

Downtown Urban Design Guidelines

Purpose

The Downtown Urban Design Guidelines provide additional guidance on the desired design qualities of buildings within the Downtown Core and Urban Mixed Use zoning districts. They complement the design standards found in the Zoning Ordinance, including those associated with the allowable building forms. Where the design standards are requirements and must be met, these guidelines are expectations that must be addressed, but may be achieved in numerous ways. Since these guidelines are not generally quantifiable, they don't lend themselves to the prescriptive structure of an ordinance. Accordingly, these guidelines were (will be) adopted by a resolution.

The design guidelines were developed to ensure that new buildings, and additions and alterations to existing buildings are compatible on a city, neighborhood, and block level, have an engaging pedestrian orientation, and are designed to reflect the use of the structure.

These guidelines will serve as a tool for City staff, the Urban Design Commission, and the Plan Commission by providing a checklist of the primary elements to be evaluated when reviewing development proposals. They will also inform property owners and their design team of items that should be addressed. In applying these guidelines, the Downtown Plan, which is incorporated herein by reference, may be utilized to provide additional guidance.

A. Site Design + Building Placement

1) Orientation

Buildings create and spatially define the public space (streets and sidewalks), and how a building faces this public way is a primary factor in what it contributes to the urban character of an area by reinforcing a consistent street wall and enhancing the pedestrian realm.

- a. Any building façade adjacent to a street should generally be parallel to the street. This is particularly important for lower stories.
- b. Buildings should be sited so that portions of the building designed for service uses, such as loading docks and dumpster enclosures, are not part of the street façade. When a lot configuration requires such activities from a street, these components should be architecturally integrated into the design of the façade.
- c. The street level of a building should be designed with active uses and architecture that engages the street/sidewalk in a contextually appropriate manner.
- d. Buildings should be oriented to preserve and enhance the views identified on the Views and Vistas Map in the Downtown Plan.
- e. Buildings at the intersection of streets should have a strong corner element, and that element should extend to the property line along both streets.

2) Access + Site Circulation

How people, bicycles, and motor vehicles access a site and circulate within it and around it can be a critical determinant in how it relates to its context. A primary goal is to maximize uninterrupted pedestrian access within a given block to enhance and maintain all areas of the Downtown as pedestrian friendly. Another goal is to minimize the visual presence of motor vehicle circulation, parking, and service functions, including minimizing the visual impact of parking structures and parking lots on the streetscape.

- a. Parking facilities beneath a building should not be considered a valid reason to establish an occupiable first floor more than three (3) feet above the grade of the sidewalk along any adjacent street, nor to include long segments of blank wall on any side of a building.

- b. Driveways should be oriented 90 degrees to the street, and shared driveways are encouraged.
- c. Porte-cochere type entries, drop offs, or circular drives should not be parallel to the street or within the right-of-way, nor should they be oriented to require more than one curb cut. Queuing space for motor vehicles should not impede pedestrian movement along any public sidewalk.

3) Usable Open Space - Residential Development

Residents living in this densely developed portion of the city enjoy a variety of conveniently located urban amenities and may not require the amount of on-site usable open space as other parts of the community. However, the provision of quality on-site useable open space is necessary to create a quality living environment.

- a. Project designs should provide attractive, safe and creatively designed yards, courtyards, plazas, sitting areas or other similar open spaces for building residents.
- b. Usable open space may be provided on balconies or roof decks if they are sufficiently large to be truly usable (a suggested minimum size for a balcony is 4.5 feet by 8 feet) and are provided for or accessible to all residents.
- c. At some locations, side and rear yards sufficient to provide usable open space may be limited, and outdoor open space may not represent the most beneficial use of a limited site when the overall density of development is relatively high. Common recreational facilities and social activity spaces in the development may be considered toward meeting some of the need for usable open space.

4) Landscaping

How a site is landscaped-- particularly in a dense urban environment-- can "soften" hard edges, make a site more inviting, and bring color and interest to a development. Well landscaped sites also create informal gathering spaces and enhance the adjoining public improvements.

- a. The design emphasis should be on creating an "urban" landscape, incorporating site amenities such as raised planters or seat walls, street furniture, public art, lighting, and landscape materials. These features should be architecturally compatible with the styles, materials and colors of the principal building on the lot and those in the immediate area.
- b. Context appropriate landscaping should be provided along the front façade. Appropriate landscaping will depend on factors such as the setbacks, shape, size, and orientation of the building.
- c. Plant species should be selected based on their compatibility with an urban environment, such as use of structural soils to promote root growth, and considering salt tolerance. Ease of maintenance should also be considered.
- d. Public art should be considered as an integral part of the design approach to these spaces.
- e. Outdoor seating areas and cafes on private property are encouraged provided they do not interfere with pedestrian flow and circulation along the sidewalk and from public ways to building entries or amenities, such as bicycle racks and benches.

5) Lighting

Appropriate site and building lighting can create interest and a safe and welcoming environment. Lighting can also reinforce architectural elements such as entries, structural bays, or shop windows. Excessively lighting a site or building can create glare and greatly detract from the ambiance of a street, while insufficiently lighting a site can result in dark spots and raise safety issues.

- a. Exterior lighting to accentuate the building architecture and landscaping should not be excessive in either amount or intensity.

- b. Building entrances and entryways and other walkways should be lit sufficiently to create inviting and safe building access.
- c. Building-mounted fixtures should be compatible with the building facades.
- d. Full cut-off fixtures should be used. With limited exceptions, such as highlighting important building elements, dark sky compliant lighting should be used.
- e. The lighting on the top of a building should not compete with the view of the Capitol dome in views of the skyline.

B. Architecture

1) Massing

Building massing is an important determinant in the quality of the urban environment and in how “welcoming” a street is perceived. Important aspects to this specifically related to massing include the preservation of natural light, sunlight and ventilation to the street, as well as preventing the feeling that large buildings are looming over the street and creating a canyon effect. The mass of a building can also enhance the pedestrian experience by creating more human-scaled development.

- a. The proportions and relationships of the various architectural components of the building should be utilized to ensure compatibility with the scale of other buildings in the vicinity. In areas where the Downtown Plan recommends significantly taller or larger buildings than currently exist, this guideline should consider the evolving context.
- b. Larger buildings should have their mass broken up to avoid being “out of scale” with their surroundings and to provide a more pedestrian-friendly quality. Articulation of buildings in both plan and profile can help break up the mass of large buildings and should be incorporated. Stepping back the upper floors of all street facades a substantial distance from lower floors may be appropriate to minimize overall scale and minimize shadow effects.
- c. The mass of a building should not negatively impact views identified on the Views and Vistas Map in the Downtown Plan. Applicants may need to prepare viewshed studies for others to fully understand potential impacts.

2) Building Components

Most buildings are experienced from a variety of perspectives, which change as a person moves about the city. Correspondingly, how the top, middle, and base of a building are designed also influences these interactions, and all must work within a complete architectural form. The Downtown Plan places an emphasis on creating an interesting skyline that reflects the underlying topography, and the design of the top of a building influences the skyline. Likewise, the Plan places an emphasis on making great public spaces, streets, and engaging pedestrian environments, and the design of a building’s lowest four floors define the public realm and are the primary contributor to a pedestrian’s perception of a street.

- a. The lower levels of street facing facades should generally incorporate a higher level of visual interest and richer architectural detailing. One way to achieve this is to locate active use areas on lower level street side spaces within a building, which could be reflected in the exterior architecture of the corresponding facades.
- b. A positive visual termination at the top of the building (such as decorative cornices, parapets, crowns, shaped roofs, spires, etc.) should be provided.
- c. Roof forms should be used to integrate rooftop equipment, telecommunications equipment, and other devices so as to express/conceal them as architectural elements. Large mechanical penthouses and elevator overrides should be fully integrated into the building architecture and be appropriately-scaled to serve as architectural features and avoid the appearance of being “plopped” on top.

3) Articulation

As emphasized in the Downtown Plan, it is especially important to create a comfortably-scaled and thoughtfully detailed urban environment through the use of well-designed architectural forms and details. Well-articulated buildings add architectural interest and variety to the massing of a building,

help define the public space, engage the street, create an interesting pedestrian environment, and help break up long, monotonous facades. Articulation also is a primary means of providing a human scale through change in plane, contrast and intricacy in form, color, and materials.

- a. All sides of the building that are visible from any public ways should be designed with details that complement the front facade. All street facades should have a similar design and quality of materials and present an attractive street orientation.
- b. A variety of elements should be incorporated into the design of the building to provide substantial articulation of the facades. This may be achieved by incorporating the use of: vertical and/or horizontal reveals, stepbacks, modulation, projections, and significant three dimensional detail between surface planes to create shadow lines and break up flat surface areas.
- c. For large buildings, incorporate variation into the design of the building facade through the use of materials and color, dividing the building into bays, and/or incorporating one or more design features (such as recessed balconies, reveals, and stepbacks) to break up large facades to create pedestrian interest at the street level.
- d. Buildings that adjoin historic buildings should incorporate designs that complement the proportion, scale and architectural details of the historic building.
- e. Franchise corporate/trademark building designs may need to be altered to fit the desired character of the district.
- f. The design of buildings fronting on State Street should reflect the historic pattern and rhythm of storefront bays on the lower level. If the interior space is wider, each bay should be articulated and have its own entrance and should have the ability to allow for smaller spaces in the future.
- g. Balconies and terraces should be incorporated into vertical and horizontal shifts and building massing whenever possible to avoid building facades that are dominated by cantilevered balcony projections. Balconies should not extend over the public right-of-way.

4) Door and Window Openings

As emphasized in the Downtown Plan, it is especially important to create a comfortably-scaled and thoughtfully detailed streetscape and how the openings in building walls (windows, doors, etc.) are incorporated have an influence on the perception of a building's mass and how it is experienced by pedestrians.

- a. The size and rhythm of windows and doors in a building should respect those established by existing buildings in the area where a clear pattern exists, and the residential and/or mixed-use nature of the building.
- b. Traditional buildings should not have window openings with different sash configurations, smaller windows, or different materials than originally used. Transom windows should remain transparent/translucent.
- c. Entrances, including doors, should be sized and articulated in proportion to the scale of the building and should be architecturally compatible with the style, materials, colors, and details of the building as a whole. Entrance definition and articulation may be achieved through use of architectural elements such as: lintels, pediments, pilasters, columns, porticoes, porches, overhangs, railings, balustrades, and others, where appropriate.

5) Building Materials

The Downtown Core and Urban Mixed Use Districts are generally the most dense and heavily used areas of the city, and buildings in these districts are exposed to a high level of use. An integrated palette of high quality, durable building materials can enrich the pedestrian environment through the use of scale, color, texture, and architectural details.

- a. A variety of complementary exterior building materials should be utilized to provide visual interest to the building. The palette of materials should not be overly complex.

- b. All sides of a structure should exhibit design continuity and be finished with quality materials. Materials should be those typically found in urban settings.
- c. If material changes are proposed, they should generally occur at inside corners or be delineated by a specific transitional detail such as a pronounced belt course or substantial reveal.

6) Terminal Views and Highly-Visible Corners

The design of buildings occupying sites located at the end of a street, on a highly-visible corner, or in other prominent view sheds can serve as a focal point and the design of such structures should reflect the prominence of the site. Particular attention should be paid to views from these perspectives.

- a. Corner buildings should define the street intersection with distinctive architectural features such as tower elements, rounded walls, recessed entries or other design features.
- b. Buildings located at visual focal points should demonstrate a higher degree of architectural embellishments to emphasize their location.
- c. New buildings on flatiron corners, as identified in the Downtown Plan, should include a design approach that reflects the acute angles of the site.

7) Awnings and Canopies

Awnings can add color and texture to a streetscape, provide shelter for pedestrians and protect storefront displays from sun exposure.

- a. Awnings should not be internally illuminated so that they glow.
- b. Awnings and canopies should be compatible with building design in terms of the rhythm and design of the storefront bays, material, details, massing, and form.
- c. Awnings and canopies should not cover up architectural details.

8) Signage

Signage is for the purpose of identifying a business in an attractive and functional manner rather than to serve as general advertising for a business. Well conceived signage can contribute positively to the character of a street or district. Too many signs and too much information on one sign can overwhelm a viewer and make a sign less effective, and too much signage on a building, block, or street can easily result in visual clutter. The guidelines below are in addition to the requirements of the Madison Sign Code.

- a. Signage should be integrated with and be compatible with the architectural scheme of a building.
- b. Messages should be simple-- only including the name, address, function (i.e. restaurant), and logo of the establishment.

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