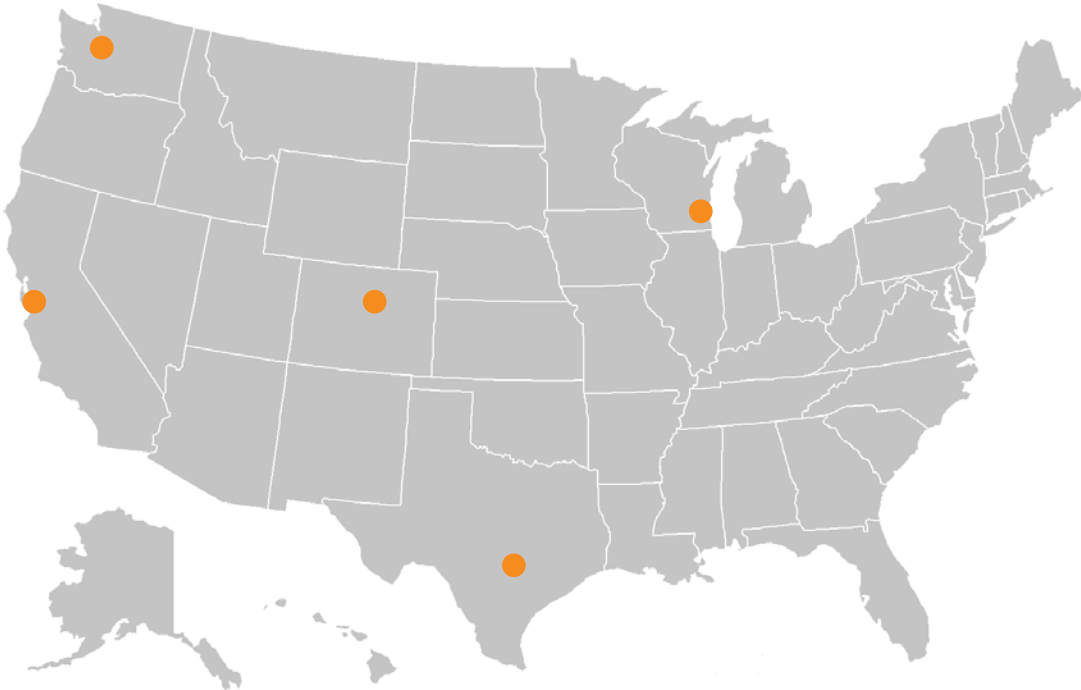


DESIGN REVIEW: LESSONS FROM PEER CITIES





“I’m not worried about setting a precedent, because a one-building case study like this is inherently bound to the record, the location, the specific facts of this case [...] I’m worried about a different kind of precedent [...] [That] we’re telling our design community that we’re not open to innovation. And I want Portland to be known as a place of innovation across the board, including in architecture.”

– City Councilor Nick Fish commenting in support of a recent project applicant’s appeal of a condition of approval from the Design Commission

PURPOSE

As an initial phase of the Design Overlay Zone Assessment, Walker Macy was asked to research approaches to discretionary and non-discretionary design review using examples from other cities nationally. The purpose of the research is to determine how other jurisdictions have successfully (or perhaps unsuccessfully) administered design-related tools and processes to achieve multiple planning goals and desired outcomes. The subjects addressed in the research include:

- Design-related zoning regulations and discretionary guidelines;
- Discretionary design review processes and administration of design review;
- The structure of decision-making bodies; and
- Community input into design of new development.

OVERVIEW



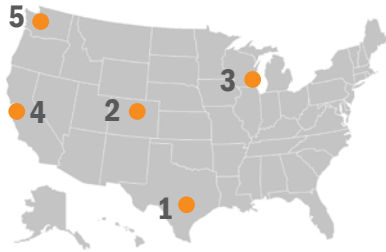
Portland's South Waterfront

Over the past six or seven years, since the 2008 Recession, a number of cities have experienced dramatic increases in new development, particularly in locations within and close to their commercial centers. This has been driven by the convergence of several factors: the desire by Millennials to live in denser areas that are walkable, bikeable, and served by transit; Boomers downsizing and choosing locations close to arts, urban entertainment, restaurants, and medical care; and shifts in the financing of housing following the recession. The consequence has been a seemingly sudden transformation of neighborhoods that had not previously developed to their code-allowed potential with significant amounts of housing – particularly rental units.

Furthermore, recent analysis of economic indicators has revealed that most of the positive growth in jobs, pay, income, and housing prices has been concentrated in about a dozen metropolitan areas. Portland is one of those; indeed it is within the upper tier of increases. The unprecedented demand for denser, urban housing development not only came as a surprise to many cities but has overwhelmed their ability to expeditiously process reviews, approvals, and permits.

Some of these cities had been employing design review techniques to guide new development for a number of years. These techniques were often focused on certain districts, such as downtowns, or corridors with existing or expected high-capacity transit.

PEER CITIES



1 AUSTIN, TX

2 DENVER, CO

3 MILWAUKEE, WI

4 SAN FRANCISCO, CA

5 SEATTLE, WA

In order to select cities to learn from and compare to Portland, we first looked at cities that were experiencing rapid redevelopment. We started with over a dozen candidates. To narrow the list, we looked for comparable attributes. These included cities that have seen substantial urban infill and mixed use development in a multitude of neighborhoods, not just downtown. Next, we looked at those cities that have had a history of directing private development in deliberate ways through policies, investments, and regulations. Finally certain cities, such as Chicago, Boston, and New York, seemed to not offer comparable lessons due to their history, complexity, geographic size, or governing structure that was too different to allow useful comparisons.

When we researched the remaining cities, we discovered that some, like Minneapolis, did not use design review as part of their regulatory and permitting framework. Others, like Washington D.C., reviewed proposed projects, but only in the context of designated historic districts – a specific type of regulatory review that is not a part of this analysis.

We did not consider cities outside the United States, as they have much different legislative, executive, and judicial authority. Some non-U.S. cities allow individual elected or appointed individuals to have unilateral and final authority over private development. By contrast, we have a system that relies upon a balance of powers, public access to decision-making, and a right of appeal. It would be very difficult to try to draw transferable lessons from locations that involve more autocratic, centralized power based on very different legal premises.

After an initial investigation, we narrowed the field to five cities: Austin, Denver, Milwaukee (Wisconsin), San Francisco, and Seattle. While all apply design review differently, each offers lessons that could be considered for Portland. It does not appear that any city has a system that works perfectly; they all have flaws. But all of these cities, like Portland, are attempting to guide the character and quality of private development in intentional ways, through varied combinations of procedures, standards, and decision-making bodies within their own context.

Finally, there is a general body of knowledge about how cities across the country conduct design review. This state of practice is reflected in conferences and workshops put on by the American Planning Association, Urban Land Institute, and various academic institutions. This paper also incorporates aspects of how this tool is used within the framework of the American land use regulatory system found in literature on the subject.

THEMES

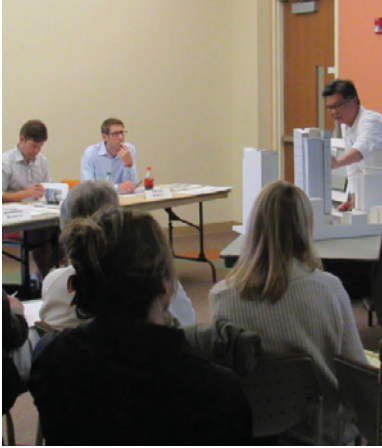


Image: Genesee Martin

Our research revealed the following themes:

1. Review Boards

The use of appointed boards to solely review designs of private development is not common in larger cities. Other major cities have design commissions, but they are generally used to guide public development, not private development. One city that uses citizen review boards extensively is Seattle. Seven volunteer boards review virtually all significant urban residential, mixed-use, and commercial development above a threshold in different districts throughout the city. Milwaukee, Wisconsin has citizen Architectural Review Boards (ARBs) only for two specific, transitioning neighborhoods.

2. Role of Staff

In general, other cities tend to rely on professional staff to engage in the majority of design review functions. Volunteer citizen boards are reserved for special purposes such as certain districts or sites or for very large projects. An exception is San Francisco which takes dozens of projects each year to their Planning Commission. The Commission has only one design professional (more by accident than intent). Even so, San Francisco employs a staff with professional design (i.e. registered) credentials that has the authority to establish conditions on development proposals. Cities that rely heavily on staff for review report that this is necessary because of the many issues needing to be addressed at multiple points during the design process.



Image: City of Austin/Project Connect

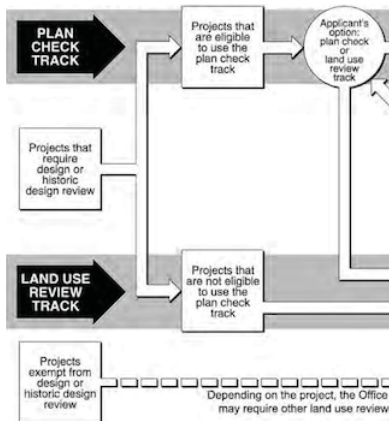


Image: Community Design Guidelines, City of Portland



Image: www.uis.edu/studentunion/student-union-design-meetings/

3. Legal Imperative

Compared with Portland, the principle of “clear and objective” standards for review does not drive the regulatory framework of other cities. (In Portland, the “clear and objective” test applies outside the Central City and Gateway Regional Center.) By contrast, other cities have broader discretionary authority that allows both staff and review boards to apply professional judgment, along with adopted standards and guidelines, to design review and conditions of approval. This obviates the need for a “two track” system that has been adopted by Oregon cities. Other cities, such as Denver, report that a discretionary process is necessary to “fine tune” projects to their surroundings.

4. Early Guidance

Some cities make use of required pre-application meetings to both guide developers and design teams in navigating procedures and standards as well as to indicate likely conditions of approval or sometimes even potential denial. Staff interact with designers at multiple points to discuss revisions and details, which a volunteer board cannot do because of the time required. Early design direction in Seattle and Denver focuses more on relationships with context and general massing of a proposed development.

Cities using methods for early guidance make sure they coincide with the earliest phases of the architect’s design process. This ensures that comments can be useful in framing the overall approach to massing, site organization, access, and other major issues.



Image: www.signsofseattle.com/outdoor-signs/land-use-signs



Image: Henk Hattingh

5. Public Notice

Throughout the U.S., many cities make information about proposed developments more evident and obvious to the public, beyond the small posting on a stick that Portland uses. A common method involves 4'x8' or 4'x4' signs that are erected on the property at the outset of the design review process. A simple site plan is included along with data on the project. The type of decision and period of comments are noted, as well as a name and contact with the City. This sign is the responsibility of the applicant, following specifications by the City. Finally, some cities have expanded mailed notices to include tenants, as well as property owners. Tenants are not individually named on mailings, but are addressed instead as "Occupant." Experience of other cities suggests that many community members appreciate knowing about a proposal in advance; learning about it suddenly when construction begins can be distressing.

6. Focused Review

Cities engaged in design review report a consistent, distinct focus in their efforts. The focus is on the public realm and portions of buildings that enclose or activate it. The majority of time is spent reviewing the ground planes and ground levels, with an expectation of details, proportions, entries, activation, and porosity being paramount. As a particular example of this focus, Denver's review process only looks at the lower levels of buildings that comprise the street edge; they view the architecture of the upper levels as being the purview of the private sector. Early guidance in Seattle involves the review board identifying those guidelines that are considered to be the most important for a proposal in its particular location and the subsequent review concentrates on those guidelines only. This allows an efficient use of time in the flow of review.

Finally, another method of focusing review and moving reviews along involves the use of time limits for any given project in review meetings. For example, in Seattle, this involves a rule that no meeting should be more than three hours in length and no individual project within a meeting can take more than 90 minutes. The board chair is responsible for enforcing this and it requires all parties, including board members, to be succinct and on point.



Image: www.newschoolarch.edu

7. Follow-up / Enforcement

When some cities started engaging in design review, they discovered that completed buildings were occasionally different than what had been approved. Elements were “value-engineered” out or builders simply chose to do something else. This was resolved by planners responsible for the design review looking at building permit sets as well as inspecting sites during the construction process. There is an expectation that an approved design would, in fact, be delivered as shown. A few cities across the country with extensive experience in design review require monetary “performance assurance” instruments that are released once a Certificate of Occupancy has been approved for issuance.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Each city we have looked at reported a unique blend of procedures, standards, and decision-makers. These differences can be explained in part by variations in State laws, court decisions, attitudes about community involvement, or differing philosophies regarding the appropriate role of local government in private sector development. Nonetheless, there is an increasingly widespread desire to direct the character and quality of new development, particularly as compared with regulatory practices decades ago. As major cities become more intensely developed, there is a more acute concern for issues of context, appropriate fit, and “tailored” designs.

Clearly, Portland stands out in that it has been ambitious and assertive in its efforts to influence the design of development over a wide range of geography, while other cities have concentrated their efforts into fewer areas and addressed a more limited range of subjects. It is evident that one way other cities have managed the review of projects to occur within a reasonable timeframe is that they limit the scope. Moreover, there is greater reliance on staff for carrying out the details of review comments and conditions. Finally, there is an emphasis on strictly managing the discussion during meetings to keep reviews expeditious and less burdensome with time for all parties involved.

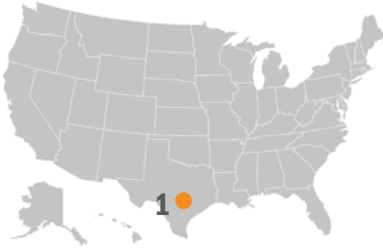
The table below summarizes takeaways from the peer cities review. More detailed descriptions of the processes used in five peer cities follow.

Peer City Comparison Summary Chart

- Type of Design Review
- Discretionary/Non-Discretionary Tools

CITY	REVIEW BOARD	STAFF	APPEAL
AUSTIN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design Commission for municipal projects only • Discretionary design guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transit corridors only • Non-discretionary standards 	No appeal process
DENVER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning Board for two districts outside of downtown • Both prescriptive standards and discretionary guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial and mixed-use in designated districts • Discretionary guidelines 	Board of Adjustment
MILWAUKEE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Architectural Review Boards for two districts (include 1 staff) • Discretionary design guidelines • Plan Commission with re-zones • Non-discretionary standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff reports to review boards 	Board of Adjustment
PORTLAND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design Commission (Type III) for Central City, Gateway, and design districts depending on thresholds • Discretionary design guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All design overlays, depending on thresholds, must allow two tracks • Discretionary design guidelines (Type II) or • Non-discretionary standards (Plan Check) 	City Council for Type III; Design Commission for Type II
SAN FRANCISCO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning Commission for more than 10,000 sf using Large Project Authorization • Discretionary guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Triggered by building type/district; reviews projects first and last • Discretionary guidelines 	Planning Commission
SEATTLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design Commission for municipal projects • Seven design review boards for private development • Discretionary guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Triggered by building type/district • Discretionary guidelines 	Hearings Examiner

AUSTIN, TX



Notes from correspondence with planner regarding design review.

Structural Attributes. Austin has a Design Commission, but it only reviews municipal projects, which can include some city-sponsored private development. It meets once a month. It is comprised of eleven registered architects and landscape architects who are unpaid. The Commission meetings are public meetings and testimony is taken on proposed city projects. It should be noted that Austin used to have a commission that reviewed private development called the Residential Compatibility Commission. It was eliminated a year ago due to frequent contentiousness and a perceived burden on development.

Design review of private development is conducted by staff. The staff review applies review only to projects that are along core transit corridors. The City has been conducting review of private development since 2005. There is no public involvement in this non-discretionary review. The City Planning Department is the decision-making body. There is no appeals process.

There is a fee schedule for the reviews. Reviews typically take three to six months, not including the time a design team takes responding to staff comments.

Staffing. The Design Commission is supported by two staff members. Staff see this as inadequate, even with the Commission only reviewing municipal projects. The staff sees themselves more as facilitators than technical support as they view the Commissioners as having sufficient design expertise.

There are six to seven staff dedicated to review of private development as part of the general permitting process. Staff reviews approximately 30 to 40 projects per year and meets with applicants multiple times during the course of a review.

Tools. The City has codified standards for reviewing development along core transit corridors.

Qualitative Aspects. The staff review of projects appears to be more ministerial than discretionary, although this involves interpreting and applying of code language. The Design Commission applies its own judgment in its self-described role as “stewards of the public realm.” According to staff, they often come up with unclear recommendations. An example: “...explore the juxtaposition of the landscape vocabulary to maintain a well-designed pedestrian environment.”

DENVER, CO



Notes from phone call with planner regarding design review.

Structural Attributes. Most of Denver’s design review process involves staff only. The final decision-maker is the Planning Director. Denver does have special design commissions for two districts outside downtown – Cherry Creek and Stapleton Airport Redevelopment. The commissions have a balanced mix of people from three categories: designers, people in real estate, and residents.

Design review is required for commercial and mixed-use buildings in designated districts. However, the review only looks at portions of building below 85 feet, regardless of the height. Their rationale for this is that the portion of buildings that abuts the street is the most relevant to people on foot and is most in the public interest. They regard the portions of building above that level as within the purview of the private sector; this reflects a philosophy that local government has no compelling need to direct the design of the upper floors of high rise buildings.

Members of the public can appeal the decision, but it goes to the Board of Adjustment, not the City Council. Staff reports relatively few appeals.

One thing the department does well is follow-up inspections by planners. It went through an era where developments would receive approval in the review process and subsequently change the materials, colors, or other aspects of the building. Inspection by planners during construction has solved that problem.

There is no fee for the review; the City views design review as a basic public service. The reviews typically take six to eight months.

Staffing. The design review section of the planning department has 12 people. They have hired people with experience in design, especially in the private sector, as they often have to work through issues with peers. They are available to development teams whenever meetings are needed. They attempt to engage with the typical process of schematic design and design development. They do the reviews and write the decision document. They also support the two special districts with commissions, but the bulk of design reviews, including those in downtown, are done by staff.

Tools. The City has adopted design review standards and guidelines that apply to private development. They emphasize the pedestrian experience, relating to the lower floors of buildings and the sidewalks.

One tool they have found extremely useful is a required Concept Review phase that occurs at the very front end of the process. They look at major issues related to context, connectivity, and infrastructure. These are discussed before lots of decisions are made on the private side. The City design staff provides advice and direction. Again, there is no fee for this service.

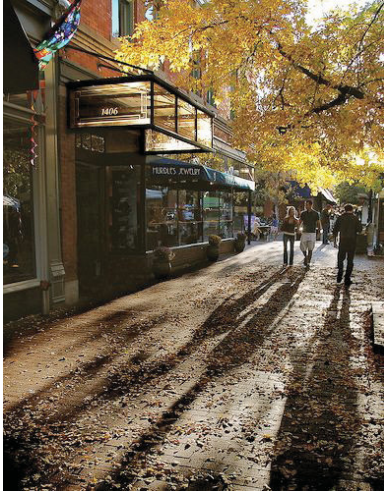


Image by Flickr user: waxhawian <http://www.flickr.com/people/dwighton/>

Qualitative Aspects. In some places the City is seeing immediate results from design review, such as in the rapidly redeveloping area around Union Station. But in other areas, with a long history of older forms of development and a comparatively little concern for the public realm, the results are less significant. The downtown still has many parking lots, brutal multistory parking structures, and generic corporate office towers, as well as sidewalks devoid of trees and other pedestrian-oriented amenities. Improvements are incremental, scattered, and sometimes overwhelmed by the context. Consequently, more interesting and diverse places are now found in areas outside of downtown.

MILWAUKEE, WI



Notes from phone call with staff.



Image: <http://engberganderson.com/project/historic-third-ward-riverwalk/>

Structural Attributes. In Milwaukee, only about one quarter of development projects go through special reviews; the vast majority are “by-right” development that only require a building permit. For the ones that do go through review, there are two bodies that review for design.

Architectural Review Boards (ARBs) were set up for only two special districts that are near but outside downtown. They are made up of staff, a Council person, a business representative, and others in design, real estate, and arts. The ARBs meet twice a month for 90 minutes each and review three to four projects at each meeting. The typical time for this review process is two to four weeks. For the most part, the ARBs rely on staff recommendations and then focus on a select number of issues that require discretionary judgment, such as proportions and materials. This process involves negotiations between the ARBs and the development team; the public is not involved. The ARBs have reviewed 12 to 15 projects a year, although the staff notes there are considerably more in the pipeline now, as one special district has become very attractive for infill development.

The other body is the Plan Commission. Much of the zoning in the City, especially in downtown, has low base zone entitlements. Accordingly, most development projects of any magnitude require a change in zoning. This process triggers design review, using more specific standards. One downtown district along the river is in an overlay with special standards, but most of downtown is not. The staff notes that downtown zoning is in need of a major overhaul. They use a Form-Based Code in portions of downtown, but they find that it is often unworkable. The rezone review process involves three steps: a Plan Commission hearing, a Council Committee Hearing, and a full Council hearing. At each step, design plans are reviewed. This process typically takes two to four months. Approximately 12 to 15 projects have been processed this way annually, although this number is increasing as there is a push for increased density in neighborhoods.



Image: Kimpton Hotels

Occasionally, both review processes are required, which can result in conflicts and a debate over which body has ultimate authority.

There is no fee for ARB review. There is a fee for Plan Commission submittals.

There are only a few appeals each year.

Staffing. Ten staff members from the Planning Department are assigned to design review. They make staff report with recommendations to both ARBs and the Plan Commission. Staff sits on the ARBs and actively participate.

Tools. The ARBs apply Design Guidelines through a discretionary process but they focus their reviews on a few topics where professional judgment is needed. They do this expeditiously, sometimes with a week turnaround.

The Plan Commission applies a stricter set of design standards through the zone change process.

Qualitative Aspects. The staff report that they are seeing good results and that most people seem satisfied. Some businesspeople report that certain subjects, such as the design of signs, have to go through multiple rounds of review, which can be annoying.

Milwaukee limits the scope of its review to two geographic areas, which has affected only around 800 dwelling units over the past year. This focus allows reviews to be more concentrated and timely.

SAN FRANCISCO, CA



Notes from phone call with Planning Department regarding design review.

Structural Attributes. This city has had a design review process for several decades. It appears to be a unique approach with a prominent role of the City’s Planning Commission, which acts as the review body (despite its having only a single design professional, which was coincidental to the appointment). It also reflects a high degree of citizen involvement, which is characteristic of that city as well. Design review is triggered by building type and district; there are many triggers in their code. The staff has authority to approve, condition, or deny most projects, but it submits projects more than 10,000 sf to the Planning Commission under Large Project Authorization.

Applicants are highly motivated to respond to staff and the Commission for a few key reasons: 1. staff initiates a trip to the Commission when agreement cannot be reached, 2. staff does not bring a project to the Commission until the project is “ripe” (which is at the planner’s discretion), and 3. if a case is continued at Commission, the return hearing could be 4-6 months later due to the high volume of Commission work. A mid-scale mixed-use project takes 18 months to two years to the first hearing with the Commission. Commission approves the schematic design, and then there is “wobble room” with staff.

Although the City has engaged in design review with a vast number of standards and guidelines for many areas, it has only had a staff dedicated to that for the past six years. They have organized themselves into two teams – one for smaller residential reviews and one for larger, more urban projects. Urban Design Advisory Committee (UDAC) projects are the largest projects in the City (San Francisco sees around 150 per year) and design guidelines do not exist for these projects.

It should be noted that the City also allows members of the public to appeal any building permits to the Planning Commission. The staff reports that cases under review can go on for a long time – often many months, and in some cases, multiple years. The Planning Commission meets every week from noon to “whenever” – sometimes after midnight.

The City charges \$5,000 for design review. A Preliminary Assessment by staff occurs prior to formal submittal of materials for a project.

Staffing. The City has 90 current planning staff. Three are specifically involved with design review. In recent years, architects and landscape architects have been hired to strengthen the design capability. The staff reviews projects first then sends them to the Commission. Last year the City reviewed 150 larger-scale projects, which went to the Planning Commission – 3 projects per week. The Planning Commission reviews at the Schematic Design level. After that, the staff completes the review. In addition, the staff reviewed 600 residential projects. The staff has a considerable amount of discretionary authority due to loose regulations and process. According to City staff familiar with both San Francisco and Portland, “Portland’s tight regulations and process result in consistency and predictability without compare. Compared to San Francisco, Portland’s process is not onerous whatsoever.”

Tools. The City has developed numerous design standards and guidelines for its numerous districts over time. The City’s code is over 3,000 pages long and is updated online weekly, as there are many amendments being made to address issues, both large and small. Although they apply an overarching criterion of “superior or outstanding design,” it seems the biggest tool they use is allowing a density increase in return for better design. But what that means for an individual project is negotiated by staff and commission. This trade-off is hotly debated between staff, Commission, development teams, and community members. Public outreach is a significant part of the system.

In recent years, the City has added another type of review, called Better Streets, that is managed through a Streetscape Design Advisory Team (SDAT). This interdepartmental staff group specifically reviews projects for issues related to the streetscape, including traffic calming, sidewalks, transit lanes and stops, and bicycle infrastructure. A very extensive set of standards is applied to projects. Using their discretion, the SDAT issues letters to developers with a list of specific improvements they are required to make to the public realm as a part of their projects. This review occurs parallel to other review so that development teams don’t receive directions on these subjects later by a different department.

Qualitative Aspects. San Francisco’s design review process could be fairly described as lengthy, contentious, complicated – and perhaps even convoluted. It can be onerous and unpredictable. The process has elevated a political discussion at the City’s leadership level over the extent to which the City’s processes have frustrated the building of affordable housing. There may even be some legislative changes coming

SEATTLE, WA



Structural Attributes. Seattle has two systems to review projects through boards. First, it has had a Design Commission for more than 40 years. By law, it only reviews public projects, which include buildings, parks, streets, reservoirs, and many other types of capital investments. It meets two to three times per month and is composed of design professionals. The initial enabling legislation in the early 70s included an honorarium of \$25 per hour, which was to comport with the pay (at that time) of owners of design firms. The payment rate never was changed, and eventually, it was dropped altogether.

In the mid-1990s the City adopted a design review process for private development. Initially, it was only aimed at downtown commercial buildings. It has been expanded to include virtually all development except single family dwellings, townhouses, and industrial uses. Seven design review boards (DRBs) were created for different parts of the city. Each board has five volunteers, comprised of a mix of designers, real estate or development professionals, and residents. The City is considering reducing this number of boards to five, with one for downtown and nearby high-rise districts and four others for neighborhoods with more midrise and context-sensitive development.

By ordinance, the review boards are comprised of a mixture of people in the design community, the real estate community, and the neighborhoods. (This involves roughly 40 people sitting on all boards; there is a waiting list of people who apply for the positions.) Boards meet every two weeks and review only two projects at each meeting, which are limited to three hours in duration. Public comment is taken. The chair cautions people attending that the subject is design, not traffic, parking, zoning, building heights, density, affordable housing, or other issues governed by other codes. The boards only review design, but they do have the latitude to allow “departures” from a short list of prescriptive code standards (not including FAR or height).

Typical board meetings, which are always held in the evenings, draw numbers citizens who watch or speak. Time limits assigned to each project are strictly followed. The total allowed public comment period for each project is 20 minutes. The amount of time for each project is set at 90 minutes, unless the proposal is large enough and complex enough to require two time slots. Regardless, any given evening meeting is a maximum of three hours with only two projects reviewed. This presents a discipline that keeps all participants on point. The chair is responsible for maintaining an expeditious progression and receives training in meeting management. The boards also use a summary sheet of guidelines during their deliberations. Legally, the boards make a recommendation to the Director, which is generally followed in a decision. The Director’s decision can be appealed to the Hearings Examiner. The cost of review, which is on the order of thousands of dollars, is recovered in hourly review fees.

Seattle has a step in its overall review process that is called a Master Use Permit, or MUP, for short. This consolidates all reviews, including environmental, into a single point after which building permits can be applied for. DRB approval is part of that turning point.

The timelines vary widely, but they are rarely less than several months given the current backlog. Some reviews, if they are complex and contentious, can take up to a year.

Staffing. As can be imagined, staffing multiple boards and conducting staff-level reviews of projects in advance of taking them to a board demands a considerable number of dedicated staff. Recently, that number has been around 15. Since staff time is recovered by fees, the number decreases dramatically in recessionary periods. This year more than 65 projects have gone through design review, with another 40 having been submitted.

Tools. The City has adopted a whole collection of design standards and guidelines to equip the boards with review criteria. They do follow them in their discussions of projects and applicants try to demonstrate how they are meeting them in their presentations. In the neighborhood planning process, neighborhoods can either choose to have “city-wide” standards or craft their own and get them adopted. Over the years, most neighborhoods have developed their own, using a template provided by the City.

One of the effective tools that boards use is a meeting called Early Design Guidance (EDG). In the first meeting, a specific design is not presented, but rather information about the site, the context and the development program. On occasion, general alternative concepts are presented, sometimes using simple context models or digital models. The role of the board at this point is to inform the developer’s team which design criteria are most important to address and to give some early direction. Focus on these is maintained throughout subsequent deliberations. When the EDG was introduced, its purpose was initially confusing; development teams thought they needed to have finished designs. Applicants have since learned to schedule this meeting well before any major design work is done.

One of the tools used most extensively by the Design Review Boards is their authority to recommend departures from certain code standards in return for better design – not dissimilar to Portland. This does not involve an increase in intensity or height, as those are not subject to change. But allowing other modifications provides for greater flexibility and more efficient use of a building envelope. Often, there are multiple departures requested. The boards use this to leverage higher quality public amenities and materials.

Qualitative Aspects. Prior to Design Review Boards, the City used to see dozens of appeals from community members every year, which would hold up projects and bog down the permitting process. It was also used by some groups as a deliberate strategy to try to stop projects. The DRB review process has reduced the number of appeals by neighborhoods significantly, as they now feel they can have an effect on the design of projects. It is generally recognized that the process has raised the bar in design quality substantially compared to the period prior to the adoption of the review process, when only quantitative standards were applied.