considerations:

What are existing streetscape features to consider? Where are utility easements and points of connection? Where is fire department access? What is the look and feel of landscaping in the neighborhood? Where is open space in the neighborhood and how is it configured? What exterior lighting exists and what would be appropriate for the site and the project? Are there fences, walls, gates, pergolas/arbors, and hedges in the front setback and are these features common? Location of pool/spa? Location of HVAC or condensing units? Location of covered patios, decks, and Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs). It is also recommended to coordinate with RRR and Mobility Divisions when developing the project design.

MASS AND SCALE

One of the most important and challenging design issues for new building projects is to manage the overall size of a new proposal within the existing surrounding building fabric. While new proposals need not copy existing development in order to fit in, managing mass and scale of a new project to respect adjacent development is important to the overall urban design of the surrounding neighborhood and in the city overall.

What's the big idea or governing architectural concept?

Each architectural proposal should have an overall architectural concept that governs design decisions. Evaluation of the project should then include appropriateness of the formal concept, and how successful the execution of the concept is as set forth in the building design and massing configuration.

How does project massing relate to the overall scale of the neighborhood, street and adjacent buildings?

The mass and scale of the project should provide an appropriate response to the neighborhood context. This does not mean copying what exists on the adjacent sites, as new development is often larger than existing development. However, there must be sufficient architectural recognition and transition of mass and scale to adjacent properties.

Does project massing reinforce the overall design concept or does it detract?

In addition to providing an appropriate response to the context, the mass and scale of the project should reflect the governing design idea(s) of the project. It is essential to identify the location of the open space in the overall configuration of the project in relationship to adjacent structure(s) for the best design and function for the project.

Does the project massing maximize open space opportunities?

Open space within a project is a very important aspect of the project design. Consider identifying the open space and orienting the project design around the open space as well as to the street.

Does the project minimize its environmental impact? Is the project oriented to maximize natural light and air?

The project massing should take an affirmative position on environmental design by organizing the project massing to enable demonstrable passive strategies to maximize natural light and ventilation. Shadow studies should be employed to ensure natural light to exterior and interior spaces is maximized. This will minimize environmental impact and enhance livability.

Is scale and proportion of buildings appropriate to the surrounding context?

A project design can make a building appear more monumental or to help diminish the apparent size and scale. Design decisions on the placement of building forms in relation to one another, emphasis of horizontal and vertical elements, size, scale and placement of entries, doors, windows, balconies and other architectural features all contribute to the perceived mass and scale of the project. Proper use of these and other design elements make it possible for projects varying in size to be designed to visually fit into the neighborhood and minimize its perceived mass

How are major building elements designed and configured?

Location and configuration of entries, prominent building elements and features should relate to overall building concept as well as neighborhood pattern, site configuration and slope, relationship to streets and corners, and views to and from the site. Differentiating the building with a hierarchy of architectural elements can also assist in achieving a balanced proportional relationship to the surrounding context and within the project itself.

DESIGN AND DETAILING

The design and detailing of the building are paramount to a quality environment. The design and detailing should be consistent throughout a project, recognizing that a building is three-dimensional and must be well designed on all sides.

Are elevations well designed, in scale, proportion, materials, details?

All buildings should be designed with attention to proper scale and proportion within itself and in relation to its neighbors. All materials and details should be durable and of high quality, to reinforce the overall building design. The materials should be complementary to the overall design concept

Are there a variety of exterior building materials, appropriate for placement and design?

Materials and colors should be used to reinforce the overall building design. Buildings should not be all stucco- a variety of materials should be used. Materials that are near the ground level and subject to contact by the public should be durable and easily maintained. Materials and finishes should be authentic and not mimic the appearance of another material.

What does the roofscape look like? Are noise and privacy impacts addressed?

Roofs are the fifth elevation of any building and give important character to a building in its massing, materials and details. Solar panels and photovoltaics should be well-integrated into the overall roofscape. All rooftop equipment must be screened. Usable rooftop decks should be sensitively designed with considerations to noise and privacy impacts on adjoining or nearby buildings given concerning lighting, landscape, outdoor furniture, sun shade, and design of roof access/stair enclosure.

Have windows been located to minimize direct views into adjacent living spaces and on neighboring sites?

Windows should not directly align other windows to living spaces of adjacent units or buildings. Balconies and private open space should also be staggered to maximize privacy for residents.

Has circulation been minimized to maximize living space?

Care should be taken to design unit plans to minimize corridors to maximize living space.

Do the landscape design and paving materials complement the building?

The landscape design should enhance the overall site and complement the building(s). There should be a variety of plants that work well together to achieve a cohesive and readable design while maintaining mature trees to the greatest extent possible.

What about the lighting design?

The lighting design should complement the overall building design, with lighting that is not excessive. Spillover light should be avoided and dark sky techniques utilized by reducing or eliminating uplighting. The goal is to light the building and highlight important or special building and site features rather than the design of the light fixtures. When fixtures can be seen, their design should be appropriate to the overall project.

Is signage necessary for project or site?

A sign program is required for multi-tenant commercial buildings. The intent of a sign program is to unify the signage to be consistent and complementary to the building design. All signage should be appropriate in size, style, location, color, materials and method of illumination to the overall project. Signs should not be too numerous or too large and should not visually overpower the site or structure or conceal building features.