



# City of Portland Design Commission

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## A Guide to the City of Portland Design Review Process

Prepared by the members of the Portland Design Commission

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This guide has been written by members of the Portland Design Commission to ensure applicants of Portland's Type III Design Review process have successful experiences and are able to obtain timely approvals. Applicants who are attentive to this document and collaborate with Bureau of Development Services (BDS) design review staff throughout the process will have predictable outcomes and the need for redesign, resubmittals, and hearing continuations will be significantly reduced.

This document is updated periodically to stay current.

## Design Review in the City of Portland

### COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

For over 40 years, Portland has practiced a design review process that encourages buildings that are responsive to their context, supportive of an active public realm and pedestrian-friendly streets and are well executed of quality materials. The results have been good. So good that, at the request of Portlanders, the design review overlay zone has recently been expanded to include many centers and corridors that are experiencing rapid growth. Portlanders understand that the design review process is a forum for the expression of opinions—favorable and otherwise—of new development proposals.

Development teams are well served by reaching out to neighbors and the neighborhood their project will become a part of early in the design process and showing consideration for their concerns. Feedback from the community is not binding, but it can be a bellwether of issues that will surface during the design review process. Public comment during a [Design Advice Request](#) and public testimony during a land use review hearing are typical. The Design Commission is attentive to concerns that are relevant to the approval criteria, and community members whose testimony addresses approval criteria have standing to appeal the Commission's decisions.

### EQUITY

Equity, and the even-handed application of approval criteria, is the foundation of the design review process:

- Everyone deserves to live and work in safe, well-designed buildings that contribute to positive sense of community.
- Everyone deserves the opportunity to participate.

## **APPROVAL CRITERIA**

The Design Commission and BDS design review staff work with multiple sets of approval criteria. Based on the location of the project, staff will inform applicants of the approval criteria. These will include Portland Citywide Design Guidelines (PCDGs), or Central City Fundamental Design Guidelines (CCFDGs) with subdistrict guidelines, or plan area guidelines.

While there are different sets of design guidelines, they are organized and discussed by the *Three Tenets of Design: Context, Public Realm, and Quality & Resilience*. (See “Commission’s View of the Guidelines” below.)

## **DESIGN COMMISSION**

The Design Commission provides leadership and expertise on urban design and architecture and advances the purpose of the Design overlay zone. (PZC 33.710.050)

The Commission consists of seven volunteer members, none of whom may hold public elective office, and all of whom are appointed by the Mayor and approved by Portland City Council. The Commission includes:

1. One representative of the Regional Arts and Culture Council;
2. One person representing the public at-large. The public-at-large member must not be employed in one of the areas of expertise listed in 3; and
3. Five members experienced in either urban planning, design, architecture, landscape architecture, natural resource management, sustainable building practices, engineering, financing, construction or management of buildings, or land development. No more than two members may be appointed from any one of these areas of expertise.

## **DESIGN REVIEW STAFF**

BDS design review staff have professional expertise in urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture, real estate development, and related fields. Staff understand the design guidelines and how current Commissioners uphold and emphasize the guidelines. The Commission relies heavily on the issues identified in staff memos and Staff Reports and most often agrees with their recommendations.

## **Commission’s Roll in applying the Guidelines**

Portland is a laboratory for planned growth. The Central City and many centers and corridors, main streets, and historic districts (collectively, plan areas) are being redefined by new development, and this will continue as zoning code revisions responding to the goals of a new comprehensive plan, inclusionary housing, climate change, equity, and other factors significant to this time and place continue to roll out.

Change is inevitable, but the Commission continues to uphold *the Three Tenets of Design* that make Portland the wonderful city it is:

- **CONTEXT**, or the characteristics that make Portland’s neighborhoods distinct
- **PUBLIC REALM**, or the tools used to create active and pedestrian friendly streets
- **QUALITY & RESILIENCE**, or coherent architectural design that can adapt to changing conditions

These inter-related tenets are rooted in the design guidelines that have guided the growth of Portland's central city and plan districts for decades. The Commission uses the tenets as a structural framework for Design Advice Request feedback and Land Use Review deliberations, and they are the organizational root of both the Community Design Standards (objective track review) and the Portland Citywide Design Guidelines (discretionary track review). The Design Commission relies on the Design Team's creativity to meet the approval criteria regardless of budget, schedule, or project mission.

What follows is a "leg up" on a variety of frequently encountered issues viewed through the lens of *the Three Tenets of Design*. This is intended to aid applicants in understanding where staff and the Commission are liable to concentrate attention. Each issue engages multiple guidelines.

## **CONTEXT**

### **Neighborhood Character Matters**

- Guidelines acknowledge that Portland's urban center is comprised of distinct subdistricts and that each plan area has uniquely valuable characteristics. Successful proposals address the past, current, and desired future contexts of the subdistrict or plan area.
- The limited use of oriel windows is appropriate in some areas, but not all. The introduction of oriels into contexts where they have no relevance in an effort to expand floor area is considered to be a privatization of the city's public rights-of-way and an unjust limitation on other's access to light and air.
- Within the Central City, the Commission is especially sensitive to the vulnerability of the Central Eastside Subdistrict and the East Burnside Arcade District within the Central Eastside.
- Proposals in the Con-way Master Plan area of Northwest should be particularly attentive to the specificity of Con-way's guidelines that address pedestrian zones, parks, and designated plazas.
- Many districts have a predominant material expression, such as brick or stucco, that should be reincorporated into new additions in the neighborhood.
- Many districts have notable neighborhood history that should be reflected and honored in new development.

## **PUBLIC REALM**

### **Parking & Parking Garages**

- Garage entrances and on-site loading spaces create dead space adjacent to public sidewalks in a city that strives to be walkable and pedestrian friendly. The Commission consistently seeks configurations that minimize or avoid these negative impacts.
- At-grade or above-grade parking should be entirely within the building structure and wrapped with active uses. Modifications that result in the reduction of active ground floor uses for parking, loading, or similar functions are not supported by the Commission.
- Above-grade parking expressed on a building's exterior is a poor response to all three tenets and is strongly discouraged. If it is proposed, it should be mechanically ventilated and given a façade treatment consistent with the building's overall design concept.

### **Ground Floor Active Use**

- Active storefronts—retail, commercial, work-live spaces, residential lobbies —are the key to a successful public realm. These uses are always prioritized over back-of-house functions, regardless of the size of the site and the nature and operational functionality of the adjacent streets.
- Where ground floor housing is viable, a street-facing exterior entrance should be provided for each unit. Ground floor units should either step *up* and *back* from the pedestrian zone with a landscape buffer, or should be fully accessible work-live spaces with residential functions at the rear of the unit.
- The height of ground floor space should reflect its adjacency to the public realm, hence a taller floor-to-floor height for retail or live-work uses is appropriate.

### **Weather Protection**

- Weather protection is a critical component of a successful public realm, and it serves two important constituencies: people entering and exiting buildings, and pedestrians. Therefore, weather protection should be provided at all building entries and along all frontages.
  - Make canopies an integral part of the building’s architectural expression
  - Use a special canopy as a tool to emphasize the main entry
  - Mount canopies at a height that maximize weather protection while complementing taller ground floor space of the facade
  - Extend canopies over the pedestrian walk zone, not just cafe or spill-out space

### **Art & Water Features**

- If public art is required, meet early with the overseeing regulatory body—the Regional Arts & Culture Council or the Oregon Arts Commission—and share the budget, design criteria, artist selection process, and timeline for installation with the Commission.
- Some sets of guidelines have at least one guideline about art and one guideline about water features. Provide thoughtful responses that are consistent with the overall project vision and are compatible with—but don’t repeat—the existing body of art in the subdistrict or plan area.

### **Skybridges**

- Publicly accessed skybridges remove people from the streets and are not consistent with the development of an active public realm.

## **QUALITY & RESILIENCE**

### **Design for Coherency**

- Successful projects and applicants effectively communicate their project’s design concept. A strong concept provides a framework for clear and consistent decisions about building placement, massing, composition, materials, construction details—*coherent design*.

### **Material Quality**

- Longevity of building materials and attention to detailing are critical measures of a project’s long-term success. The Commission strongly supports the selection of durable building materials like brick, stone, pre-cast concrete, glass-fiber-reinforced concrete, and composite metal panel systems with concealed fasteners. Materials that are untested in this climate or known to not hold up in Portland’s climate are not favorably received by the Commission.

When used:

- Metal panels must be of a thickness to ensure rigidity and avoid “oil-canning” of the exterior surfaces
- Fiber cement is reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and the extent of its use will depend on the type of material
- Natural wood should be protected from direct contact with rain
- Weathered steel should be used only in location where it will not stain adjacent materials and never within the pedestrian “touch-zone”
- Glass should be transparent rather than reflective.

### **Mechanical Equipment**

- Through-wall residential mechanical units are not preferred because of their impact on building facades. If proposed, they should be integrated into window and door systems and fitted with a louver or screen of similar finish to the windows and doors.
- Rooftop equipment should be organized to minimize its visual impact from near and far. Large mechanical units require screening. Integrate the screen into the body of the building.
- Building exhaust at the ground floor is not supported
- Be cautious of light colors for louvers because they tend to show exhaust stains rather early in the building’s lifespan

## **Design Advice Request**

A Design Advice Request (DAR) is a voluntary opportunity to meet with the Design Commission during the conceptual design phase, when an early discussion with the Commission can bring both the design process and the review process into greater focus for the applicant. DARs are strongly recommended for Type III reviews and are also available for Type II reviews that are large and/or sensitive.

The DAR is not a formal review process or an exhaustive deliberation. Consult with staff about which aspects of the proposal would most benefit from feedback from the Commission. Appropriate topics may include:

- **CONTEXT**
  - Concept
  - Existing neighborhood patterns, as identified in the 2035 Comprehensive Plan
  - Site organization
  - Building massing options
  - Site sections
- **PUBLIC REALM**
  - Active ground floor uses and ground floor transparency
  - Parking and loading strategies
  - Circulation routes

- Landscape concept
- On-site open areas
- Utilities
- QUALITY & RESILIENCE
  - Overall coherency of the architectural expression and consistency between the architecture, its form, and the building materials
  - Preliminary material options
  - Approach to art
  - Approach to sustainable site and building practices

Staff will provide guidance on likely Modifications, Adjustments, Oriel Windows, and FAR transfers that should be surfaced with the Commission.

### **DAR PRESENTATIONS**

DARs are limited to 90 minutes, so presentations should be brief. Structure presentations according to the Three Tenets: Context, Public Realm, and Quality & Resilience, beginning with the concept that has guided decisions made to date and site design and/or massing options that have been explored. (Sharing options is persuasive and can yield productive conversation with the Commission.) Conclude with a short list of discussion topics.

Applicants who are clearly and thoroughly responsive to feedback received at the DAR can greatly increase the likelihood of a “one & done” land use review hearing process subsequent to the DAR.

## **Type III Land Use Review Hearing**

### **SUBMITTAL MATERIALS**

BDS design review staff will provide guidance on submittal materials. Drawings that are concise, clear, and communicative are easy for the Commission to review and will deliver the best discussion and feedback.

*Do not include:*

- Corporate marketing materials or images
- Stock photos
- Information that is not specific to the approval criteria

*Do include:*

- Concept diagram(s) to explain the design
- Limited images of architectural precedents
- Limited images of the surrounding context
- Street names, north arrows, graphic scales, dimensions, and other drawing conventions
- Color-coded diagrams of the building program
- Site plan with all buildings, parking, circulation routes, and open areas

- Site sections through the entire site in two directions showing all horizontal and vertical relationships
- Construction details of sufficient size and legibility to quickly convey the content
- Line drawings of all exterior elevations (no color, shadows, or entourage) that identify all building materials by name—differentiate clear glass and spandrel glass—and the percentage (length, area) of each material on each elevation
- 3-D imagery of the proposal in its context (depending on the scale of the proposal, it may make sense to show future height and FAR rather than existing conditions)

### **TYPE III PRESENTATIONS**

Land Use Review (LUR) hearings are limited to 120 minutes and applicant presentations are strictly limited to 20 minutes. Owners and developers are usually well served by relinquishing control of the presentation to the design team members most familiar with the submittal materials and approval criteria. Please review any questions beforehand with BDS Staff.

The Commission reviews submittal materials and the Staff Report in advance and arrives to the hearing familiar with the proposal, its context, and the approval criteria.

*Do not present:*

- A lengthy project introduction, marketing images, or any other information not related to the approval criteria
- New material that staff and the Commission have not had an opportunity to review
- Information that is not specific to the approval criteria

*Do present:*

- The minimum amount of information necessary (have back-up drawings and data on hand to address probable Commissioner questions)
- Discussion topics germane to the approval criteria and aligned with the Staff Report
- Materials identical to submittals circulated to the Commission prior to the hearing
- Physical material samples that represent the correct texture, color, gauge, reflectance, etc.

### **CONTINUATIONS**

If approved to be continued, revised materials should focus on unresolved issues. The revised materials and presentation should be brief and describe how each unresolved issue has been addressed. Show the prior design alongside the revised design on the same page of the submittal and in the same slide of the presentation. Please work with BDS Staff on numeration of new materials.

### **CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL**

Work closely with staff to minimize Conditions of Approval. The Commission typically views lengthy or complex Conditions of Approval as a failure to comply with approval criteria.

### **MODIFICATIONS TO REQUIRED DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS**

PZC Section 33.825.040 requires proposed Modifications “better meet design guidelines”, are “consistent with the purpose of the standard for which a modification is requested”, and “any impacts resulting from the modifications are mitigated to the extent practical.”

Modifications are consistently requested and granted for dimensions of automobile spaces and the number and type of loading spaces, but otherwise the bar is high. The design or mitigation proposed must be an exceptional response to design guidelines to merit approval of a Modification.

We look forward to seeing you in the hearings room.

Signed, the Portland Design Commission,

Sam Rodriguez, Chair



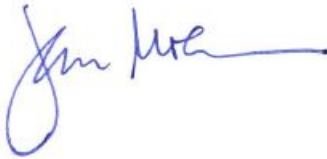
Chandra Robinson, Vice Chair



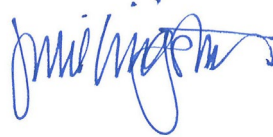
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