

Urban Design Evaluation

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Developed by the Design Advocacy Group

Individual development projects - new construction, expansion, or renovation - can affect the surrounding environment in many ways, both positively and negatively. Each proposed project should be evaluated for its relationship to the immediate surroundings, the neighborhood community, and the larger urban context. The following list of questions has been assembled to provide a framework for discussion between community groups, designers and developers and guide development projects towards making positive environmental contributions.

Note: Words in bold type are explained in the accompanying Glossary of Terms.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

Zoning

What zoning variances to the Zoning and Planning Code would be required for the development, and would they be consistent with the community master plan and urban design best practices?

Use

Would the proposed building uses be appropriate to the particular site and the neighborhood and is the development consistent with the community master plan?

Density

Could the proposed density of use be adequately supported by adjacent transportation infrastructure, or would the project contribute to unacceptable levels of congestion?

Amenities

Would the proposed development include the construction or enhancement of any public amenities, such as parks, plazas, playgrounds, community centers, libraries, or transit stops?

Connections

Would the project enhance pedestrian linkages to neighboring public amenities?

History

Does the proposed design appropriately incorporate or respond to any historic assets, or would the development destroy or compromise such assets?

Environment

Would the building preserve and enhance the existing natural resources while addressing its own environmental impact appropriately?

STREET LIFE

Activity

Would the building uses at street level promote sidewalk activity? Are the building fronts designed to emphasize pedestrian entrances? Would the appearance of activity within the building on the second and third floors be visible from the street?

Continuity

Would the proposed development maintain or strengthen the existing street edge, or would it create an interruption in urban continuity?

Streetscape

Would the sidewalk be enhanced with amenities such as benches, paving patterns, and planters so as to enhance the pedestrian experience? Are the curb-cuts, service entries, and vehicular access ways minimized and designed to create comfortable and safe interactions between pedestrians, bicycles and motor vehicles?

Landscaping

Has the proposed landscaping been designed to link the building with its site in a meaningful way? Would existing street trees be maintained and would new trees and plantings be added? Would the proposal be in accordance with the community streetscape plan?

Parking

Would automobile parking be handled in a way to minimize the impact on the surroundings? Has underground parking been utilized? If above ground parking decks are part of the proposal, would they be set behind building elements with human uses so as not to be visible from the street?

Servicing

Would the design of the loading and servicing provisions be appropriate to the building and neighborhood?

BUILDING CHARACTER

Height

Would the height and form of the building have a positive relationship with the street and surrounding buildings as viewed from both near and far? Would the shadow cast by the building adversely affect neighboring buildings and outdoor public space? Would the building obstruct any important view corridors?

Massing

Would the massing of the building be an appropriate response to the context? Would the height and width of the building be appropriately subdivided into component parts?

Composition

Does the design of the façade form a sophisticated composition of component parts? Does the architectural vocabulary relate to the existing context or create a meaningful juxtaposition? Would the design of the building enliven the streetscape?

Materials

Would the building materials and colors be attractive and appropriate to the surroundings? Would the materials be durable and are they employed in an appropriate manner. Would any reflections created by the wall or window materials adversely impact the surrounding buildings or street? Would the developer maintain a commitment to utilize the proposed materials through the completion of the project?

Openings

Have the building entrances been designed to express the importance of the connection between the interior and exterior of the building? Would the scale of the entrances be appropriate to the neighborhood context? Would each of the dominant walls of the building have a sufficient number of door and window openings? Would the scale and proportion of the window openings and their articulation form a positive relationship with architecture character of the surrounding buildings?

Roof

Has the roof edge been designed to express the termination of the building in an attractive or meaningful manner?

Are the rooftop mechanical units and penthouses successfully incorporated into the design of the building?

Sustainability

Would the project utilize sustainable materials and building practices?

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Definitions of some of the terms used in the Urban Design Evaluation are provided below:

Density of Use – the number of individuals per unit of area. Higher levels of density must be appropriately supported by the urban infrastructure to prevent overcrowding and congestion. The advantages of denser settlement patterns include the decrease of separating distances between individuals, businesses, and institutions; the increase of social interactions; and the preservation of natural resources, such as land and energy (decrease of sprawl). The common means to measure and regulate density of development is by Floor Area Ratio (FAR), which is the proportional relationship between the total floor area of the buildings and the land on which they are built.

Historic Assets – buildings or aspects of neighborhoods that hold significant shared memories for the residents and provide historic identity for the community. Some buildings are specifically recognized by the city for their historic character and are provided with a degree of protection from destruction or significant alterations to the exterior. Some

neighborhoods that have many historic structures have been recognized as Historic Districts or, alternatively, Conservation Districts, and these classifications provide certain levels of protection for the neighborhood as a whole.

Scale – a general design term used to describe the size and proportions of a building and its components, such as stairways, windows, doorways, cornices, and ornamentation. For example: The scale of Independence Hall is consistent with most historic houses in Society Hill, but not with most new high-rise buildings.

Street Edge – a term often used to describe the line to which the front walls of buildings on a particular street are built. For example: If a new store on Chestnut Street is built with its front wall back twenty feet from the front of all the other buildings on the block to provide off-street parking spaces, that building can be said to have not maintained the street edge.

Sustainable Materials and Building Practices – terms used to describe a wide range of building practices and materials that are designed to limit the depletion of natural resources. Building designs that utilize such practices are often referred to as “Green Architecture”.

Transportation Infrastructure – includes all built aspects of the private and public systems of transportation, such as rail lines, roadways, bridges, parking lots, and bike paths.

Zoning and Planning Code – the legal guidelines by which the city controls the uses of buildings or areas of land and also the rules about building size and height, setbacks from lot lines, and required open space.

Zoning Variances – the legal remedies by which property owners may obtain permission to build structures that do not fully correspond to the existing zoning codes. In Philadelphia, variance requests are reviewed by the Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZBA).