

DOWNTOWN

DESIGN GUIDE

CITY OF LOS ANGELES



Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

A. AREAS TO WHICH THE DESIGN GUIDE APPLIES/RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER REGULATIONS

The Downtown Design Guide: Urban Design Standards and Guidelines (“Design Guide”), which supplements Municipal Code provisions, applies to all projects in the areas shown on Figure I-1, except:

- Provisions of an adopted Specific Plan, Community Design Overlay, Streetscape Plan, Design for Development, Supplemental Use District, Development Agreement or other regulations as determined by the Reviewing Agency shall take precedence where there is a conflict.
- Projects in the Historic Downtown must comply with the Historic Downtown Los Angeles Design Guidelines (July 2002) sponsored by the Los Angeles Conservancy as well as with the Design Guide. Where there is a conflict, the Historic Downtown Los Angeles Design Guidelines shall take precedence.

Where the Municipal Code is more restrictive than these Guidelines, and a request has been made to deviate from the Municipal Code to conform to the Design Guide, then the Decision-Making body must find a project is in conformance with the Design Guide and the Urban Design chapter of the Community Plan in the consideration of affirmative findings.

B. APPLICATION OF DESIGN GUIDE TO PROJECTS/DEFINITION OF PROJECT

The Design Guide is intended to provide guidance for creating a livable Downtown. It includes both standards (requirements) and guidelines (suggestions). Standards typically use the word “shall”, an active verb (such as, “provide” or “install”), a clear directive (“are not permitted” or “are required”). Guidelines typically use the word “should” or “consider.” Projects must comply with standards and are strongly encouraged to comply with guidelines.

In the spirit of affording maximum creativity, projects that do not adhere to the letter of every provision in the Design Guide, but none-the-less demonstrate a clear alternative approach which is superior to and achieves all the prominent objectives of the Design Guide, will be recognized as valid alternative.

For the purposes of the Design Guide, a project is the construction, erection, or addition to any building or structure, on a lot located in whole or in part within the areas shown in Figure 1-1, which requires the issuance of a grading permit, foundation permit, building permit, or use of land permit. A project shall not include:

1. Demolition;
2. Adaptive reuse of an existing building, which conforms to the Adaptive Reuse Ordinance;
3. Remodeling of designated Historic Resources;
4. Exterior remodeling of any other existing building, unless the aggregate value of the work, in any one 24-month period, is greater than 50% of the replacement value of the building or structure before the alterations or addition as determined by the Department of Building and Safety;
5. Interior remodeling of any other existing building, or the change of use of a building or land, or the relocation of existing uses.



Figure 1-1 The Design Guide Applies to the Highlighted Districts

C. HOW TO USE THE DESIGN GUIDE

The Design Guide encourages Downtown Los Angeles to develop as a more sustainable community. To achieve this goal, good choices must be made at all levels of planning and design - from land use and development decisions to building massing and materials choices - with an emphasis on walkability and the making of great streets, districts and neighborhoods. The focus of the Design Guide is on the relationship of buildings to the street, including sidewalk treatment, character of the building as it adjoins the sidewalk, and connections to transit, as illustrated in Figure 1-2 below. The successful treatment of these key features, coupled with particular attention to the details of a project in the first 30-40 vertical feet, forms the basis for providing high quality development at a human scale.

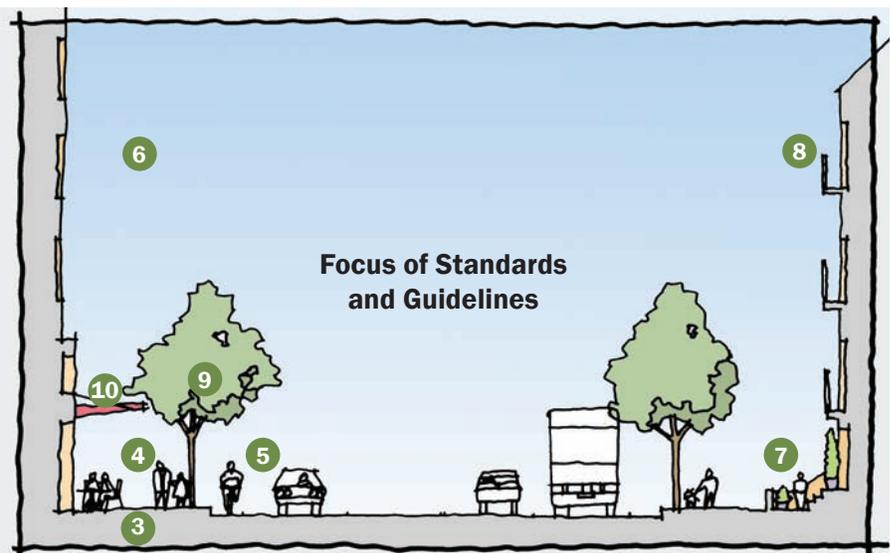
The first step in using the Design Guide is to determine where a project's building walls along the street will be located. Start by consulting the Downtown Street Standards on Navigate LA to determine where the curb line and back of sidewalk adjacent to your project will be in relation to the existing street center line and whether any roadway widening or narrowing will be required. Note that, on many streets, the required sidewalk width will be a combination of public right-of-way dedication and sidewalk easement. Refer to Section 3 of the Design Guide for a more detailed description of the Downtown Street Standards.

Continue reading Section 3 for direction regarding setbacks: are they required/allowed and, if so, how should they be treated? Setback treatment varies by district and with the adjacent ground floor use. Section 3 will also tell you whether you are on a street on which ground floor space must be designed to accommodate retail or similar uses, that is, a Retail Street.

Section 4 establishes key design characteristics of ground floor street walls, which vary by type of street (Retail Streets or other streets). Section 5 addresses parking and access, including alleys. Section 6 addresses building massing and street wall treatment, which vary by district and by street type. Section 7 addresses on-site open space; Section 8 architectural detail; Section 9 streetscape improvements; Section 10 signage; and Section 11 public art and culture.

Figure 1-2 Focus of the Design Guide. This diagram shows the zone of development on which the standards and guidelines focus. Numbers correspond to the sections of this document in which each topic is addressed:

- 3 Sidewalks and Setbacks
- 4 Ground Floor Treatment
- 5 Parking and Access
- 6 Massing and Street Wall
- 7 On-Site Open Space
- 8 Architectural Detail
- 9 Streetscape Improvements
- 10 Signage



The Appendices provide more detailed guidance on certain topics, including tenant signs, streetscape improvement details, street trees and street lights. Applicants should also review LADOT's Transportation Mitigation Toolkit for environmental review, which focus on enhancing alternative modes to the single-occupant vehicle.

D. REVIEW PROCESS

Procedures for implementation of the Design Guide are established in this document and incorporated into the Central City Community Plan. A Downtown Implementation Committee comprised of the Department of City Planning (DCP), Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA/LA), Department of Transportation (LADOT) and Bureau of Engineering (BOE) will continue to provide guidance and technical assistance when needed.

- Building Permit or “as of right” projects will be reviewed and approved by CRA/LA staff, in consultation with Downtown Implementation Committee staff where necessary. In the event the Redevelopment Area Plan expires, then the Department of City Planning will assume responsibility for building permit sign-offs.
- Discretionary applications or entitlements for subdivisions, zone changes, site plan review, etc., will be reviewed and approved by DCP staff, in consultation with the Downtown Implementation Committee staff.

Prior to filing, a preliminary joint meeting with CRA/LA and DCP staff is required in order to consider the proposed project's compliance with the Design Guide. This opportunity to engage in early, innovative and constructive review is intended to avoid unnecessary delays once a project is filed and deemed complete. The pre-filing review will supplement any other pre-development requirement that may be established by the City under its permit streamlining initiative.

The relevant decision-maker (Advisory Agency, DCP Planning Commission, CRA/LA Agency, City Council) will make the final determination of compliance with the Design Guide and will be required to make affirmative general plan findings in so doing.

- Where an environmental assessment is required, the Applicant shall consult the Transportation Toolbox - which affords a variety of techniques that emphasize pedestrian/transit/bicycle over the Single Occupancy Vehicle – and confer with the Department of Transportation on the appropriate tools for the project's environmental clearance.

Further, permanent procedures for implementation will be developed with the adoption of the New Central City Community Plan (NCCCP). A master Community Design Overlay zone may be one technique considered for enactment of permanent procedures.

E. AMENDMENTS TO THE DESIGN GUIDE

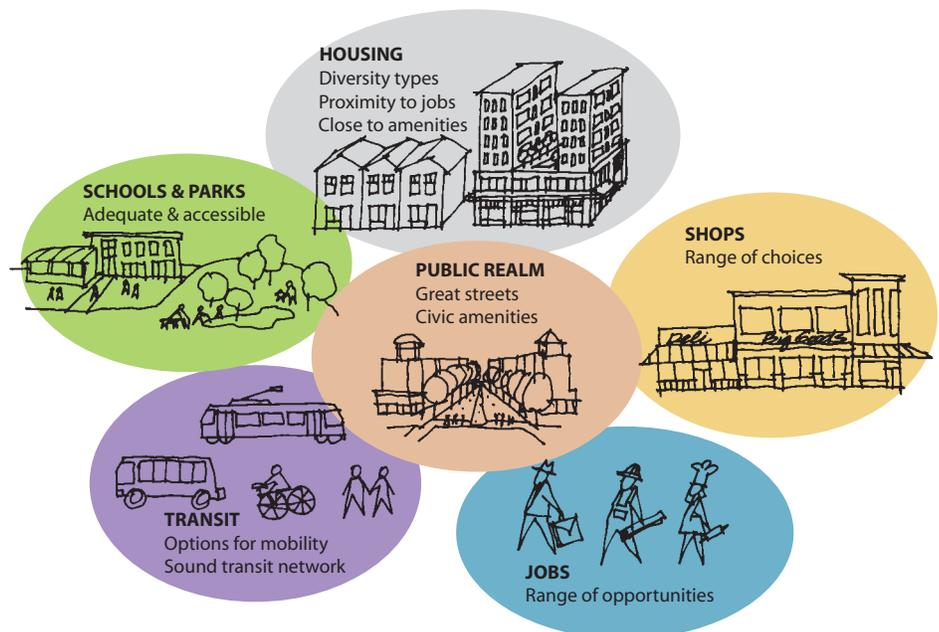
The Design Guide may be amended as necessary by the Citywide Planning Commission and the Redevelopment Agency Board.

F. DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR CREATING A LIVABLE DOWNTOWN

District and Neighborhood Design

- **Employment Opportunities.** Maintain and enhance the concentration of jobs, in both the public and private sectors, that provides the foundation of a sustainable Downtown.
- **Housing Choices.** Provide a range of housing types and price levels that offer a full range of choices, including home ownership, and bring people of diverse ages, ethnicities, household sizes and incomes into daily interaction.
- **Transportation Choices.** Enable people to move around easily on foot, by bicycle, transit, and auto. Accommodate cars but fewer than in the suburbs and allow people to live easily without one.
- **Shops and Services Within Walking Distance.** Provide shops and services for everyday needs, including groceries, day care, cafes and restaurants, banks and drug stores, within an easy walk from home.
- **Safe, Shared Streets.** Design streets not just for vehicles, but as usable outdoor space for walking, bicycling and visual enjoyment.
- **Gathering Places.** Provide places for people to socialize, including parks, sidewalks, courtyards and plazas, that are combined with shops and services. Program places for events and gatherings.
- **Active Recreation Areas.** Provide adequate public recreational open space, including joint use open space, within walking distance of residents.
- **A Rich Cultural Environment.** Integrate public art and contribute to the civic and cultural life of the City.

Figure 1-3 Components of a livable downtown at the neighborhood scale.



Building Design

- Recognize individual projects are the “building blocks” of great streets and neighborhoods. This requires particular attention to the way the building meets the sidewalk, providing a transition to pedestrian scale and elements that activate the street.
- Respect historically significant districts and buildings, including massing and scale, and neighborhood context, while at the same time, encouraging innovative architectural design that expresses the identity of contemporary urban Los Angeles.
- Accommodate vehicular access and parking in a way that respects pedestrians and public spaces and contributes to the quality of the neighborhood.
- Express an underlying design philosophy (a “big idea”) that is articulated and supported by all aspects of building design and initially conveyed through design sketches, drawings and specifications.

Sustainability is the overarching goal of the Design Guide and essential to the concept of a livable Downtown.

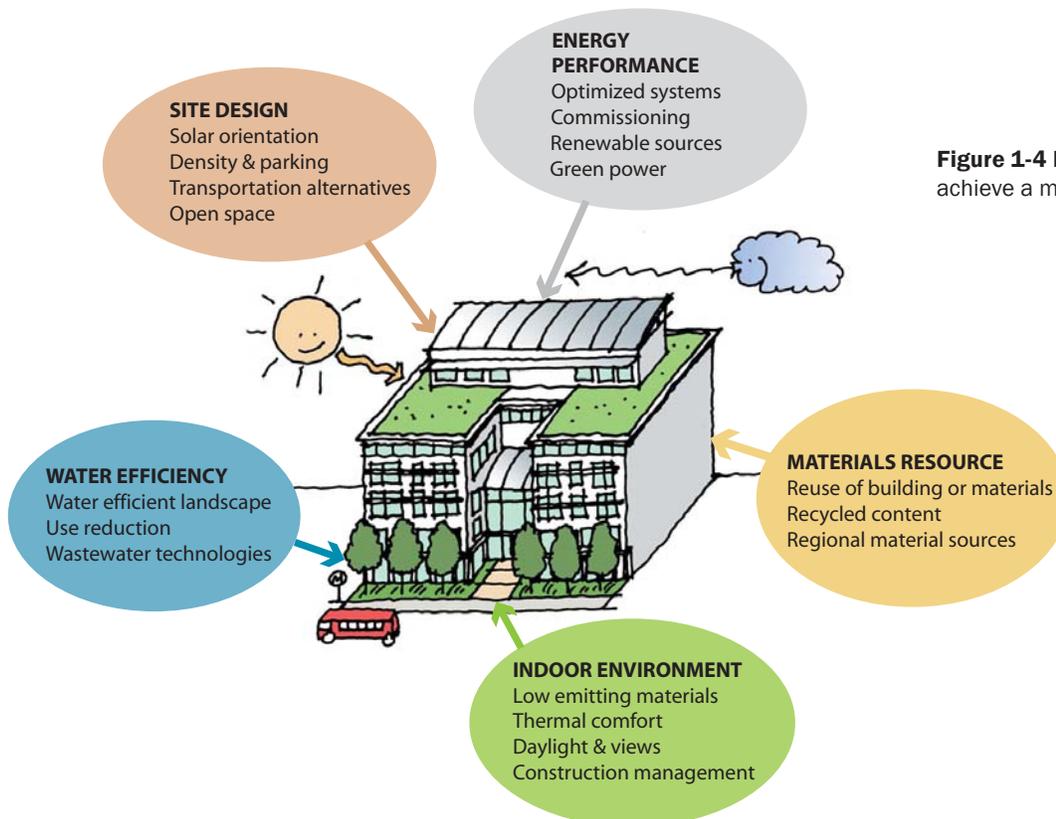


Figure 1-4 Design considerations to achieve a more sustainable building.



Creativity can take many forms: cutting-edge, iconic design like Disney Hall and the Caltrans building (top two images); new life for an historic building like the Biscuit Lofts (third); and a LEED™ and pedestrian friendly project like Eleven/Luma/Evo in South Park (bottom).

G. ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

The Design Guide provides both specific and broad suggestions, which, if followed, should result in “good buildings” which help create “good streets.” While the definition of “good” varies with individual opinion, there are fundamentals of architectural design (both traditional and modern) that, in most cases, contribute to the creation of good architecture. Judgment of what is good and ultimately acceptable will be made by the Planning Commission and CRA/LA Board with input from staff.

As discussed earlier, exceptions to the precise requirements of the Design Guide may be entertained by decision makers, including the DCP and CRA/LA, provided that a project achieves the overall objectives of the Design Guide. For example, a proposed site may be genuinely unique and requires special consideration, or an innovative architectural design may bring more value to a site and to Downtown than a purely contextual solution.

Typically, buildings are seen as good contextual solutions when they appear similar to other buildings in the neighborhood. But contextual solutions can also reinterpret the existing character and features within a city block, and recompose them in a cleverly modern interpretation. This can result in new projects that are aesthetically unique and represent good building since they too contribute to the overall neighborhood identity.

Most architecture that is considered memorable is ground-breaking in its design approach and sometimes contrasts sharply with its surrounding environment. Such projects usually bring the cache of a well-known or internationally recognized architect whose work is based on a strong theoretical design practice. These projects are often elevated above normal considerations, and exceptions to the Design Guide can be entertained because the design meets or exceeds the objectives of the Design Guide.

Good buildings help sustain a neighborhood and maintain a healthy economic environment. Making good buildings can be achieved using the skills of experienced and talented architects, whose designs routinely incorporate the sustainability and livability objectives of the Design Guide. Using their professional experience, they are often practiced at determining how to integrate these objectives into a project in a manner that results in a contemporary solution that genuinely contributes to the richness of Downtown's built landscape, and in turn, contributes to a great community of good buildings.