
MEETING: Project Advisory Group
PRESENTERS: Mesa Sherriff, Senior Planner, Planning and Development Services
Keith Walzak, VIA Architecture
Michael Cannon, VIA Architecture
Dan Kennedy, VIA Architecture
SUBJECT: Urban Design Studio
DATE: March 31st & April 2nd, 2020

PRESENTATION TYPE:

Workshop style presentation and discussion, meeting held online via computer/call in

SUMMARY:

At the workshops on March 31st and April 2nd, 2020, the Project Advisory Group (PAG) reviewed and provided feedback on secondary architectural features, public-private transitions, and landscape design as they relate to existing and proposed code changes and design review.

DISCUSSION:

The following topics were presented to the PAG for review

Secondary Architectural
Features

- Building Entries
- Parking Garages
- Weather Protection
- Balconies
- Blank Walls
- Facade Enhancements
- Ground Level Transparency
- Corner Treatments
- Materials & Color

Public-Private Transitions

- Ground Floor Residential
- Retail Interface
- Through Block Connections

Landscape Design

- Urban Plazas
- Landscape Requirements
- Trees
- Utilities + Screening

Lighting

- Standards
- Guidelines

NOTES:

BUILDING ENTRIES:

Things (building access doorways) that aren't entries (such as exits) should be obscured or not look like entries.

Ben - For 5 over 1, retail wants to be primary street and res lobby on secondary street. Clearly define the importance of establishing a hierarchy between residential and retail/commercial entries. Ideally, retail entries should face primary street, while residential entries should face secondary streets. These entrances should be clearly distinguished from one another if they are on the same building façade.

VIA comment: Residential entries – this may not be true in all cases especially along Pedestrian Corridors. Various conditions may warrant various responses.

PARKING GARAGES:

Gary - Parking garages at medium to low density transition areas should be looked at. May warrant special considerations. Parking garages kill (ground level) activity and negatively impact neighborhoods. Concerns from development community.

Slide 10 #4: Parking structure screening can be a challenge: If 50% is open, no mechanical ventilation is required. Heavy screening will result in costly mechanical ventilation. Need more specific criteria on style and aesthetic treatments. Less to do with open area, and more to do with style and looking pleasant. Use all of right of way, including sidewalk area, for opportunities for screening. Tacoma downtown with its hill slopes can potentially allow lower and upper level garage entrances/exits. Review sloping side streets for entries/exits in middle of garage.

Slide 10 #5: Ben may not agree. Instead of prohibiting parking garage access from primary streets, limit "high volume" access instead.

VIA comment: the impact is not just the cars, it's the curb cuts and design.) Downtown consideration: multiple parking entries at multiple levels allows for the elimination of ramps = more efficient parking floorplates.

Ben: Slide 10 #3: "high quality gates or decorative screening" Don't like it. Current code says "can't see headlights of car. ", that's not good either. Instead: challenge design team to screen car and explain how their proposal is appropriate to make garage look like architecture instead of infrastructure. Herzog garage in Miami Beach has no screening but it's a work of art. Ben citing Pacific Place parking garage

VIA comment: Pacific Place actually prioritized - away from pine, which is more important than 7th and 8th. The result is huge conflicts with pedestrian. SPD need to station traffic officers to direct flow out of the parking garage at peak periods.

Parking structure may be set-back to enhance screening effects with vegetation etc. The effect of depth (locating the parking facility further away from the street) will help toward screening.

Ben: A parking garage should look like a beautiful parking garage, not an office building. I'm a Modernist and believe things should look like what they are.

WEATHER PROTECTION:

For buildings that front the property line, if the intent is to protect the sidewalk (pedestrians), then make the edge of canopy relative to the building faced if there is a setback.

VIA comment: Provided the weather protection is intended to cover paved walkway areas at pedestrian circulation areas along the public ROW and at building entries.

Weather protection design should match the building, not other weather protection. Weather protection requirements should apply to new buildings only. What if the building is setback away for the public right-of-way? IS weather protection still required to cover public sidewalk?

VIA comment: Applicability of design standards should address new buildings and major renovations. Common sense to the weather protection measures suggests to provide weather protection for pedestrian comfort accessing building entries, and along sidewalk areas. Assumed not to require weather protection over surface parking lots.

Small storefront retail areas - Ben Mock (sp?) at UWT is privy to design standards on Pacific Avenue. Same canopy design was element of continuity, fabric is element of distinction – maybe. Fabric awnings are a dominant design feature. VIA to connect with Ben.

BALCONIES:

Ben: There is no code language addressing consistent design/materials of balconies. Point Ruston building has 7 different balconies. That's what we want to avoid. –Amen!

Shared balconies designed as a continuous horizontal feature that appear to be shared is allowable.

John: Not sure about the narrow side yard condition. Uncovered balconies are seldom used in Pacific Northwest. Projected balconies are frequently used due to climate (rain in winter and hot sun in summer months). Trend now is moving away from balconies. People don't use balconies and tend to store stuff on balconies instead (Ben).

8-10 years ago, almost every apt had a balcony. Developments are concerned Tacoma is too provincial and people won't rent units that have a balcony requirement. We work developers down from 80% of units to 20% of units. Can we have a soft code to lobby for something better?

Address cross section (slide 14): Slabs going thru w/ deck – in our experience that's not very common b/c of potential for water intrusion into the unit, that's why we use bolt-ons. They look good at first, till they get value engineered out. Adding a section on balconies in the Guidelines should elevate this conversation. Promote balconies as a 'design' feature.

BLANK WALLS

We want theatres and museums, but the budgets of these projects allow great treatment (example – Seattle Center, Mercer). What is a cheaper option? Make it hard for storage units – they are going to make the pushback.

How to address this: No fake windows. It's never done well. Example, public storage buildings using clear windows at ground level. Need to regulate this use.

Be thoughtful regarding walls. Think about the height and length of wall area and its context to the pedestrian area, length and width of sidewalk area. Use textures appropriately -such as the Nordic Museum. Texture however may not be good enough if not designed well. Example image on right may not be enough.

VIA comment: Select precedent images that reflect good and bad examples. Need to be clear on what each image is suggesting.

FAÇADE ENHANCEMENTS

Ben: #3 Fenestration pattern shall be used to maximize daylight – too strong. What is the intent? May need to generalize this and clarify the purpose.

#4 What's a quality window? Vinyl is not acceptable, or vinyl not acceptable beyond first floor. Same w/ framing.

Building entries should be allowed as parallel or perpendicular to the street edge or as appropriate, at an angle to the street.

This element of the code should talk about what elements do rather than what they have. Not clear what this means?

VIA comment: Clarify/revise explanation with the draft written standards. Is this to be a performative measure of a prescriptive measure?

TRANSPARENCY

Draft transparency graphic caused some confusion regarding the 8 ft. dimension. Transparency is less about daylighting and more about the point is to get eyes into the building.

We should encourage clerestory windows, but a transom window is not equally as important as an eye level window, so it should be a separate standard.

What if transparency standards were relative to height of the space behind it? Standards should respond to various site and sidewalk slope conditions.

Fix graphic on Slide 20 – Window/door transparency

VIA comment: A standard 'metric' measuring ground plane transparency addressing that are of building frontage between 2 ft. and 8 ft. in height. This seems to be a universally applied standard.

CORNER TREATMENTS

How will a developer know if they are at a gateway, view terminus, or positioned to frame open spaces?

Indicate blocks early in the process if corner treatments are expected on particular building sites.

Top corner image is a good example of where base middle top should NOT apply.

MATERIAL + COLOR

Ben: Don't mandate color, but encourage the use of color. Colors are trendy. Be careful with that.
Possible solution: Talk about colors as performing a function, such as dark colors being more recessed, or relating to ground level.

There are plenty of examples of large buildings that would be better off not going through color changes / materials acrobatics. You're going to get the same predictable result over and over again. Rather than "is" appropriate, "may be appropriate".

Gary: Slide 22 #4: May be appropriate.

If modulation is required, they should explain why a particular combination of colors/materials is apt. Force the designer to think. Why did they propose what they did? Challenge the designer to explain their rationale. Try to accomplish what you're doing w/ the fewest possible moves. Additive vs. minimalistic – don't discriminate.

Felicia: 2 categories: Color for the sake of color and color to create sense of depth

PUBLIC – PRIVATE TRANSITIONS

Mesa: Slide 24: Unfortunately, Tacoma may incentivize below grade units as these units often do not count toward the FAR. Need to play out different conditions. More to this than we may expect. Needs further study.

Ben: should only apply to new buildings. Take live-work out of this requirement. Visual separation is key. Tacoma doesn't have a strong retail market. Ground floor units must be accessible from the street. May be some challenges. A 6-8 foot ground level setback can work to allow for a 1st or 2nd floor cantilever, but this may not work structurally for 10 ft length; need to explore.

Jay: This standard should include existing buildings.

John: Landscape isn't seen as a benefit (in Tacoma). Need more landscaping. Aspire to a high level of design. Document (Urban Design Guidelines) should promote the value to landscaping. Building should not overpower the entry and landscape.

Gary: Concur with John's comments. John's argument is based on quality of life – must advance the idea of private spaces. What would a resident do with the 10 ft. (transition) space? What amenities might be used in this transition space?

Holly: Support John's comment. Left image balances the public-private space, CPTED principles are a high priority. Qualitative design matters.

Gary: Combine circulation and transitions. Encourage flexibility in design.

RETAIL INTERFACE

Holly: Slide 28: questioned if the retail café dining space should be defined by a fence. Many active street examples use a simple marker on the ground to delineate the outdoor seating space. Consider the minimalist approach

Ben: State Liquor Control Board requires a 42" guard rail if alcohol is served outdoors. Outdoor rail requirements should be looked at closely. Would we want to see a rail during the winter months when there is no outdoor activity?

John: Agreed with Holly. Don't encourage fences. Cited the McMenamen's Elk Temple example. Slide 29: Questioned the intention with the 30 ft. interval. Why this maximum condition. If the individual storefronts convert to a single use, would the doorway interval be required? With a single retail space, would additional doorway still be required? Having hard numbers (standards) like this may be too restrictive. Agreed that this encourages the opportunity for fine grain retail along the street.

Holly: Asado restaurant – outdoor seating area has an 18 in. raised area with a handrail. The seating here is in only 4 ft. wide. Would prefer this area to be at-grade with the sidewalk, but there is a sloping condition that must be addressed. The seating area is too narrow. Suggested a preference to maintain a flat surface area. Should not matter what the interior finish floor level is. Make outdoor space level.

THROUGH BLOCK CONNECTIONS

John: Slide 30: Street furniture code is too restrictive. 10 ft. wide is too narrow suggest wider, 15 feet is better. Sited project example where 10' pathway was widened to 18 feet because of long interior block distance.

Ben: Perhaps show this as a ratio – length to distance?

VIA comment: Seattle South Lake Union standards encourage mid-block connections, addressed through a performance standard approach. Minimum base and minimum width. Then must open up to a wide condition.

SIDE YARD SETBACKS

Ben: Slide 31: Don't restrict units with windows and balconies. Concerned with viability of project proforma. Setback is measured from center line of alleyway. IBC standards dictate these conditions. Make the requirements to be associated with the zone transitions, not uses. MF next to MF, versus MF next to SF. The design intent may be more relevant to a single-family adjacent use. The Proctor example was cited.

John: Eyes on the street is a good thing (Jane Jacobs). Eyes on the alleyways (Slide 31 image on right) is an acceptable design outcome. We can anticipate that things will change over time. Can assume increase in density. This should not be a prescriptive measure.

Diagram on left – if this is about solar access, then solar orientation is important to understand. Can understand the light and air aspect of building separation. Solar access varies depending on orientation.

John and Ben supported the idea of requiring applicant submissions to include shadowing diagrams to illustrate potential shading impacts on adjacent uses. Diagrams should correspond with quarterly solstice and time of day metrics.

URBAN PLAZAS

Landscape. Group acknowledged an interest in quality of design rather than just meeting quantity requirements. Agreed that less 'number of trees' language should be replaced with more direction on implementing a better quality of landscape.

Patrick: Need to test out this 800sf size to see how it works.

Holly: In favor of these plazas if they can be accommodated in development projects, would be good for neighborhoods.

Ben: Have worked on eight projects with these plazas provided in the design, but none have been realized when the project was eventually built. Has to do with negotiation in final agreements, costs, etc.

UTILITIES /SCREENING

Holly: Trash containers are a challenge in these projects

Ben: Yes, and there are often 4 different pick-ups between recycling, compost, trash...all have different potential requirements that can impact a project's bottom line.

DISCUSSION

Ben: We should be thinking about how these standards / guidelines are not be so lofty that they discourage developers from implementing them; perhaps some that are more restrictive can be rolled out at a later date once expectations are set. Area, or amount of square feet in a building is everything, and all these things add up. Also, I'm sure it is impactful to lower income housing as their margins are much slimmer than market rate projects.

Felicia: Yes, and in reality, regarding competition for units, there may not be that much incentive to add in extra amenities or nicer materials /finishes as the rents may not be appreciably different between rental units when all is said and done. So low-income housing is vulnerable.

Ben: Would be good to tie incentives to additional FAR bonuses to motivate developers to do these extra things.

Mesa: Thank you all for participating, this was a good discussion, please stay tuned for updates on Planning Commission dates - they may be adjusted due to the COVID-19 situation.

ADDITIONAL NOTES RECEIVED AFTER MEETING:

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- Transparency is an old concept and should not require a half-hour discussion. Define what the code intends for, say, a lineal foot of 'transparency', for its purposes. Then apply it as a percentage of building frontage. Period.
 - As to the secondary architectural features, in 2 different sections/applications. I reiterate that to define assumptions or examples in too literal terms is to lock in the materials and practices of a short-lived era. I keep thinking of the 'modulation and materiality' multi family fiasco in Seattle during the '90's. Every 2-bit hack designed right out of the code.. Quality, appropriate means, effect and architectural outcomes should be encouraged, not inadvertent 'for-instances'. The 'stuff' is not the outcome. Maybe we need to think and speak more like we are presenting a design brief, not a fait accompli. This is much harder, and more worth the extra effort. My thought is that if we need several paragraphs or a shopping list of time-bound examples, we have not properly clarified our general intent or actual intended outcomes. No silver bullet here
 - Screening for parking garages or blank walls should be considered per our earlier exchange. Using added depth as a way to encourage more mature landscaping, for instance, could raise the functional sightline without using one tall flat element to hide another one. The flat element in question could then become a backdrop for a softening element that takes precedence.
 - The entire canon of DR standards and guidelines is in fact adjudicated daily by review staff and is simply collected codified and clarified here for purposes of education, uniform assessment and enhanced reference value.
 - Regarding through-block passages, given the 10 - 30-foot range of possible widths over a 130', +/-, length, including apron areas, consider whether design standards of these interior streets should toggle to the earlier 'interior street' section, or the frontage section we discussed last time.
 - Regarding 'eyes on the street', either on an interior passageway, or on a neighboring zone, I have a thought or two. Regarding adjacency to a lower density zone or another building, existing or not, cooperation with building and land use divisions will be necessary for complete interpretation. In the first case there should be some buffering required for the newer development, and/or setbacks sufficient to permit generous fenestration. An illustration: In the late '90's I was managing the design of 4 townhouse units on Lake Union for Vaughan/Knudson Architects. The free-standing units were designed on a zero-lot-line premise, with the imposed 'lot lines' on the face of one unit, with the adjacent unit separated by the code minimum to achieve full window opportunities. According to interpretations negotiated with DCLU at the time, the former unit was permitted one-hour-rated openings at the relatively small percentage allowed to maintain the one-hour rating of the entire wall. These modest openings 'relieved' the wall, but did not compromise it, nor leave it blank. The adjacent unit's wall had all the windows it needed. The planning of the units maximized the lot coverage and development/sale opportunities in this premise. By this measure we achieved fee-simple real estate transactions as well as privacy. This was a tough program from the owner, but

was achievable at the time through serious bargaining - I am not sure what is possible these days.. In any case, I feel all review staff should be on board to achieve the ends of DR and employ the maximum scope of the code canon. This 'quiet lane' aspect of otherwise dense housing could be a real plus. This cannot be a simple black/white or yes/no condition.