The Planning Commissioner Handbook

Chapter 6

Community Design

Institute for Local Government℠

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Basic Principles of Community Design 148

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design 151

Green Building 153

Design for Historic Preservation 154

Basic Principles of Community Design

Maintaining and enhancing design quality of your community is one of your chief duties as a planning commissioner. You will be thinking about community design in almost all the work you do, whether it's reviewing a new plan or zoning regulation, or considering a specific project for approval.

Discussions about "good" design often invoke intangible phrases like "sense of place" or "quality of life." These things are difficult to define and can therefore be problematic when planning commissioners review plans and projects. Yet there exists a set of basic principles of community design that should inform all plan creation and project review, and that can be clearly articulated as the basis for community planning.

Planning for sustainability requires a comprehensive approach to all elements, which allows for the realization of synergies and a harmonious interaction of essential elements. The way people move around, the infrastructure and the process by which all these things are developed and come together are crucial elements which must be taken into consideration. Sustainable community design is a way of planning, building and creating places for living and working that allows the community to contribute to the on-going long-term health of the jurisdiction and the natural environment.

The following list of eleven principles[1] is by no means exhaustive, but it is meant to provide you with a starting point to begin the discussion of what constitutes "good" design in your community.

It is important to note that these principles do NOT qualify as "objective design standards," nor even as "design guidelines," both of which are described in detail in the Application Review section. Thus, these principles cannot be used by themselves as a basis for application review, nor should they be incorporated by themselves as design guidance in a jurisdiction's regulatory documents. Design standards and guidelines need to be much more specific than the principles shown here. That said, the principles listed here can provide an important foundation for you as a planning commissioner to use in reviewing both proposed regulatory and planning documents as well as proposed projects.

- **Build to Human Scale.** Good urban design is people-oriented. This concept is often expressed as "pedestrian friendly" and "built to human scale." Buildings, streets and open spaces should add to the experience of the individual. People like places where they can walk comfortably, admire a view, get a cup of coffee, see interesting buildings, meet a friend or just people-watch. Large buildings with long, unbroken walls create dead spaces that people tend to avoid. Architectural features—like windows, doorways, balconies and cornices—assure that buildings relate to the pedestrian. A traditional retail block, for example, may have four or five stores at a scale that is inviting to shoppers and passers-by. New development can create additional spaces—like small plazas or landscaped walkways—between buildings and wider sidewalks to accommodate outdoor cafes and other seasonal uses.

- **Design for Comfort and Safety.** To enjoy a space, people need to feel comfortable and secure. Architecture that isolates people—long, narrow passageways, for example—creates a feeling of insecurity. Amenities like good walking surfaces, shelter, shade and interesting things to look at add to comfort. People feel more secure when they can see—and be seen by—other pedestrians. This is sometimes referred to as "eyes on the street" design. A good way to test whether a place will be physically comfortable is to ask yourself whether you would enjoy being there.

- **Create Places to Congregate.** Places where people congregate should offer a variety of activities. Choice makes a place more interesting. For example, shopping areas are a natural collection point. People will enjoy the space more if they can also sit outside, walk, meet a friend or order a meal in the same area. Good design provides such choices in order to create and encourage neighborhood energy and vitality.

1 Many of these principles were distilled from the Planning Commissioners Journal, available at www.plannersweb.com, and from the Smart Growth Network's 10 Principles of Smart Growth, available at https://smartgrowthamerica.org/our-vision/what-is-smart-growth/.

- **Provide Connections.** Ensuring circulation and accessibility involves creating safe, efficient passageways for cars, pedestrians, bikes and other transportation options. Excessively wide streets, intermittent sidewalks and poor circulation plans can create confusion for pedestrians and increase the chance of accidents. Creating separate paths for different uses can increase safety and make our communities walkable and bicycle friendly. In many cases, simple devices—like curbs and landscaping—can provide the needed separation.

- **Connect Buildings to Streets and Sidewalks.** Buildings should be oriented to the outside, so they serve not only their users but also their communities. Small setbacks, interesting doorways and porches and large windows can help create vital neighborhoods with lots of eyes on the street, thereby promoting both safety and vitality. Large display windows, detailed architectural designs, and parking lots placed behind buildings allow commercial activities to "spill" out onto the sidewalk. An active interface between building and street creates vibrant areas that people want to visit.

- **Mark Transitions and Boundaries.** Most people like to know where one neighborhood ends and another begins. A logical world with good spatial definition orients people. Transitions can tell people when they leave and enter town, what is public and private, where to sit and meet, where to stroll and where to drive. Many towns are already informally divided into districts or neighborhoods based on existing landmarks. Reinforcing these boundaries—or creating new ones—provides a sense of order. The design of a neighborhood suggests what types of activities will take place there. Variations in building shape, doorway design, paving materials, curbs, landscaping, street furniture, elevation and signage let people know where one area or neighborhood gives way to another.

- **Include Detail and Variety.** Most people prefer a degree of aesthetic complexity and variety. Murals, attractive sidewalk designs and the occasional fountain make public spaces more interesting. Architectural differentiations in materials, textures, roof shape, trim and size also create variety. Monotonous facades symbolize institutionalism. To avoid this perception, make sure facades are broken into smaller units with varying shapes, sizes, windows, textures, colors and perhaps even balconies.

- **Build on Existing Precedents.** New development should reflect, but not exactly replicate, the design and scale of existing buildings. Building height, size, roof shape, doorways and materials are all design elements that can be made compatible with existing nearby precedents, but without stamping out originality. Repeating small but obvious elements—like signage, lampposts and curbs—on a neighborhood or district level also creates cohesion. Context is important – in places undergoing major change or, those that do not have a lot of existing development, it may be more important to rely on the vision for the area as opposed to existing building stock.

- **Stay True to Function.** Great design will not make up for poor function. Buildings and design must serve their purpose. People must be able to work, shop and move efficiently through buildings and surrounding areas. For example, a project that relies on heavy pedestrian traffic should have wide sidewalks and places for people to rest. Overlooking these features may endanger the underlying economic purposes of the project. Urban design involves incorporating the functional needs of the project and society into the physical appearance of the urban environment.

- **Mix it Up.** Mixed-use projects provide a combination of a variety of uses in a single development (vertically or horizontally), and may include housing, office, retail and open space. This development pattern ensures that there is activity around the property 24 hours per day. At the same time, the proximity of people to multiple uses decreases dependence on cars. Consider the ideas of a "fifteen minute neighborhood" where most daily functions — living, working, eating, entertainment, recreation — are available within a fifteen minute walk.

- **Emphasize Compact Development.** Compact design means placing uses in close proximity to each other, and at relatively high densities, so as to make efficient use of land and allow people to easily move from one use to another. Encouraging development to grow up, rather than out, is one way to do this. Infill development—building on empty or underutilized lots—is another. Building within an existing neighborhood can attract more people to the jobs, homes and businesses already there, while also making the most of public investments in things like water and sewer lines, roads and emergency services.

These principles provide only a starting point and are drawn from a several formal declarations adopted by various organizations that advocate for good urban design. These include the Ahwahnee Principles (by the Local Government

Commission, 1991), the Charter for or from the New Urbanism and the Canons for Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism (by the Congress for New Urbanism, 1996 and 2009 respectively). The field of urban planning and design is broad, and many other groups have issued statements of urban design principles. You will likely learn more about good design as your term on the commission continues. However, the most direct way to gain more insight is to visit and think about the places you like to go and note what makes them work.

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design[2]

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED – generally pronounced "sep-ted") is a design philosophy based on the theory that the proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the fear and incidence of misuse, as well as an improvement in the quality of life.

CPTED is a process and a way of thinking about design. It is not a program or system of ready–made solutions. CPTED emphasizes understanding and changing the physical environment in an effort to reduce improper activity at particular locations.

CPTED is effective because of the concept of "defensible space." This concept suggests that all space in the human environment is defendable; a guardian can take responsibility for a given space and take action to defend it from non-legitimate, criminal or unintended use. Alternately, space can be undefended: when there is no one who takes responsibility for the space, it is left exposed to unintended uses.

To help defend a location, there are four overlapping CPTED strategies that need to be employed: 1) Natural Surveillance, 2) Territorial Reinforcement, 3) Access Control and 4) Maintenance. Each strategy employs a slightly different method of sending a clear message that a responsible person is nearby and inappropriate activity is not welcome. These strategies are not exclusive. They may be applied concurrently and will provide greater benefits as a result.

- **Natural Surveillance.** Natural surveillance is the design of an area that places physical features, activities and people in locations that maximize the ability to see what is occurring in a given space. An example of natural surveillance is a parking garage built with large openings facing a major street. Windows allow pedestrians and motorists passing by to see into the parking area and detect unwanted activity. In the event that misuse does occur, there is a greater chance that it will be seen and reported to police. Other examples include properly trimmed and maintained landscaping, which allows visibility, and appropriately scaled lighting, which highlights the pedestrian environment.

- **Territorial Reinforcement.** Territorial reinforcement is the design of an area that clearly defines its boundaries and ownership. All space can be defined as public, private or semi-public/semi-private. The underlying principle of territorial reinforcement is that the transition between spaces should be clearly identifiable for both the user and others in the area. Territorial reinforcement allows legitimate users to develop a sense of ownership over a space and act as guardians against unwanted acts. Examples of territorial reinforcement are small decorative fencing placed around the semi-private outdoor patio of a business and proper signage that communicates the ownership of a space and the rules of its use.

- **Access Control.** Access control is the physical guidance of movement to and from a space by the placement of entrances, exits, fencing, landscaping, locks and other barriers. This CPTED strategy works because it not only limits and guides movement, but it also causes improper access to be noticed more readily. Some examples of access control are well-marked pedestrian pathways through parking lots, which give direction to users and alert drivers to the concentrated presence of pedestrians, and bollards placed near the entrance of a park to prevent vehicle entry while allowing pedestrian passage.

- **Maintenance.** Up-to-date maintenance demonstrates that someone cares about a space, is watching and will defend

2 This section is adapted from the CPTED discussion in the Bay Fair BART Station Area Improvement Plan prepared by Mike Wells of Justice and Security Strategies as a subconsultant to Design, Community & Environment and published by the Bay Area Rapid Transit District, 2009.

the property against misuse. A property that is run-down or in disrepair is likely to attract non-legitimate activities. Routine maintenance or clean-up can have a great deal of impact in making an area unattractive to offenders. This strategy works because it is based on what is known as the “Broken Windows Theory.” The theory suggests that a neglected space will elicit mistreatment, while a maintained space will bring proper treatment creating naturally safe space that requires less need for law enforcement. This strategy lessens fear in a community by creating perceptions of responsibility and caring.

Green Building

The State of California and local communities are increasingly asking that public and private buildings be constructed using "green" building techniques and energy conserving technologies. Green building involves using energy, water, building materials and land more efficiently than was often the case in the 20th Century. It also results in healthier indoor environments with cleaner air, fewer toxins and more natural light. Green building reduces the overall impact of a development project on the environment and can also reduce long-term costs for building owners and for taxpayers. Some techniques involved in green building include:

- Siting buildings to take advantage of natural heating and cooling and to encourage access by walking, bicycling and mass transit.
- Using existing landscaping and natural features where possible and landscaping with plants with low water and pesticide needs.
- Incorporating energy efficiency measures.
- Using construction materials that are sustainably harvested, of recycled content and recyclable, durable and locally produced.
- Using dimensional planning and other material efficiency strategies. These strategies reduce the amount of building materials needed and cut construction costs. One example is designing rooms on four-foot multiples to conform to standard-sized wallboard and plywood sheets.
- Reusing and recycling construction and demolition materials. For example, using inert demolition materials as a base course for a parking lot keeps materials out of landfills and costs less. Designing with adequate space to facilitate recycling collection and to incorporate a solid waste management program that prevents waste generation.
- Designing for dual plumbing to use recycled water for toilet flushing or a gray water system that recovers rainwater or other non-potable water for site irrigation.
- Minimizing wastewater by using ultra low-flush toilets, low-flow showerheads and other water-conserving fixtures.
- Improving indoor air quality through a variety of methods, such as the use of construction materials and interior finish products with zero or low emissions.
- Utilizing pre-fabricated building modules, assembled in a factory to reduce building waste and on-site construction impacts.

Some green building features may cost more up front than traditional building methods, but over the life of a building is generally less expensive. Savings include lower energy costs and operating expenses, improved occupant health and productivity (office buildings), and reduced pollution and landfill.

Both the State of California and in addition a number of communities in California and across the country have developed programs to encourage green building in private development projects. Recent updates to the California Building Code include many green building features. Some communities offer technical assistance, grants, streamlined permitting and other incentives. In a few cases, communities are requiring private developers to meet green building standards that exceed those found in the Building Code. Many local agencies have also committed to using green building techniques in new public buildings.

Design for Historic Preservation

Historic preservation protects historic buildings and other cultural resources that have a unique heritage. Examples include old homes, movie theatres, bridges, farms and even entire neighborhoods. The benefits of historic preservation include revitalized neighborhoods, higher property values and increased community pride. Typically, a historic preservation strategy will involve some or all of the following actions:

- Authorizing a survey of historic resources.
- Incorporating a historic preservation element as part of the general plan.
- Adopting a historic preservation ordinance that provides guidelines, standards, incentives and regulations to protect important resources.
- Designating certain properties as local historic resources, often in tandem with a “Mills Act” program to provide property tax relief to owners of local historic resources.
- Designating certain areas as historic districts.
- Including historic preservation as a priority in development plans.
- Setting up a revolving loan fund to provide homeowners and businesses with money to rehabilitate historic buildings.
- Adopting an adaptive re-use ordinance to encourage the sensitive rehabilitation of older buildings, by offering relief from selected code standards such as parking or setbacks.
- Developing an awards program to recognize property owners for outstanding work in preserving or rehabilitating historic resources.
- Creating a Historic Preservation Commission charged with overseeing the programs and initiatives identified above.

Successful programs will also find ways to engage the community to support historic preservation. Many communities have a local historical or preservation society that will be an immediate constituency and advocacy group for historic preservation issues.

Federal and state programs protect many historic resources. For example, the National Register of Historic Places provides a national inventory of significant historic resources. To be placed on the register, a building must be determined to have local, state or national importance by the U.S. Department of the Interior, upon recommendation by the state historic preservation officer. Buildings on the register are eligible for increased income tax credits if rehabilitated and, for certain programs, grants and loans. California has a parallel landmark certification program with similar benefits.

In addition, several state laws support local preservation efforts. For example, the State Historical Building Code provides an alternative set of building regulations that allows greater flexibility in the restoration, preservation and relocation of historic buildings. Local agencies may also issue bonds for the rehabilitation of historic commercial and residential rental properties. State law permits historic properties to be assessed at present value rather than at “highest and best use” value when uses of the property are restricted by an enforceable contract. It is important to note that what is considered “historic” will shift over time. Buildings that are not currently considered historic may receive that designation in the future.

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) also requires local agencies to take stock of their historic resources (and mitigate against their loss to the extent practicable) when new development will destroy or significantly impact historical resources. CEQA also includes a categorical exemption (meaning no environmental review is required) for the rehabilitation or repair of certain historic resources.