

urban design guidelines for Austin

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urban design guidelines for Austin

Austin City Council, 2008-09

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The material contained in the Urban Design Guidelines was developed by the members of the City of Austin Design Commission and represents their best effort to illustrate clearly the subject of this report. The City of Austin, the Austin City Council and city employees are not responsible for any errors or inconsistencies contained in this report.

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timeline / acknowledgements

On November 6, 1997, the Austin City Council by Resolution 971106-23 requested the Design Commission to develop design guidelines for downtown. For complete resolution, please see Page 79.

On May 18, 2000, the Austin City Council adopted, by Resolution 000518-92, the Downtown Austin Design Guidelines “as recommendations for all downtown development and redevelopment projects by both the public and private sector.”

On June 12, 2003, the Austin City Council adopted, by Ordinance 030612-93, amendments to Chapters 15-12 and 25-12 of the City Code relating to the use and development of property zoned Central Business District and Downtown Mixed Use.

February 2008 Austin Design Commission issues a revised version of the Downtown Design Guidelines, renamed, "Urban Design Guidelines for Austin."

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The Importance of the City

“... The city is in itself the powerful symbol of a complex society. If visually well set forth, it can also have strong expressive meaning. ...The common hopes and pleasures, the sense of community may be made flesh. Above all, if the environment is visibly organized and sharply identified, then the citizen can inform it with his own meanings and connections. Then it will become a true place, remarkable and unmistakable.”

Kevin Lynch: The Image of the City

The work presented in this document is guided by the view that the city is the form of settlement which most clearly reveals our sense of collective identity, our belonging to a public with certain shared beliefs and values. It is guided as well by the belief that a city also reveals our collective diversity, our ability to benefit from our proximity while subscribing to differing opinions and values. In America, democracy—governance by the populace with equal access to opportunities—is assumed the ultimate cornerstone for citizenship and therefore also the ultimate guide for the design of cities. Thus the city becomes the locus civitas, the place of citizens.

Austinites are defined both by what we have in common and what we do not share with one another. We are eager to contest other beliefs, and it is this quality that gives our democracy its dynamic, healthy character. The creative process used to bring our opinions to accord is a source of originality and innovation which permeates our civic character. We are strengthened by this sense of participation.

As the site of the State Capitol, Austin is also the heart of Texas. Our city is inhabited by many municipal, county, state, regional, and federal governmental institutions, further charging Austin with the role of assuring a great public realm. Except for the Capitol Building, however, few of these institutions significantly contribute to that public realm. They tend to be disconnected from one another and lack public plazas, courtyards, or even a pleasant streetscape. What they seem to affirm is an indifference and even exclusion toward its citizens. In contrast to the message of the built environment, Austin is often characterized as an open, friendly, tolerant, freedom-loving, creative place—one whose citizenry is at once full of character and relaxed. Perhaps the spacious park land setting of our downtown on Lady Bird Lake and its somewhat loosely-structured urban form attest to these qualities.

Austinites are proud of their community. We expect, and have the right to expect, that current planning and redevelopment will provide amenities and environments which reinforce the entire range of desirable activities downtown. Each individual project is a part of a whole, and as such, should contribute its part to the quality of downtown and the community as a whole.

Since the Guidelines were created in 1999, much has happened to change the character of downtown and the city as a whole. The design of buildings and the pedestrian environments around them have found a larger place in public awareness, increasing expectations and hope that it will continue to respond to public concerns.

During part of the time since 1999, the Downtown Design Guidelines were used as a component of the Smart Growth Matrix, where projects which met the guidelines were awarded development incentives. Through the Design Commission's periodic project reviews, a greater understanding of the relationship between guidelines and development was afforded.

The revisions issued here are intended to respond to the changes in Austin and the lessons learned since the first set was issued.

About This Version of the Guidelines

The current 2008 revision of the original Downtown Design Guidelines includes a global refocus of the applicability, enlarging it to include any areas in the city which, through general agreement, seek to create and shape dense development. References to downtown and boundaries and districts have generally been removed, and the name has been changed to **Urban Design Guidelines of Austin**.

A Contextual History

In 1838, President Mirabeau Lamar instructed Edwin Waller to create a new city in central Texas and Austin was born. By 1839 Mr. Waller had completed a plan illustrating a regular grid of streets and including commercial areas, residential areas, four symmetrically placed city squares, the State Capitol, a block dedicated for a university, and other amenities. While we can no longer see the once rich prairie nor appreciate the springs that once emanated from areas around Congress Avenue, the setting that receives central Austin and the grid that Waller laid out is still there, still visible. The original layout between East Avenue (now IH- 35) and West Avenue, and between the Colorado River and the Capitol Building remains the central core of our downtown and the geographical and psychological center of Austin.

The heritage of our city is a rich tapestry of cultures, including ancient native cultures, modern native cultures such as the Lipan and Mescalero Apaches, Spanish settlers prior to 1838, Mexican, African-American, Asian, and Anglo-American, among others.

Through the middle of this century, the construction undertaken in the downtown region in Austin clearly indicated that public officials and entrepreneurs, as well as the architects and engineers they commissioned, understood their responsibility to serve the community by building buildings that would serve structurally, functionally, and aesthetically, for the long term, certainly beyond their own lifetimes. In many cases these public structures exhibit the best design, materials, construction techniques, and craftsmanship available in the region at that time. The State Capital complex, including the capitol building, the Old Land Office, Lamar Bridge, and Tom Miller Dam are examples of state architecture that still stand to tell their stories well. Private sector buildings in this category include the Scarbrough Building, the Littlefield Building and the Paramount Theatre.

Austin's rich history as an active and vital human environment framed by beautifully designed and well crafted buildings is one of the factors that moved the City Council to commission the framing of the design guidelines.



Original map of the “plan for Austin” commonly referred to as the Waller Grid.

The 1997 Downtown Initiative

In an attempt to capture the benefits of a strong economy while preserving what is best about Austin, the City Council, led by Mayor Kirk Watson, created the 1997 Downtown Initiative. This endeavor began by inviting the R/UDAT team to return to Austin and review progress on their earlier work. (See R/UDAT Revisited – 1997 “A Call To Finish.”) Responding to recommendations made by the R/UDAT team, and assessing the needs and opportunities of Downtown Austin, the City Council put together a series of resolutions to guide the continued revitalization of downtown. These resolutions included endorsement of The Heritage Austin process of public input and support for future action by Heritage Austin. They also endorsed public-private development for residential uses, financing plans for improvements to Waller Creek, and the creation of the Downtown Development Advisory Group. As a major component to the Downtown Initiative, the City Council passed resolution 971106-23 (see Appendix 1) which requested that the Austin Design Commission prepare draft design guidelines for the city’s downtown region. In addition the resolution stated, “that these guidelines should exemplify ideals such as pedestrian and bicycle mobility and urban core vitality expressed through past Council actions, previous planning studies and recommendations and community consensus building exercises such as the Citizen’s Planning Committee, the Heritage Society, and R/UDAT.”



The corner of South 1st and West Annie Street exemplifies Austin's unique character.

The Guidelines Development Process

The aim of this document is to promote positive and enriching development by assuring that it aspires to a greater architectural and urban design standard. This document, building originally on ideas put forward in *Heritage Austin: A Community Workbook* (1997) by the Heritage Society of Austin, attempts to elucidate this greater vision as well as generate the regulatory mechanism to achieve it.

Austin is rich in plans and directives for building a city. Some are referred to occasionally, but most have been ignored. The Design Commission has endeavored to incorporate the positive aspects of this past work, and present these Guidelines with the hope that they will be implemented and enhance our community through design.

Values, Vision and Guidelines

Because the city is a community of people and not of buildings, and because people can come to community through shared values, the Commission sought first to articulate a set of commonly held values. These values then created the basis for a vision of downtown that includes the goals and aspirations which, if met, could shape our downtown into a great public place. From the goals the Commission then generated a set of clear and objective guidelines which describe specific actions to be taken by both public and private entities seeking to build in any dense area in Austin.

The current effort assumes that the articulated community values should also shape the urban environment throughout the city as it becomes more urban.



The Austin City Limits Music Festival framed by the Downtown skyline.

Supporting Documents



Congress Avenue in the 1930's. The State Capitol Building is in the background and two of Austin's most treasured buildings: the Scarborough and Littlefield Buildings on the left and right of the photo respectively.

In the process of developing this document, the Design Commission consulted an extensive body of existing literature. Several of the documents within that library proved to be of special significance and were relied on heavily by the Commissioners in developing the guidelines. They are listed below.

Documents from Austin:

- A Community Based Vision, Heritage Austin – 1998
- R/UDAT Austin – 1991
- R/UDAT Austin Implementation, A Call... to Action – 1992
- R/UDAT Revisited, A Call to Finish – 1997
- Architectural Design Guidelines, 6th Street National Register District, City of Austin Historic Landmark Commission – 1994
- Austin Convention Center District Design Guidelines, City of Austin —1990
- Town Lake Park Comprehensive Plan, City of Austin – 1987

Documents from other cities:

- Downtown Design Guidelines, Portland, Oregon, Bureau of Planning – 1983
- Design Review, Standards, Guidelines and Process, City and County of Denver, B5 Downtown Zoning – 1995
- Urban Design Guidelines, City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania – 1998
- Design Guidelines for Plano's Historic Areas, City of Plano, Planning and Transportation – 1993

Documents supporting civic art:

- The Houston Framework: Community Vision and Initiatives for Civic Art and Design in the Houston/Harris County Region. Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County – 1997
- Public ArtWorks: The Arizona Models, The Phoenix Arts Commission 1992
- Artery Arts Program: Concept Report, Massachusetts Highway Dept. 1993
- Artwork/Network: A Planning Study for Seattle, City of Seattle/Seattle Arts Commission – 1984

Shared Values for Urban Areas

As stated previously, the city is a community of people and not only of buildings. The Commission believes that, for Austin, important shared values include:

Humane Character

- Density
- Sustainability
- Diversity
- Economic Vitality
- Civic Art
- A Sense of Time
- Unique Character
- Authenticity
- Safety
- A Connection to the Outdoors

Although not necessarily exhaustive in scope, these shared values constitute the foundation for the guidelines that follow.

1 - Humane Character

Humane character is of value because it is the basis for comfort in a built environment, and people are more inclined to live, shop, eat or recreate in an environment that is physically and psychologically comfortable. The design of our city should demonstrate that it was built for people; it should foster a sense in inhabitants that this place was made for comfortable human living. Designers, developers and transportation engineers can move the physical nature of the city closer to an ideal human habitat, while recognizing that urban places are special and more concentrated. In the same way, the use of materials, the scale of construction, human amenities, the mitigation of sunlight, the level of complexity, and the amount of plants and trees may all be manipulated to suggest that urban areas have been designed for human use. This understanding will contribute to a sense of well-being as we feel well matched to our surroundings – as we feel that they have been designed for us. It will also promote the use of our sidewalks and streets by pedestrians, increasing the activity level and economic viability of the city core.

2 - Density

Density refers to the concentration of people, buildings and activities. With this concentration comes a great efficiency and vitality. We value density because density facilitates commercial and social interaction by simply placing many people together in a relatively compact space. The serendipity arising from this inevitable interaction is evident in all great cities of the world.

Density and concentration are not to be confused with overcrowding. According to Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, density is critical “to generate exuberant diversity in a city’s streets and districts.” In the same book Jacobs quotes Lewis Mumford on the function of the city (inset). In summary, density promotes vitality and diversity. In the suburbs where most often there is neither density nor diversity, it is a homogenous majority that defines the character of the community. Dense urban places are, by their very nature, highly diverse in character and therefore more representative and democratic in character, more experientially diverse and exciting.

3 - Sustainability

Sustainability is a value because a city that is self sustaining—that which achieves an ongoing and maintainable balance between the total resources it consumes and the total resources it creates—is better able to survive over a long time period. The city is a setting for our lives and the life of our families, and this constancy contributes to a sense of well being, a sense that we are part of a more civic whole. Sustainability considers that future generations in Austin should have flexibility and choice available to them as it was to our generation.



West 5th Street heading toward Congress Avenue.

Shared Values for Urban Areas, contd.



Providing opportunities for multi-modal transportation is critical in creating a vibrant urban environment.

Sustainability addresses more than the simple effort to minimize energy consumption, emphasize “green” construction practices, and institutionalize recycling. It also encompasses the reuse of existing buildings, the creation of buildings with long life spans, and the creation of buildings with built-in flexibility to allow for differing future uses. Sustainability assumes that our community is a human community and that the built environment is an extension of the infrastructure which allows a dense population to live in a relatively small area in relative comfort. Sustainability also encompasses economic sustainability, leading to the conclusion that our economic health requires affordable commercial spaces and that investment in these spaces can provide returns necessary to support it.

4 - Diversity

The support of diversity (the distinction of characteristics, qualities, or elements) is a societal strength and one of the central principles of democracy. A diverse place for living ignites the imagination, capturing cultural and business pursuits. Diversity fosters inclusive ownership of private, public, and civic amenities. Diversity in our built environment applies to function, culture, style, and use. Development which is multiuse or diverse in other ways will result in a city that evolves into a rich and vibrant place to live, work, and play, and will support continued economic growth.

5 - Economic Vitality

Economic vitality describes a condition where all sectors of the economic machinery are working well and are working together. It represents a sustainable return on investment for all measures of urban life. Without the energy and vigor of the economy, downtown revitalization is not possible. The powerful draw that Austin has as a unique and highly desirable city can be enhanced by ensuring that future development does not result in a city in decline. Successful private projects will create higher property values in general and thus increase the tax base. Private projects, however, must be profitable if they are to expand the tax base and enrich the civic presence.

6 - Civic Art

Art for public defines the public realm and distinguishes the fine points in a city. Art creates a civic good which can inform the inhabitants and the world of their commitment to the expression of a collective identity. Expressing this identity celebrates what is unique about the community, transforming the everyday, honoring and valuing the past, as well as expressing the community aspirations for the future.

Civic art stimulates the cultural life of the region. Civic art, whether initiated by the city or by private development, promotes economic development, cultural tourism, downtown and neighborhood revitalization, international prestige and recognition, and an improved quality of life for a community.

Civic art gives places back to the people; it leads visitors as well as inhabitants into the discovery of a city. Over time Austin has evolved through the many purposes, ideas, ideals, and the traditions of those who have shaped and lived here; a work of art or architecture over time becomes an important link to a city's past. From it future generations learn of the perceptions and attitudes of their predecessors. When the work is new, it can help people understand today's ideals and traditions and the changes going on around them.

Over time, our artists—whether they be fine artists, artisans, or folk artists— have shaped and created Austin in response to the rich natural resources of the region and the traditions and cultures they brought with them. They are a natural resource which should be supported.

7 - A Sense of Time

A sense of time and its history is important to the protection of valuable resources and the continuity of our community. Moments of accelerated growth can cause the

Shared Values for Urban Areas, contd.

destruction of resources, the value of which is often realized too late, after the resources are gone. Much of the development which will occur in the future has the opportunity to protect and reveal the history and stories of the place, while responding to the needs of the present. Our city is more valuable to us when we sense this continuity throughout the past, the present and plans for the future.

Austinites value the fact that we are simultaneously fiercely protective of our diverse natural and cultural environments, and forward-thinking—open to new technologies and encouraging change for the better. By valuing a sense of time, we recognize the importance that each moment in time be represented. As we create the future, we ensure that what we do now will someday become a part of a history that we will want to protect. Development will, in this way, take on the role of the story teller. Everything we build will become a story within the larger story of Austin. The decisions we make as we build, that is, how we tell the stories, will determine the way in which our history is manifested in downtown Austin. The stories told must be thorough, truthful, articulate, engaging, enduring and challenging.

8 - Unique Character

Through the singularity of its landscape and the diversity of its people, Austin has built a character which is unique, something increasingly rare and precious in a time when cities worldwide are becoming homogenous collections of buildings, highways and signs advertising similar lifestyles. Unique character succumbs to attack when cultural franchising is accepted as the most successful way for large enterprises to sell goods and promote services, buildings, businesses, food, clothing and entertainment. Our physical environment, under such conditions, becomes more homogenous and predictable. It can become a dehumanizing place, where individuals face a uniform environment beyond their control.

Austin is a collection of what we find valuable in our region—the river, the hill country, the State Capitol, parks, special places, building types, styles, architectural details, and town form, as well as the activities of commerce and special events. Within this collection of activities is an individual spirit which is valuable because it gives us a stronger sense of identity in a world which is quickly losing individuality. One reason for Austin's current growth is the attraction others feel to the differences it provides. Many people are moving here from cities which offer no sense of membership because they lack an individual identity. This sense of place is therefore a strong economic factor as well as a positive force in the creation of a healthy community.

9 - Authenticity

Because cities create, over time, a physical story of the life of that place and the people who live there, it is important that those who shape Austin do so with a sense of authenticity. This concept has value because a city shaped by it will be better able to create a sense of membership and community. By assuring that the physical story corresponds well to the authentic history, people will be more inclined to trust it, participate in it, and associate themselves with it. The closer a city aligns itself with what is genuine about itself, and the real lives of the people who live there, the stronger the connection people can make between themselves, their identity, the history of the place and the physical environment. In other words, the when, why and how a city formed. People are less inclined to associate with or feel connected to a place or thing which is contrived or unnatural.

As a value, authenticity suggests that Austinites would prefer to have a city whose image and physical context clearly references the time in which it was built and the activities and needs of the people who live and work there, rather than one created through false historical constructions or commercial imagineering designed to deceive the user through theatrical manifestations.

When authenticity has played a role in the creation of a city, buildings and spaces accumulate meaning and significance naturally over time. Here, the story of the place

"Now the great function of the city is to permit, indeed to encourage and incite, the greatest potential number of meetings, encounters, challenges, between all persons, classes and groups, providing as it were, a stage upon which the drama of social life may be enacted, with the actors taking their turn as spectators and the spectators as actors."

Lewis Mumford

Shared Values for Urban Areas, contd.

can be told by the physical environment and people, by association, can relive the story of their own lives by moving through the city. In the same way that one reaffirms one's identity by visiting a childhood home, one is reminded of one's past by the physical part of one's hometown. The reminding can create a strong attachment to a city and to a community through the retelling of small stories on a daily basis.

Authenticity in this context refers to a real city where people live and work and explore personal and collective opportunities and conflicts. It refers to a place where one's assumptions about their physical surroundings can be trusted. Real stories will collect around places that people really inhabit.

10 - Safety

The creation of safe urban places, free from danger, is a difficult but important objective. Urban areas can be filled with strangers, inherently noisy and condensed. To attract people, it must also feel safe. We value safety because it frees people to fully engage themselves in chosen activities. A safe downtown provides a venue for these many activities. Making people feel safe among strangers and in the midst of such abundant activity can be facilitated by the design of streets, sidewalks and buildings, and by lighting and lines of sight. Public streets and other open places can help direct attention and promote the intuitive safety mechanism of observation. Design may facilitate safety by coding space, clearly identifying where it is safe to go.

11 - Connection with Outdoors

A connection with the outdoors is of value because it brings natural forces and elements such as sunshine, breezes, clouds, rain, shadow patterns, water and vegetation into urban places. Immersion in the natural environment adds complexity and transition to our experience of a day in contrast to the experience of a more static built environment. Outdoor environments offer options for reviving the senses and the lives of people who spend long periods indoors.

Austin is already distinguished by its value for outdoor connections, as seen in its strong legacy of parks and greenbelts, waterfronts and tree canopy, where people can enjoy both active and quiet pursuits. Residents have traditionally protected public green spaces and the right to be outdoors, and newcomers are attracted to Austin because of the opportunity it provides to connect with the natural environment. As the city becomes denser, access to the outdoors becomes even more important, requiring protection and enhancement of existing green spaces as well as the creation of new plazas and other urban forms of open space.



Philosophers' Rock, a statue by Santa Fe artist Glenna Goodace, invites the audience to participate. One often find children sitting in their laps.

A Vision for Our Urban Places

When the fundamental basis for the guidelines was established, through the articulation of shared values, a vision for downtown was formulated, establishing the goals and aspirations which, if applied throughout the city, could ensure that new urban places were vibrant and exciting.

The eleven shared values described in the previous section are broad concepts. A more specific list of goals follows. These goals were derived from the shared values, but hold a complex and indirect relationship with them, where the lines between goals and values frequently overlap. Each goal is stated and its main point briefly explained. *Italicized in the margins are the specific shared values which the goal helps promote.*

1. Promote an intuitive understanding of the layout of any urban place.

The intensive use associated with thriving urban centers may be enhanced if the physical layout can be easily understood. Understanding requires that we form a mental map of the area. The logic of the place needs to be understood sufficiently to orient pedestrians.

2. Reinforce the sense of time and historical continuity.

This goal speaks to the preservation of historical buildings and other facilities and of historical planning, but equally important, speaks to the relationship among buildings built over time—including those built in the present time.

3. Foster physical continuity.

Physical continuity speaks to the freedom of movement in pedestrian, transit and automobile environments, but is most important in the pedestrian circumstance. Encouraging movement within an urban place allows comfort and promotes our staying there for a variety of activities.

4. Develop the public nature of all urban places.

The public nature of urban areas is most apparent in public open space—plazas, sidewalks, streets and parks. The design of the lower levels of buildings is also vital in promoting inclusion in the place.

5. Encourage a diversity of uses, activities and sizes of development.

Achieving this goal will require balancing the existing uses with additional uses that an urban area lacks, such as residential and destination retail. It will also require that we do so while allowing for differing economic status of the residents. Diversity should apply to retail, residential, commercial, office, entertainment, and all other sectors.

6. Encourage public and private investment in the future of Austin.

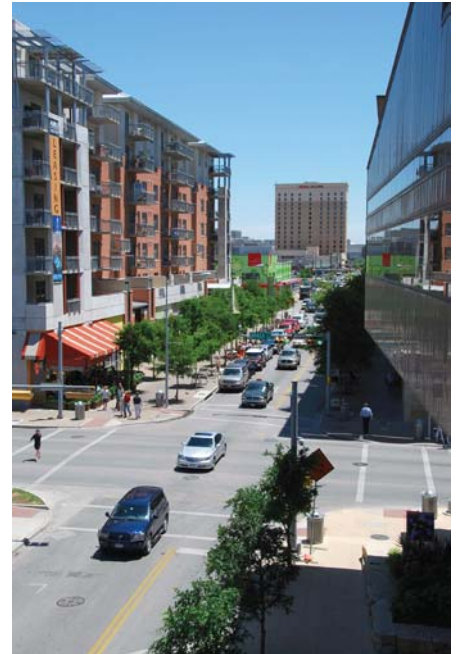
Perhaps no other goal provides more opportunity to demonstrate the value we place on civic behavior than this one. Where those who have gone before us have been willing to invest in the future—to regard the value of their investment over a long period—we generally have bridges, buildings and other structures which have endured and which we now regard as important to our history.

7. Reinforce the unique character of Austin.

To better promote a sense of connection to and membership with Austin, our urban places should be a unique signal for a unique place. Developing a unique character should start with what is already unique about Austin.

8. Create a safe urban environment.

All of the users of our urban places men, women, children, young and old, those with physical challenges, natives and visitors, customers and service personnel— should be considered when designing a dense environment. A safe urban environment will encourage economic activity and foster commerce.



The emerging 2nd Street Retail/ Mixed Use District, as photographed from City Hall.



An example of the transportation hierarchy being accommodated in an urban setting

9. Create a comfortable urban environment.

Comfort includes shelter from the harsh Texas sun and other weather, a reorientation of urban places away from a fast moving, automobile oriented place and to a slower moving, pedestrian-oriented population, and an understanding of intuitive way finding.

10. Create a hierarchy of transportation which begins with pedestrians.

The hierarchy in order of priority is:

- 1 Pedestrians
- 2 Public transit systems
- 3 Bicycles
- 4 Vehicles

11. Actively promote civic art.

Civic art promotes economic development, cultural tourism, downtown and neighborhood revitalization, international prestige and recognition, and an improved quality of life for a community. Art in a city describes the way in which the city honors spirit and soul. Public art can create a civic message that expresses community identity, myth and culture.

12. Encourage a vibrant cultural atmosphere

Arts, entertainment, and other cultural activities add richness and viability to our everyday lives. Such activity is an advantage to Austin because it promotes economic development, cultural tourism, downtown and neighborhood revitalization, international prestige and recognition, social service opportunities, and an improved quality of life for the community.

13. Encourage intense street level activity.

The street is a place for extra activities — sidewalk seating, vendors, waiting for a bus. Activities that don't require enclosed spaces or are enhanced by being outside should be added to the activities that already happen outside to create intense street level activity.

14. Maintain a sense of connection to the natural environment.

Austin's natural environment is a primary attribute. Every economically feasible effort to preserve, maintain and enhance Austin's natural environment should be pursued.

15. Encourage an architecture whose design responds to functional needs and reinforces urban activities.

Buildings designed to sculptural effect are not discouraged, but formalist aspirations should not be attained at the expense of functional requirements and a positive position within the requirements of other buildings and users. Architecture should respond to the whole array of human needs.

16. Encourage quality building.

Buildings in urban centers should have a permanence that some other areas of the city do not require. Quality adds to the overall value of any urban place.

17. Promote urban residential uses.

A residential component provides for 24 hour activity, a consumer base for retail activity, eyes and ears on the street, and reduces the need for transportation.

18. Create an economically vibrant urban area.

None of the values can be promoted without the economic engine to drive urban redevelopment.

19. Strive for environmental balance.

All development should take into consideration the need to conserve energy and resources. It should also strive for a small carbon footprint.

20. Create an interconnected system of attractive open spaces.

An interconnected system of attractive open spaces supports the pedestrian activity which creates vitality and provides a natural experience which can make dense urban development more comfortable and successful.

urban design guidelines

- 17 Area-Wide Urban Guidelines
- 31 Guidelines for the Public Streetscape
- 49 Guidelines for Plazas and Open Space
- 69 Guidelines for Buildings

Organization of the Guidelines

These guidelines are divided into four categories: area-wide urban guidelines, public streetscape guidelines, plaza and open space guidelines, and building guidelines.

The four sections of the guidelines are explained in further detail below:



area-wide urban guidelines

This describes issues which apply generally throughout any area where the urban design guidelines are applied.



guidelines for the public streetscape

The major focus is on the streetscape environment which affects the pedestrian. This includes all the elements that can make a pedestrian comfortable such as the sidewalk, street trees, street furniture, and the facade of the building.



guidelines for plazas and open space

These guidelines propose the adoption of a uniform philosophy through shared vision for open spaces and plazas within urban centers. This vision would result in the focus of pedestrian activity pre-eminently over vehicular modal transport in urban settings.

These guidelines adopt the principle that open spaces and plazas are public spaces, and that these natural public amenities encourage human occupancy.



guidelines for buildings

These guidelines include recommendations for the physical makeup and shape of construction inside the property lines.

area-wide urban guidelines

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Create Dense Development

Values Supported

Economic Vitality
Diversity
Unique Character
Authenticity
Sustainability
Safety
Civic Art

Issue

Austin's central core presently benefits from its central business district, a major university and the State Capitol, combining to form a rich nucleus bounded by historic inner city neighborhoods, and interwoven with a natural fabric of parks and waterways. As the city grows it is increasingly important to support the core with additional nodes of density and connect them by rail and roadways.

Density combined with inviting streetscapes and open spaces can increase walkability, reducing our reliance on cars and allowing us to live, work, and shop without getting on a freeway.

The encouragement of dense development, downtown and in nodes, can redirect the focus of current growth away from the periphery, concentrating use in an area and increasing the efficiency of infrastructure and services.

Recommendations

- Density should be expressed in terms of a floor to area ratio for commercial developments and units per acre for residential developments. Standards should be consistent with LEED Neighborhood Design Standards.
- It is recommended that all current limits on FAR be maintained, and that developments which adopt and abide by the Urban Design Guidelines along with Density Bonus and other specified requirements should be eligible for additional density on a case-by-case basis.



This mixed use district has wide sidewalks, shade trees, awnings, and retail that create a welcoming urban streetscape that can accommodate Density.

Create Mixed Use Development

Issue

Employees who work in city centers frequently live outside them because there are few opportunities and services available to residents to support residential living. Large numbers of commuters leave the core each evening, taking with them the critical population necessary to support a well rounded urban environment.

A diversity of uses in a well planned development can better support residential development and decrease the need for commuting, thus creating a dense core where people are able to live, shop, recreate and work in a walkable area.

These principles are applicable in Downtown and anywhere density is desired, however just as a mix of uses is desirable, a mixed income environment is also critical in creating a sustainable community. Creating mixed income developments currently requires a mixture of subsidy and incentives, and many of the principles addressed in this document can be used as part of a city sponsored density bonus program.

Values Supported

Diversity
Safety
Economic Vitality
Authenticity
Sustainability

Recommendations

- At least two different uses per half block are required. Low occupancy uses such as warehouses, storage, and parking will not be counted in the evaluation of mixed use functions.
- Secondary uses should occur at street level and be adequate in size to create a sense of variety at street level. As the size of the project increases, the number of street-level secondary uses should increase proportionally.



Residential uses above retail storefronts.

Limit Development Which Closes Downtown Streets Create Developments with Connectivity and Human Scale Circulation

Values Supported

Sense of Time
Unique Character
Authenticity
Humane Character
Safety
Economic Vitality

Issue

The original “Plan of the City of Austin” was conceived in 1839 by Edwin Waller and has come to be known as the Waller Grid. The plan has small regular blocks and is simple and easy to understand. As seen in the drawing of the grid created in 1839, the original city was bounded by Water Avenue (Cesar Chavez), North Avenue (Fifteenth Street), West Avenue and East Avenue (IH-35). The small blocks were divided into even smaller lots, which gave rise to the very human scale of the original buildings, still existent throughout downtown, but especially along Congress Avenue and Sixth Street. It is important to preserve and honor the heritage of this original plan and discourage the creation of super blocks which close streets in the Waller Grid.

This Principle also extends beyond the Waller Grid and in to any dense development. New Developments should be organized into walkable block systems that are easily navigated and contribute to an open and connected circulation network. Human scale pedestrian circulation should extend to neighborhood open space.

Recommendations

- Multi-block developments which close existing streets should not be permitted within the original Waller grid.
- New Developments should be designed with networks of connected, circulation routes, focusing on multi modal transportation, pedestrian walkability, and open space.

- * See map for outline of the original Waller Grid.
- * See Guideline Area-Wide 6, Protect Public Views.



The corner of West 6th Street and Lamar Blvd.

Buffer Neighborhood Edges

Issue

Because the areas described in this document include properties along corridors and extends to the opposite sides of streets which form boundaries, the issue of the potential conflict between greater density and less density - or more urban and less urban - must be addressed. Our existing small scale neighborhoods contribute to the overall vitality of the city. They are an important part of the mix that creates an active community life in the central city. This residential character needs to be considered in the design and planning of adjacent dense development.

Conflicts may occur through the juxtaposition of Urban Development and existing private homes. Buffering of the neighborhood edges, through compatibility standards, respects their intrinsic value and serves to integrate them in to the urban fabric. The height, setback, scale, massing and detailing of adjacent commercial buildings should respond to existing homes. Vehicular access to new development and parking requirements should minimize impact on neighborhood traffic flow and avoid disturbing the neighborhood character.

Open spaces can be used as a buffer and to link residential neighborhoods to commercial development through expanded streetscapes, linear greenways, or neighborhood parks and plazas at their interface.

Recommendations

- Projects should be planned to minimize increased use of adjacent neighborhood streets.
- Projects with frontage on a neighborhood street should limit public access from that street and limit business associated parking on that street so as to avoid significantly altering the residential character and scale of the existing street.
- Communication with neighborhoods is vital to creating successful urban infill projects.

Values Supported

Humane Character
Safety
Sustainability
Diversity
Economic Vitality



Traditional Bungalows are treasures in Central Austin Neighborhoods. New Development in existing neighborhoods must be compatible with the scale and character of the existing context.

Incorporate Civic Art in Both Public and Private Development

Values Supported

Sense of Time
Unique Character
Safety
Sustainability
Authenticity
Diversity
Humane Character
Economic Vitality

Issue

Civic art can be traditional artwork created for public spaces as well as artisan-crafted architectural details. These can define the public spaces they help form and the small detail in a city's fabric, providing a rich language that expresses the values a society upholds or rejects.

Art which includes references to Austin's geography, landmarks, history, diverse ethnic cultures, industry, local craft, and other cultural attributes can increase our sense of belonging by associating us with a place imprinted with a specific image or feel rather than one which looks and feels like any other modern American city. While buildings are built of standardized products, and look more and more alike throughout the world, civic art can provide visitors as well as inhabitants with multiple and layered expressions of a history and culture that is unique to that place.

As the world we build increasingly isolates and protects us from our climate and from the infrastructure which controls it for us, our understanding of natural processes and our relationship to them are increasingly obscured. Art which articulates and draws attention to these natural processes can help reconnect us with nature. By focusing our attention on the way we impact nature, it can teach us sustainability.

Civic art can reveal and celebrate:

- the historical underpinnings of Austin
- Austin's diverse cultural traditions
- the connections to the city's natural systems such as highlighting greenway trails
- the pedestrian world
- the gathering places of the city
- the utility infrastructure of the city
- the transportation network by enhancing bus shelters, street furniture or street light standards
- through memorial and commemoration
- interaction in public open space through dynamic civic art.

Recommendations

- Encourage civic art that highlights nature's processes.
- Encourage developers of new projects to incorporate artists into the design team from the inception of planning in order to integrate works of art into their projects.
- Civic art should :
 - Be incorporated into public plazas and infrastructure projects such as bridges, transit systems, highways, roadways or water tunnels.
 - Explore opportunities to express local history and identity through functional and ornamental design elements and works of civic art.
 - Mark gateways and significant intersections of Austin.
 - Create a system of Historical/Cultural/Information points which could:
 - Establish a set of strategic points within the city that would both unify as well as mark unique places in the urban context.
 - Take the form of plaques mounted on buildings, information on transit shelters, murals, commemorative sculpture, elements in the sidewalk, walking tour brochures.
 - Provide elements, programs or brochures that tell what happened in a place.
 - Be commissioned for stand alone public art that provides community identity and that is not necessarily tied to a building project.



The Austin GuitarTown Project celebrated the Live Music Capitol and Civic Art with 50 guitar sculptures painted and decorated by local artists and celebrities.

Protect Important Public Views Downtown

Issue

The preservation of certain views in downtown, toward and away from the surrounding hills and toward the river, can greatly enhance the experience of living in the city. Views to the west and south are of tree covered hills which provide an attractive contrast to the buildings downtown. These particular views are unique to Austin and help distinguish it from other cities, reinforcing its unique character. They also help people orient themselves within the downtown street grid.

Values Supported

Unique Character
Humane Character

Recommendations

- Development should not obscure existing views through the public right-of-way.
- Pedestrian bridges and building fly overs should not be permitted anywhere downtown.



Auditorium Shores framed by the developing Austin Skyline.

Avoid Historical Misrepresentation

Values Supported Issue

Sense of Time
Unique Character
Authenticity

Like most cities, Austin is created from buildings of many eras, each illustrating a piece of the history of the city. Over time, construction methods, engineering practices, building styles, and uses change in a natural evolution of technology, economy, and architectural values. One need not be a historian to notice the difference between buildings of different eras, nor be well versed in civic planning to appreciate the sense of continuity created when buildings from many generations combine in one urban setting. Their differences speak to the passage of time and to the variety and creativity of the human spirit. It can also reveal certain truths about a town which contribute to our understanding self awareness.

However, we have the ability today to cover our contemporary buildings with exteriors which exactly duplicate the appearance of buildings of other times. While supposedly providing the city with charming old-world buildings, this prospect will create confusion about the authenticity of the truly old buildings, devaluing them in the process. If new buildings take on the appearance of old ones, it will become difficult to know which buildings are really old.

Examples

Positive Historical representation:

Chartres Cathedral was begun in 1135 and completed in 1160. After a fire in 1194 which destroyed the eastern half of the church, reconstruction was undertaken in a much more ornate style, then popular, rather than the early Gothic of the original. The result is both a wonderful and authentic building, and a great story about the evolution of engineering, taste, and artistic development.

Unauthentic physical surrounding: Concerned that new construction would destroy the charm and character of its original adobe building stock, the city of Santa Fe adopted guidelines requiring new construction to appear that it was made of adobe. Rather than build from adobe, traditionally constructed homes now typically receive thin plastic coatings colored to look like mud. Polystyrene insulation under the coating is rounded at the corners in a faux-adobe exercise that has created an overwhelming sensation that all that looks like adobe really is not.

Recommendations

- Buildings date the historical development of the city. It is important that any mimicry of past architectural styles not be exercised in such a way that the historical record becomes confused.
- New downtown buildings should be designed in such a way that they don't appear to have been built significantly earlier than they were.
- This guideline does not preclude consideration of the use of materials, scale or massing found on older buildings (See guideline Building 6, Create Quality Construction).

Respect Adjacent Historical Buildings

Issue

Austin's stock of older buildings is made up of relatively small, highly detailed masonry buildings with wood frame windows broken into multiple panes of glass. While similar buildings can still be built today, more typical are buildings which are taller, more likely to span an entire block, and constructed of panels of glass, smooth stone or concrete panels.

The way buildings are built today can easily leave the older building stock appearing out of place, primarily because of the difference in size, or massing. A very large building next to a very small one will make the smaller seem insignificant unless some gesture is made by the larger.

Awkward juxtapositions can also be felt when adjacent buildings differ greatly in their sense of scale, and the degree to which they are articulated on the exterior.

Recommendations

- Dense development should respond to adjacent historically zoned buildings and avoid creating awkward or incompatible design solutions.
- Compatible designs should not be created through historic replication, but should reflect a consideration of the scale, material and massing of the adjacent historic buildings.
- These may include small setbacks of upper stories so that at street level new buildings are consistent with the adjacent older building.
- Utilize transfer of development rights (tdrs) or other mechanisms to preserve the historic fabric.

Values Supported

Humane Character
Sense of Time



The CSC building is a modern structure that compliments the Historic Schneider building in scale and articulation.

Acknowledge That Rooftops Are Seen From Other Buildings and the Street

Values Supported

Values Supported
Humane Character
Economic Vitality

Issue

As a city grows in size it will also grow skyward, and an incidental and desirable attraction emerges: spectacular views. This element of a city center draws the attention of companies, clients, tenants, tourists and shoppers. Views from above inspire pride in citizens and encourage tourists to return. Unfortunately, roofs are generally crowded with unsightly service equipment, put there because it is considered out of view. Because it is easily seen from other buildings of equal or greater height, and frequently seen from the ground, this practice detracts substantially from the views downtown should offer.



View of Downtown buildings from atop the 360 Condominiums.

Recommendations

- Roofs should be designed and constructed in such a way that they acknowledge their visibility from other buildings and from the street. Mechanical equipment should be screened when visible from the street or from potential or existing buildings nearby.
 - Unused equipment should be removed from view.
 - Utilize green roofs to provide for aesthetic as well as functional considerations.
- * See also guideline Streetscape 11, Screen Mechanical Equipment

Avoid the Development of Theme Environments

Issue

The city can be a model of the values we hold as a community. If these include a sense of time, a unique character, and authenticity, then it is important that we are careful in the way we recreate the past through our buildings.

While past models and styles are often used to establish a physical identity for new development, the recent phenomenon of theme environments and theme parks, does this in a cold commercial way, degrading the original with caricatures intended to attract attention with fake images.

While American city founding generally contained some fakery in the architecture, there is a difference between our tradition of using trends from the past to create a place in the wilderness, and recreating popular existing places for entertainment.

“There is an important difference between today’s thriving entrepreneurship of illusion and the impulses that invented identities for raw land and new communities in the past. Those earlier identities were an investment in character for rapidly growing new settlements, an attempt to establish some ready-made sense of place to define and speed development. Today’s themed creations are not, and never will be, real places; they are not meant to be. They are made for the moment, instant environments intended to serve only as temporary, substitute events, conceived and carried out as places to visit in which novelty, experience, and entertainment are sold for immediate profit and a short period of time. They are based on proven, family-oriented entertainment formulas. To embrace their limited and exclusionary objectives is to forfeit the larger needs of place and society. To imitate their poverty of reference is to lose all we know about the past. To think that American cities can learn from them is to embrace the most dangerous illusion of all.”
-(1997) Ada Louise Huxtable, The New Press, New York

Values Supported

Sense of Time
Unique Character
Authenticity

Recommendations

- Mock representations or caricatures of past of imaginary places, popularly referred to as “theme environments” or “theme parks” should not be created.

Recycle Existing Building Stock

Values Supported	Issue
Authenticity Sustainability Sense of Time Unique Character Diversity	Existing buildings can provide a sense of continuity through the many memories people have associated with them. Keeping buildings can reinforce unique qualities of a place and so may be more valuable than the cost of the materials alone. It is therefore important that even buildings which are not historically designated be preserved and integrated into new development when possible.

Recommendations

- The recycling of Austin's building stock is highly encouraged.



Instead of being demolished, this building on East 11th Street was renovated as an adaptive re-use.

guidelines for the public streetscape

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Protect the Pedestrian Where the Building Meets the Street

Values Supported

Unique Character
Dense Urban Character
Humane Character
Economic Vitality
Connection with the Outdoors

Issue

The comfort of the pedestrian is crucial to the development of any dense development which strives to be economically viable. This is especially the case today, when people have come to expect the climate control found in contemporary buildings. Like much of the south, Austin has many months of extremely hot and humid weather; it can also have very cold and wet winters. The tendency to dash across a parking lot from an air conditioned car into an air conditioned building is normal behavior in Texas today, and so is the tendency to shop or eat only in places where parking can be found directly in front of the store or restaurant.

Making the transition to a pedestrian oriented streetscape will require special attention to the comfort of the walker. Dense development can increasingly expect pedestrians to arrive by mass transit and walk to their destination. Because they are the economic base for any development it is important that pedestrians are comfortable. They will choose the most comfortable route, avoiding blocks which are less comfortable or which create gaps in the continuity of the protection.



For pedestrians, even simple awnings extended over windows can provide adequate protection from the elements.

Recommendations

- Overhead cover, offering adequate pedestrian protection from the sun and rain should be provided along the right-of-way where downtown buildings meet the street. This should occur between nine and fourteen feet above the level of the sidewalk, and should provide a minimum of eight feet of cover in width. Cover should not project closer to the curb than three feet.
- Overhead cover at the sidewalk may provide continuous protection without being continuous itself.
- Cover may take the form of either a projection from the building, an arcade, or a combination of the two. Arcades shall be open to the street.
- Projections may take the form of fabric awnings which are retractable, fabric awnings which are not retractable, or fixed non-fabric projected covers.
- Projected covers may be occupied by the building user, but should be accessed only from the building and not from the sidewalk. Where projected covers are occupied, they may also be supported by columns which fall in the right-of-way. Columns in the right-of-way should not interfere with pedestrians or emergency functions of the sidewalk. Maintain clear sidewalk width not interrupted by columns. Provide sufficient space between curb and columns to accommodate the potential of vehicles jumping the curb.
- Where buildings have been permitted to pull significantly away from the property line, a free standing cover should be provided along the right-of-way. Owners are encouraged in this condition to provide pedestrian cover additionally at the edge of the building where it does not touch the property line.
- Existing buildings which experience significant renovation should provide pedestrian protection as well. Landmark buildings may comply by installing a detached cover in front of the building.

Minimize Curb Cuts

Issue

The safety and comfort of people walking on a sidewalk is of greater concern than the convenience of a driver; pedestrians are the primary concern. Every time a car crosses the sidewalk there is a potential danger and inconvenience to the pedestrian. For this reason, places where cars cross the sidewalk should be minimized.

Values Supported

Values Supported
Dense Urban Character
Safety

Recommendations

- Curb cuts should be minimized, and concentrated at mid-block.
- Development downtown should place curb cuts at original alley locations where possible.
- Specialty pedestrian paving, such as pavers, should continue at a level walking surface across mid-block curb cuts.
- Overhead cover should continue across curb cuts where possible.

Create a Potential for Two-Way Streets

Values Supported	Issue
Dense Urban Character Safety Economic Vitality	Loading and parking entrances shape the buildings and influence the flow of traffic on adjacent streets. Ideally, all streets in dense urban development will be two-way. Developments which create access designed to work only on one-way streets, such as angled entrances or ramps parallel to the street, will not work if traffic directions are changed. Where one-way streets exist or are planned, entrances should be designed in a flexible manner that can be adapted to street conversions and ever changing traffic demands.

Recommendations

- Driveways should be designed to function in both one-way and two-way street system.



Cesar Chavez Street has been converted from a one-way street to a two-way.

Reinforce Pedestrian Activity

Issue

Pedestrian related concerns are a priority in the creation of a successful urban environment. Tourism, conventions, and daily business all create pedestrian traffic. Currently, vehicular needs dominate the streetscape at the expense of pedestrians. In some areas, discontinuous sidewalks force pedestrians into the street to compete for space.

Major points of interest downtown, such as the State Capitol, Town Lake, the Four Squares, Shoal and Waller Creeks, the Convention Center and the Warehouse District need better pedestrian connections. Improved wayfinding tools such as signs and graphics together with continuous and adequate sidewalks would encourage walking.

Recommendations

- Appropriately wide sidewalks should be provided from corner to corner along all property lines.
- Sidewalks should abut the street curb. Sidewalks extending on and of private property will meet at grade.
- Blocks without pedestrian connections should be identified and prioritized for sidewalk construction.
- Develop a Way Finding Master Plan which incorporates such tools as specialty pavements, signs and graphics to facilitate pedestrian movement.
- A new street sign system which unites downtown and other urban centers should be developed.
- Encourage street vendors, sidewalk cafes, etc. – food attracts pedestrian activity.
- Buildings should address the streetscape and reinforce pedestrian activity.

Values Supported

Dense Urban Character
Humane Character
Safety
Economic Vitality
Civic Art
Connection to the Outdoors



By tipping the balance of vehicular activity to that of the pedestrians, the streetscape becomes a vibrant livable place.

Enhance Key Transit Stops

Values Supported	Issue
Dense Urban Character Humane Character Safety Sustainability Economic Vitality Civic Art	<p>The increased use of public transportation is central to the creation of viable and sustainable dense development. However, because of the poor image of transit and the lack of amenities and proper signage at transit stops, only a very small percentage of people use public transit. Increasing the use of alternate modes of transportation should be a city-wide goal as downtown develops and additional dense nodes are created. The encouragement of alternate modes of transportation over the single-occupancy vehicle should be primary goal within city policy.</p>

Recommendations

- Reduce and consolidate the overall number of transit stops in throughout the city.
- Enhance and make markedly visible stops which are located near important pedestrian crossings, at bus route transfer stations and at culturally or historically important places.
- Adjacent developments should incorporate enhanced transit stops and shelters into their design.
- Developments should address enhanced transit stops as public places.
- Consider pedestrian comfort and safety and provide adequate space, shade, and trees at transit stops in the development of site plans.
- Transit station enhancements might include:
 - o lighted transit “signal” indicating transit stop by name, e.g., “Fourth Street at Congress”, “Transfer Station”, “Convention Center Station”, “Brush Square Station”.
 - o legible route number graphics
 - o full shelter with benches
 - o city location map
 - o bus route map and schedule
 - o public telephone • water fountain • waste receptacle
 - o advertising surface
 - o district related enhancements, such as particular paving type or logo
 - o “Cultural Information Point”
(see downtown “culture framework plan” proposal)
- Incorporate civic art into key transit stops

Enhance the Streetscape

Issue

Circulation from one part of a development to another without relief can be daunting to some pedestrians. Streetscape amenities such as benches, trash receptacles, planters, pole lights, kiosks, telephones, news stands, drinking fountains, bike racks, sculpture, and water features enliven and support the public domain. Cafe tables in the right-of-way can bring activity to the street. They can provide a wonderful means of people watching for diners and pedestrians. Consideration should be given to unification of these elements within a block and from street to street.

Values Supported

Dense Urban Character
 Humane Character
 Economic Vitality
 Civic Art
 Connection to the Outdoors

Recommendations

- Dense development is encouraged to provide street furniture in the public right-of-way for pedestrian use. High priority should be given to streets identified in the Great Streets Program.
- Coordinate street furniture with the Great Streets program where applicable.
- Street furniture may be fixed to the sidewalk if adequate clear passage for pedestrians and emergency access is provided. Avoid intrusions into the accessible route.
- Cafe tables and kiosks may occupy a portion of the public right-of-way if adequate clear passage for pedestrians and emergency access is provided.
- The design of street furnishings should unify areas with distinct character. Participation from private property owners is encouraged.
- Appropriate planting may be provided as well.
- The use of Austin artisans and artists in the creation of street furniture is encouraged.



Avoid Conflicts between Pedestrians and Utility Equipment

Values Supported

Humane Character
Safety

Issue

Utility equipment is frequently allowed placement in the public right-of-way. This not only results in unsightly sidewalks, but creates conflicts with pedestrian traffic. Utility boxes mounted on low poles at street corners block pedestrian traffic in a place where continuity is particularly important.

The amount of power and communication wiring attached to poles in the right-of-way will grow as development fills in and service requirements increase. New utility upgrades and service to properties should be installed below ground. Above ground support for these services is discouraged to avoid clutter at the streetscape.

Recommendations

- Utility connections and support should be located in the furnishings zone to avoid conflict with pedestrian movement in the right-of-way and maintain accessible routes.
- Placement of utilities should be considered as a design element and be clearly dimensioned on site plans - where the information is available.
- Above ground utilities should be visually compatible with other streetscape elements.
- Utility lines (wires) should be placed underground in the public right -of-way.



Utility equipment in the public right of way conflicts with pedestrian movement and comfort.

Install Street Trees

Issue

Trees improve air quality, reduce storm water runoff, provide cooling effects for the urban heat island, increase property values and create urban wildlife habitat. They can also greatly increase the quality of life in downtown.

As State Forester James Hull said, "...There is no question that trees are a valuable part of the city infrastructure and need to be managed as proactively as the streets and public utilities."

The importance of healthy trees will increase as the density of downtown increases. Lack of adequate growing conditions for trees contributes to their ultimate decline.

Recommendations

- Trees should be provided along major pedestrian corridors.
- Consider that the life span of street trees in dense urban areas is frequently limited by soil volume. Provide as much soil volume as possible to support sustained tree growth in existing or new sidewalks. .
- Consider the use of structural soil or continuous street tree trenches to provide maximum soil area for roots to spread, and water and air to penetrate.
- Locate trees in expanded sidewalk areas in the parking zone to provide more area for root systems.
- Allow sufficient room for tree canopies to grow and develop without conflict with other building elements.
- Install irrigation systems to provide adequate water to establish and maintain trees. Provide drainage to storm sewer or install dry wells.
- In high pedestrian use areas, install tree guards to protect the trunks from damage
- Consider the design of street tree layout in relation to the buildings and other streetscape elements.
- Select trees which are adapted to the harsh conditions of a dense urban environment.

Values Supported

Unique Character
Dense Urban Character
Humane Character
Sustainability



Street trees along 2nd Street.

Provide Pedestrian-Scaled Lighting

Values Supported

Humane Character
Safety

Issue

Light quality can strongly affect the character of a place. Harsh light creates an environment which seems inhuman, while too little light creates an environment which feels unsafe.

The size and scale of lights and light poles will also impact the character of the streetscape. Light fixtures scaled to the movement of cars will suggest to pedestrians that they are in a car's environment and that they may not be safe.

Both the scale of fixture and type of lighting can easily create the sense that the sidewalks—and all of downtown—are the domain of the pedestrian.

Recommendations

- Urban Streets should be lit by pedestrian-scaled fixtures emitting warm light.
- A minimum of 1 foot candle of warm light should be provided in all space between the building face and the curb along all streets.
- Lighting may be provided through the use of pedestrian-scaled pole fixtures, or fixtures may be attached to the face of the building. The type and size of pole fixtures should be as consistent as possible along a single block.
- The City of Austin is encouraged to create a set of recommendations for street lighting, outlining areas where a consistent character should be maintained, and describing that character.



Streetlights set to the scale of the pedestrian create a comfortable space where people feel safe.

Provide Protection from Cars/Promote Curbside Parking

Issue

The design of the streetscape should make people walking there as safe as possible; it should make them feel a sense of safety as well. It may be impractical to assume that effective barriers could be provided along the curbs of every street in a dense development, protecting pedestrians from the possibility of being struck by a car. But a degree of protection can be created in fairly easy and inexpensive ways.

Perhaps the best protection for the sidewalk would be cars parked along the curb. Parking meters would provide some protection too. Where there is no parallel parking at the curb, small bollards, heavy planters or other similar devices may provide some protection.

Parking along the street edge can provide a buffer between busy automobile traffic and pedestrian movement. It also acts as a traffic calming feature, slowing drivers in the curbside lane.

Values Supported

Humane Character
Safety

Recommendations

- Buffers from cars should be provided along the sidewalk edge.
- This protection may take the form of cars parked in metered parking spaces, trees, planters, or bollards.
- Curbside parking is encouraged along all busy downtown streets.
- Where right-of-way is 80' or less, parallel parking is encouraged.



Pedestrians should feel safe as they walk along the sidewalk. Streetside parking and trees can create buffers which protect the pedestrian from the danger of moving vehicles.

Screen Mechanical and Utility Equipment

Values Supported	Issue
Humane Character Economic Vitality	Mechanical equipment is necessary to the function of the buildings which comprise a successful city center. Unfortunately, space must be found for components that are sometimes large, noisy and unsightly. Mechanical equipment, particularly when added after the building is in use, can interrupt the streetscape and public views, decreasing the comfort and livability throughout the area. The same care should be applied to other utilities and dumpster/trash facilities.

Recommendations

- Mechanical equipment should be screened from view and located away from the street edge.
- Particular attention should be given to mechanical equipment at street level. This should be screened in a way appropriate to the streetscape.

Provide Generous Street-Level Windows

Issue

Long windowless walls prohibit visual connection between the inside of the building and the sidewalk. People inside have no knowledge of those on the street and people on the street cannot see inside. Walls with no windows can project the sense that people outside are not trusted and that the area is not populated. It is this inability to see inside, and to be seen from the inside which creates the pedestrian's sensation of danger, and the real danger in unobserved places.

Windows not only create a feeling of trust and openness in a city, they also instill in people on the street the feeling they could be assisted if in danger. This phenomenon, "eyes on the street," can help reduce crime by increasing the potential that offenders would be seen.

Recommendations

- The lower two levels of buildings, where they face the street, should be made highly transparent, through the use of windows or fixed glass panels.
- A minimum area of glass, meeting the most restrictive percentage described in the Design Standards, Subchapter E, is required.
- The use of reflective or highly tinted glass is discouraged.

Values Supported

Humane Character
Safety



Windows on the street facade create a friendly connection between pedestrians and the people and functions inside.

Install Pedestrian-Friendly Materials at Street Level

Values Supported

Sense of History
Unique Character
Humane Character
Diversity



The streetscape should be composed of materials friendly to the pedestrian. Wooden benches, cobble stones, and trees set in planters creates a story that tells the pedestrian about the character of the surroundings.

Issue

As buildings meet the street they come into contact with people in a very physical way. Close up, we are able to get much more information about a design or material than we can when it is high above the street. Here we are able to see it close up, to run our hands along the sides, see ourselves reflected in the shiny places and observe the attention given to the craft in the materials. We also have a tendency to attribute to a city the attitudes projected by its primary buildings. If these seem inhospitable, the city feels hostile. If they seem well built, the city seems strong and vital. If they seem cheap and temporary, it suggests that we don't care about the quality of our environment, our downtown or the people in it.

It is important that the materials and construction of streetscapes and buildings downtown, at least on the lower floors, provide a level of detail and quality which is physically and emotionally comfortable for the pedestrian.

Recommendations

- Building materials at street level should be pedestrian friendly and durable.

preface to the Guidelines for Plazas and Open Space

This section of the Urban Design Guidelines challenges outdoor spaces to become truly public places by creating comfort and amenities available to everyone. Outdoor places can be well adjusted to the uses expected of them if consideration of their specific place within the larger downtown is made.

Public open space can accommodate and encourage the interaction of the wide social, cultural, ethnic, economic and age diversity that exists in our city. At each scale, from the largest regional park to the smallest “vest pocket” courtyard or plaza, and along all our public streetscapes and trails, the design of these spaces should always seek to allow citizens from all areas of the city and all walks of life to interact in comfort and safety.

The guidelines focus primarily on plazas, the types of open spaces associated with dense development, while recognizing the need for a continuous open space network that links major public open spaces throughout the city.

To aid the discussion of appropriate outdoor development, the Commission has borrowed on the work of Marcus and Francis’ People Places; Design Guidelines for Urban Open Space, 1998, which proposes that plaza design can be enhanced by the use and study of specific types of outdoor spaces and that the use of these types is based primarily on their size, location and orientation. At the same time, we have tried to make the guidelines here specific to Austin, its climate and the character of its people.

Illustrations created by the Commission are included below describing the primary types. They are described as follows:

Street Plaza - widened sidewalk, bus-waiting spaces, arcaded plaza.

Corporate Foyer - decorative porch, impressive forecourt, primary entrance to large building.

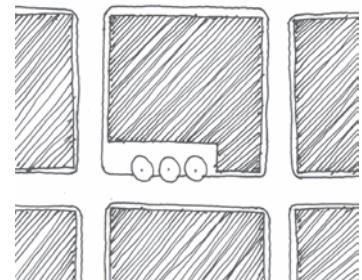
Urban Oasis - sheltered plaza with high concentration of planting and shade.

Grand Public Plaza - city wide plaza for concentrated public use and gatherings.

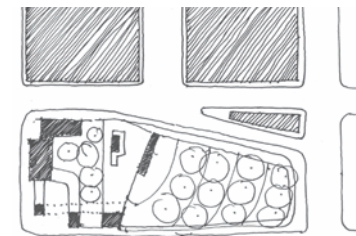
Pedestrian Mall - widened sidewalks both sides of street, transit / rail corridor, common attraction.

Thru-block Pedestrian Corridors - means of traveling across the block at ground level.

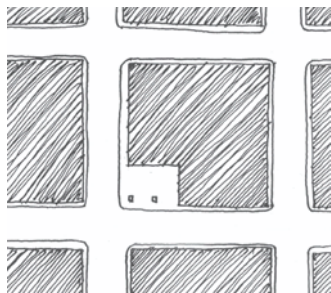
Public Square - the four original squares of Austin.



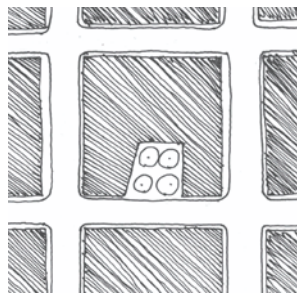
Street Plaza



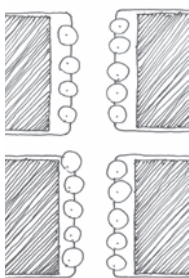
Corporate Foyer



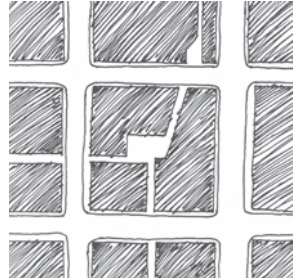
Urban Oasis



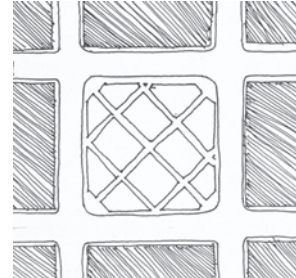
Grand Public Plaza



Pedestrian Mall



Thru-Block Pedestrian Corridor



Public Square

guidelines for plazas and open spaces

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Treat the Four Squares with Special Consideration

Values Supported
 Sense of Time
 Unique Character
 Humane Character
 Connection to the Outdoors

Issue

Downtown Austin's four squares were established by the original Waller Grid in 1839. While one square has been lost to development, it is important that the remaining plazas continue to serve as public amenities. Public squares in a grid are a traditional urban feature in Texas, and link our lives with the lives of those who lived before us, and so deserve to be celebrated by the special consideration of adjacent development. These squares can also provide cues about our location in the city. By recognizing the square, we place ourselves in the grid intuitively and understand where we are at that moment. They can create—if easily distinguishable—a powerful mental map of downtown. They also provide us with a sense of the scale and size of downtown further linking its identity to the physical streetscape of the core.

A hollow in the fabric of the city can be enhanced by the creation of strong edges on all sides, creating greater contrast and focusing the public's attention on these unique urban features. If this strong built edge can be consistent on all sides, the sense that these are unique places will be further enhanced.

Recommendations

- Development facing the four public squares established by the historic Waller Plan should receive special architectural consideration.
- Buildings facing the squares should provide a fairly consistent building height, and make an effort to establish the civic significance of the square through a unique architectural treatment.
- Primary building entrances should front the square.
- Loading docks should not face the public squares.
- Developers should also reference applicable existing requirements of the Downtown Parks Combining District ordinance (§13-2-174 in the Land Development Code).



A 'hollow in the fabric of the city' is enhanced when defined by dense urban structures on all sides

Contribute to an Open Space Network

Issue

Successful pedestrian environments rely on inviting walking paths and an interconnected network of open spaces. Some developments will incorporate plazas as part of an open space network, but others may play a more supportive role by providing strong connections, responsive design elements, or supportive services.

Recommendations

- Identify major open spaces in the vicinity of proposed development.
- Consider pedestrian movement through and to open spaces when locating building entrances and pedestrian-oriented uses.
- Provide enhanced sidewalk connections to nearby open space.
- Use design elements such as building configuration and streetscape design, including lighting, to support visual and pedestrian connections to open space.
- Provide ancillary support services such as food service and recreational equipment for use in nearby open space.

Values Supported

Humane Character
Sustainability
Diversity
Unique Character
Connection to the Outdoors



Providing Inviting, interconnected walking paths in a network of open spaces ensures a successful pedestrian environment

Emphasize Connections to Parks and Greenways

Values Supported	Issue
Humane Character Sustainability Diversity Unique Character Connection with Outdoors	Parks and greenways are generally public entities and usually more natural in form and materials than the surrounding urban environment, but they should be integrated with the city. Dense developments should consider visual and functional connections to nearby green spaces as well as the positive impact that can be made on the development's microclimate. Pedestrian scaled lighting should be included to enhance the visual connection.

Recommendations

- Incorporate views and prevailing breezes into the site planning and design of proposed developments.
- Limit building heights to avoid undesirable shadows on parks and public squares.
- Provide clear, well-lit connecting pathways to parks and greenways.
- Provide pedestrian scaled light fixtures which create a warm light on urban greenways such as Waller Creek and downtown portions of Town Lake.
- Provide bicycle racks where appropriate.



Natural in form and materials Parks and greenways should be integrated with the city

Incorporate Open Space into Residential Development

Issue

Residential development in dense areas follows a different model than detached single-family housing. The absence of lawns and yards associated with resident’s homes need not mean an absence of private space to be outdoors. In lieu of front and back yards, outdoor space for apartments and condominiums should take more urban forms and will generally occupy less square footage. Common outdoor areas contribute to a sense of community, and a variety of open spaces may be provided in residential developments along a continuum from public to private.

Values Supported

- Humane Character
- Sustainability
- Diversity
- Unique Character
- Connection with Outdoors

Recommendations

- Provide public open spaces such as plazas where appropriate, especially at entryways.
- Provide community open spaces such as roof decks, pools and patios.
- Provide small private open spaces such as balconies and terraces associated with individual units.



Common outdoor areas contribute to a sense of community”

Develop Green Roofs

Values Supported	Issue
Humane Character Sustainability Diversity Unique Character Connection with Outdoors	<p>Green roofs are roofs that incorporate significant amounts of vegetation on their surface. They are especially suited to the dense urban environment because they create roof amenities, provide attractive views from other buildings, reduce the urban heat island effect, reduce stormwater runoff, and reduce heating and cooling loads. While green roofs might have been considered experimental in the recent past, this type of roof design is becoming more mainstream as the body of research and successful examples grows steadily each year. In any case, green roofs contribute to a healthier, more sustainable downtown environment.</p>

Recommendations

- Provide a vegetative surface on a significant portion of the roof.
- Provide the infrastructure and maintenance to support the green roof.
- Incorporate amenity space for building users and/or public.
- Provide opportunities to grow gardens.



Green roof over City Hall.

Provide Plazas in High Use Areas

Issue

Urban plazas should be designed with public use as a priority. The use of public open space is often dependent on the real estate maxim of “location, location, location.” Therefore, it is important to analyze the location of a proposed plaza in terms of the existing plazas in the area, the linkage to a downtown pedestrian and transit system, the primary population to be served, and the diversity of potential users. Creating open space in a dense development without coordinating the size and use with other nearby plazas can result in declining use in the others. Conversely, areas with too few outdoor spaces will generally be overused. Care should be taken to coordinate plazas with their catchment areas.

Values Supported

Density
Humane Character
Diversity
Sustainability
Connection to the Outdoors

Recommendations

- Consider the need for a new urban plaza based on the catchment area of potential users. The catchment area extends 450 feet in all directions from the center of the proposed plaza.
- Review the need for a high use corner location versus the oasis potential of a mid block cul-de sac or pedestrian thoroughfare.
- Consider the number of potential workers in the catchment area to ensure a lunchtime clientele.
- Provide diversity in ground level retail to encourage daytime use by workers, tourists, and shoppers.
- Design the plaza as a catalyst to enhance urban pedestrian and transit circulation patterns.
- Link the plaza to an urban open space plan which provides and encourages safe pedestrian walkways.



Coordinate the location of new urban plazas with their catchment areas

Determine Plaza Function, Size, and Activity

Values Supported	Issue
Humane Character Diversity Sustainability Connection to the Outdoors	<p>Downtown plazas should be designed through the consideration of the function, size, and activity of the open space in relation to the urban context around it. They should not be viewed as leftover exterior space to enhance, but rather as opportunities to create enlivened places for people to enjoy. The function could be simply a visual setback for a building and transition zone or it could be a transit stop, place for lunchtime relaxation, or sidewalk cafes. The size may affect the comfort of its patrons and determine appropriate activities. Larger spaces may accommodate displays, exhibits, and performances. Plaza design should always consider the diversity of uses and activities that might occur such as passing through, relaxing, and the needs of different user groups.</p>

Recommendations

- Determine plaza function, which may include:
 - a) visual setback for building
 - b) transition zone from street to interior foyer
 - c) lunchtime relaxation and sidewalk cafes
 - d) transit stop
 - e) exhibits or performances
- Determine plaza activities, and consider:
 - a) if the plaza is to accommodate pedestrian traffic, eliminate barriers between the sidewalk and the street.
 - b) if the plaza is to accommodate stopping and relaxing, provide dense furnishings, focal elements, and defined edges.
 - c) if the plaza is to accommodate concerts or rallies, provide unimpeded open space.
- Provide active areas which accommodate public interaction as well as areas which provide a more relaxed and secure experience.
- Consider sight lines when designing plazas for public gathering or events.
- Encourage heavy use across varied activities to minimize vandalism.



An urban plaza can provide an opportunity to create enlivened places for people to enjoy

Respond to the Urban Microclimate in Plaza Design

Issue

The semitropical climate in Austin offers short winters and long, hot summers. Annual rainfall is approximately 30 inches per year. Temperatures in the 90's and above often last from May through September. Heat stored in the concrete and asphalt can create a microclimate at least ten degrees hotter than in undeveloped areas. Tall buildings block southeast breezes and, during the winter, "blue-northers" can come in quickly, dropping the temperature 40 degrees in two hours.

As a result, our urban plazas need special attention to make them habitable during the summer months and inviting in the winter months. Open spaces should be located to receive and encourage southeast breezes, yet block the blue-northers. Shade should be provided by vegetation, canopies, and trellises. Water can be used as a cooling element, and the use of adjacent air-conditioned indoor public spaces can help temper spaces near entrances.

Values Supported

Unique Character
Humane Character
Sustainability
Connection to the Outdoors

Recommendations

- If possible, site the plaza to receive summer breezes from the southeast.
- Provide filtered shade by means of deciduous trees and vine covered trellises which reduce temperatures in summer, yet allow sun in the winter.
- Provide continuous shade by means of arcades, canopies, and awnings adjacent to buildings.
- Consider the use of ceiling fans in exterior overhead structures to create air movement.
- Minimize the amount of hard plaza pavement which retains heat. Provide only the amount necessary for projected pedestrian circulation and volume.
- Maximize the amount of vegetation in trees, shrubs, groundcovers, and vines which cool the surrounding areas.
- Calculate sun-shade patterns as seating locations are developed.
- Provide water features where appropriate.
- Consider the use of air-conditioned indoor public spaces adjacent to the outdoor spaces.



Water can be used as a cooling element to make plazas habitable during the summer months

Consider Views, Circulation, Boundaries, and Subspaces in Plaza Design

Values Supported	Issue
<p>Values Supported</p> <p>Humane Character</p> <p>Sustainability</p> <p>Economic Vitality</p> <p>Connection to the Outdoors</p>	<p>The design of outdoor plazas should consider how they will be used by people. The layout of a plaza affects pedestrian circulation between the plaza and the streetscape, between the plaza and the building, and should take into account the ability to create subspaces for relaxation. The layout can enhance or block views, invite people in, or keep people out.</p>
Recommendations	

- Define the plaza as a distinct space.
- Create a strong connection between the plaza and the adjacent public right of way. Large grade changes may not be appropriate.
- Where appropriate, extend planting into the public right of way to draw attention to the plaza.
- Provide direct pedestrian routes from sidewalks to building entrances.
- Provide easy access to ground level retail as well as seating and viewing areas.
- Provide opportunities for pleasant meandering shortcuts.
- Guide pedestrian flow through the use of built elements.
- Accommodate the needs of the disabled, elderly, and parents with strollers with easy access to each level.
- Consider the transition between the interior and exterior building uses at the plaza level. Ensure that one does not interfere with the other.
- Design the edges with nooks and corners to provide a variety of seating and viewing opportunities.
- Provide subspaces to accommodate small groups within a larger plaza area.
- Make subspaces inviting with human-scale dimensions and elements.
- Define subspaces with grade changes, planting diversity, or seating arrangement.



Plazas can invite people in or keep people out. Plazas should reflect how people will use them

Provide an Appropriate Amount of Plaza Seating

Issue

Urban plazas are the outdoor rooms in dense developments. They are the places where people gather to relax and socialize. Research has shown that the most important element in encouraging plaza use is an adequate amount of seating. A link between the size of the plaza and the amount of seating provided has been established through the study of successful outdoor spaces. In addition, location and orientation of seating, types and styles of seating, and materials have been shown to be important in determination of use.

Values Supported

Density
Humane Character
Diversity
Sustainability
Connection to the Outdoors

Recommendations

- Provide one linear foot of seating per each perimeter linear foot of the plaza.
- Provide for a variety of seating locations which accommodate the needs of various sitters.
- Place seating in shaded areas as well as in sunny areas. Shade may be created by trees, trellises, canopies, umbrellas, or building walls.
- Place seating where sitters can watch passersby.
- At least 50% of recommended seating should be secondary, in the form of steps, planter seat wafts, retaining walls, or mounds of turf.
- Seating wall heights should be approximately 16-18"
- Provide benches that are wide enough to serve many needs.
- Provide some linear or circular seating which encourages interaction.
- Provide backless benches, right angle arrangements, or movable chairs and tables to accommodate groups.
- Provide seating materials that are inviting and which do not damage clothing.

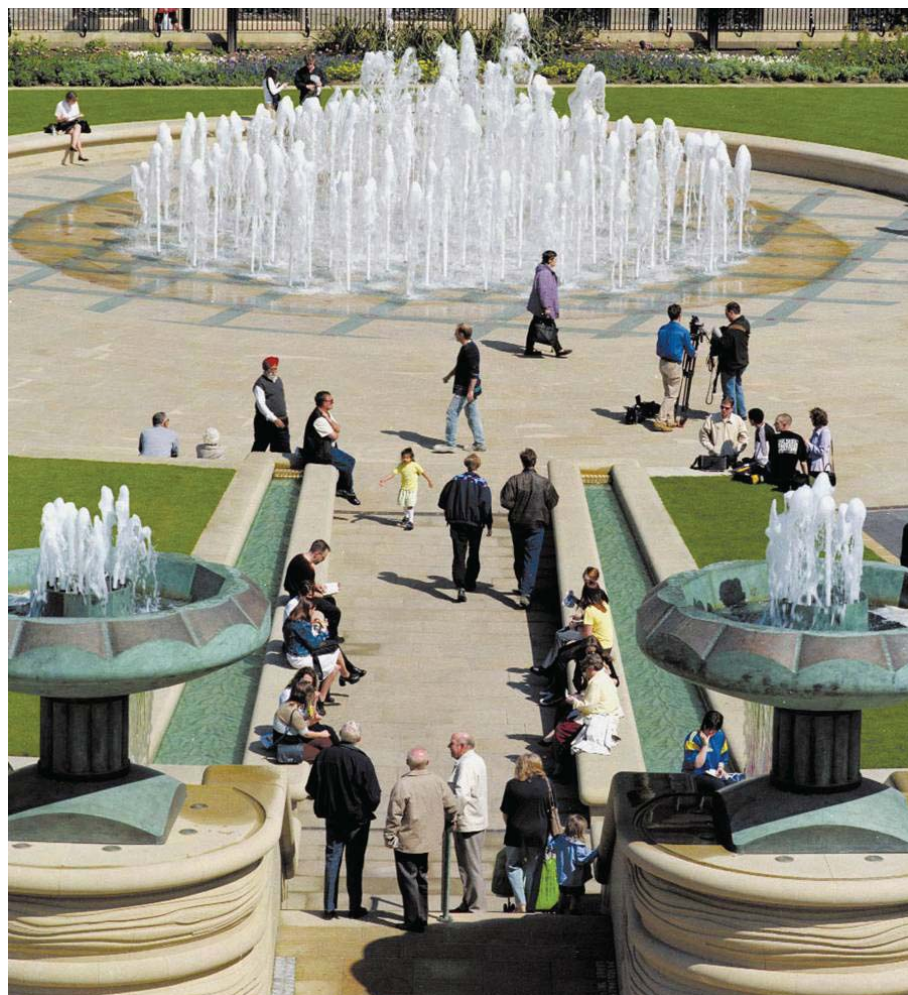


Serving as the outdoor living rooms of the city, Urban plazas require an adequate amount of seating.

Provide Visual and Spatial Complexity in Public Spaces

Values Supported	Issue
Humane Character Diversity Sustainability Connection to the Outdoors	Broad expanses of hard paving create uninviting and alienating environments. Framed views, changes in level, subspaces, different places to sit, and trees and shrubs create a diversity of places for people to use and enjoy. A wide variety of forms, colors, and textures offer a humane character to our public open spaces.
	Recommendations

- Frame views out of the plaza, where appropriate, to visually link the plaza with the rest of the city.
- Visually connect subareas within the plaza.
- Physically separate subareas with modest level changes where appropriate.
- Physically connect level changes with ramps as well as steps.
- Provide an elevated area with wall or railing to lean on for people watching.
- Avoid dramatic grade changes which discourage public use.
- Where plazas are sunken, provide focal points to draw people downward.
- Where plazas are raised, use plantings or other elements to draw people upward.
- Use plants or other elements to define different areas within the plaza.



Framed views, changes in level, subspaces, different places to sit, and trees and shrubs create a diversity of places for people to use and enjoy

Use Plants to Enliven Urban Spaces

Issue

Humans are part of the biological world and comfort is our judge for the quality of our habitat, natural or un-natural. Plants provide an intimate connection to this world and a respite from the built interiors of office buildings, apartments, and condominiums. Groupings of plants can create urban oases. Trees offer shade to help cool the city. Their leaves catch the breeze and respond to weather changes. Flowering shrubs and vines provide a connection to the seasons, color, texture, and fragrance. Panels of turf provide green spaces which soothe the eye and invite relaxation.

Native plants are adapted to the vagaries of our climate. They have a better opportunity for survival in the harsh urban environment. In addition, native plants celebrate the unique character of Austin and the Texas Hill Country. Plants have requirements for growth such as orientation, soil depth and width, water, nutrients, and drainage. Design and detailing of plazas should accommodate these requirements.

Recommendations

- Consider the impact of expanses of paving on the heat gain of the plaza. Cover at least 30% of the plaza surface in plant material.
- Select a variety of native and adapted plants -trees, evergreen shrubs, flowering shrubs, vines, groundcovers, perennials, and annuals - to provide color, texture, and fragrance.
- Use feathery-leaved trees to provide a see through effect to subspaces within the plaza.
- Consider the eventual height and mass of mature plants in regard to views, shade, and maintenance.
- Provide adequate soil depth and width to encourage healthy growth. Provide underground irrigation and drainage to all plantings to ensure their survival.

Values Supported

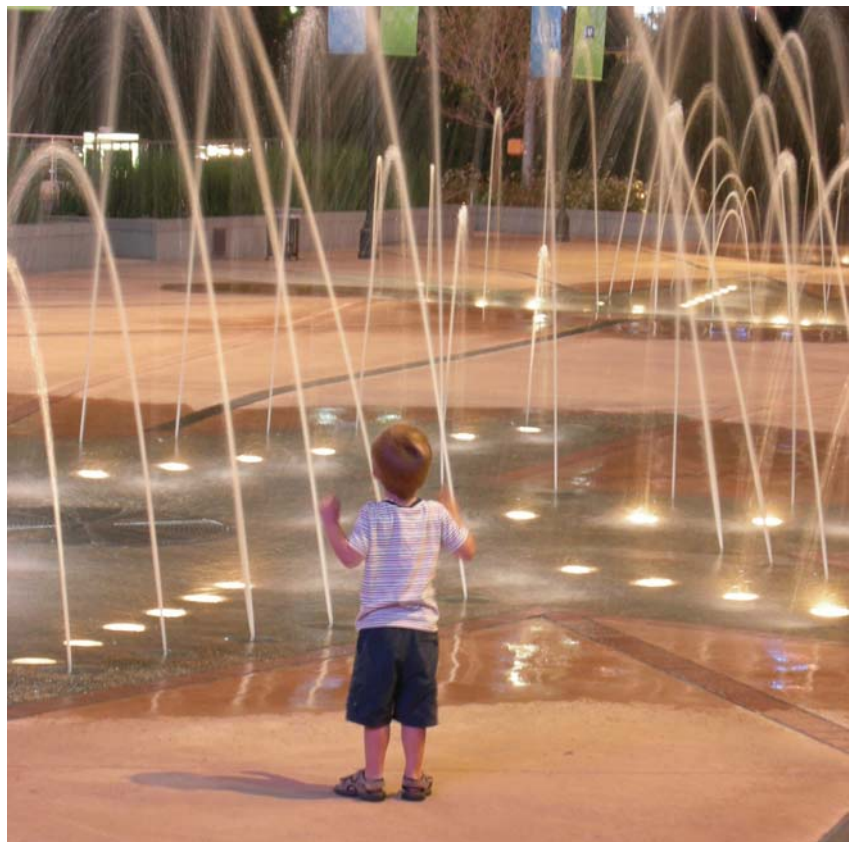
Unique Character
Humane Character
Diversity
Sustainability
Connection to the Outdoors



Provide Interactive Civic Art and Fountains in Plazas

Values Supported	Issue
Sense of History Unique Character Humane Character Civic Art Connection to the Outdoors	Civic art, sculpture, and fountains are popular features in urban plazas world wide. They function best when they promote interaction and communication among people who use the space. In Austin, we have the opportunity to select civic art which speaks to our unique character and sense of place. It can tell the story of our natural and cultural heritage in a way which enriches our experience and understanding of our history.
	Recommendations

- Include civic art in the plaza design. Consider any built element as an opportunity for art, such as manhole covers, paving, railings, overhead structures, signage, etc.
- Select art which communicates a relationship to our sense of place, creates a sense of joy and delight and stimulates play and creativity.
- Include fountains for visual attraction, to screen traffic noise, and for cooling effects.
- Provide art, sculpture, and fountains with which people can interact by means of touch, movement, and play.
- Locate sculptures to not impede pedestrian circulation patterns and lines of sight.
- Scale sculptures and fountains to the size of the plaza.
- Link civic art in plazas with a downtown civic art plan. Consider the opportunities of a downtown art walk.



An urban oasis can use water to create an urban microclimate and calm Austin's harsh summer

Provide Food Service for Plaza Participants

Issue

In William Whyte's book, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, field researchers concluded that plazas with food service attract users more frequently than those which do not. Food concessionaires benefit and more people are drawn to nearby shops which increases the economic vitality of the district. Increase of liveliness and activity increases security and leaves little room for vandals. Food services may take the form of indoor/outdoor restaurants, cafes, food kiosks, and vendors.

Values Supported

Humane Character
Economic Vitality
Safety
Sustainability
Connection to the Outdoors

Recommendations

- Locate food service in and next to the plaza.
- Consider a variety of food service options from cafes to vendors.
- Design the plaza to accommodate vendors. These can add vitality, promote security, and draw people to the ground level retail.
- Provide space for vendors which is highly visible and accessible, yet out of the way of direct pedestrian traffic.
- Provide comfortable places to sit and eat.
- Provide drinking fountains, rest rooms, telephones for users.
- Distribute trash containers around the plaza.

Increase Safety in Plazas through Wayfinding, Lighting, & Visibility

Values Supported	Issue
Humane Character Safety Sustainability Connection to the Outdoors	To encourage the feeling of safety in urban plazas both during the daytime and at night, designs need to include appropriate wayfinding and lighting. Plaza layout needs to promote visibility both into and out from the plaza.
	Recommendations

- Highlight the main building entrance with lighting, signage, materials and detailing
- Provide directional signs linking the plaza to transit stops, taxi stands, nearby neighborhood streets, and orientation within the district
- At adjacent interior lobbies, provide signs directing visitors to reception, elevators rest rooms, telephones, restaurants, etc.
- Provide lighting which promotes a feeling of safety at night. Be sure to light corners and out of the way locations.
- Link plaza lighting to streetscape lighting.
- Design for visibility from the street and the ability to see through from one part of the plaza to another.

Consider Plaza Management and Maintenance

Issue

In many urban plazas the future management and maintenance is not considered in the conceptual design. How the space will be used should be an integral part of the design process. If the plaza is to be used for special events, exhibits and performances, the layout needs to be flexible. Temporary canopied shade, a stage, a place for concessions, and information kiosks may need to be provided. Maintenance issues will affect the design of fountains and irrigation systems, the selection of materials, plants, righting, and civic art.

Values Supported

- Diversity
- Sustainability
- Unique Character
- Connection to the Outdoors

Recommendations

- Develop management policies toward special events.
- If special events are planned, provide a flexible stage and audience area away from the main circulation path.
- If movable chairs and speakers are used, provide a place for interior storage.
- Provide for exterior electrical needs of lighting and speaker systems.
- Provide attachment locations for banners, decorations, and temporary signs.
- Provide information kiosks to post scheduled events.
- Provide locations for temporary concessions.
- Calculate the operational costs of running fountains and irrigation systems.
- Design fountains to prevent overspray onto adjacent paving.
- Program irrigation controllers to water in early morning for the most efficient use of water and to avoid interference with pedestrian traffic.
- Plan and provide for adequate maintenance, recognizing the specialized nature of maintaining plantings and site elements
- Have a maintenance plan in place prior to project completion
- Provide an adequate number of litter containers and an appropriate collection schedule. Coordinate with other plaza furnishings.
- Select built materials for durability and longevity.
- Select plant materials for low water use and low maintenance.
- Consider hiring a plaza manager to ensure that the plaza remains an inviting, user friendly urban amenity.



guidelines for buildings

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Build to the Street

Issue

The place where the building and the sidewalk meet is of prime importance in any urban environment. This is the moment in a pedestrian network where the interaction between people on the sidewalk and businesses in the buildings is most intense. It is a threshold across which commerce and activity must cross. Street level restaurants, shops, stores and businesses are all accessed at that line, and the more continuous it is the greater possibility for success they will all experience. A gap in the length of facades will create an area of low activity and low commercial potential in the same way a vacant lot will, and should be avoided wherever possible.

Buildings, as they meet the ground, also form the space around our city streets. The shape of the streetscape is created by the height and location of the buildings which line the sides. A mid-rise street wall which aligns fairly consistently with the street edge implies that the individual buildings defer to the street. Buildings which meet the street acknowledge the greater importance of the public space through which the streets run. They can, in this way, create an awareness of the greater importance of the civic whole, where building facades are shaped by the public spaces rather than the other way around.

Recommendations

- Urban buildings should be built to the property line to the greatest extent possible when the property line is adjacent to the street - except where additional sidewalk width is needed or desired to create 12 -18' wide sidewalks.
- Building facades should be viewed as part of the public realm and designed accordingly.
- Developments should meet the property lines at the lower four floors. Provisions will be made for exceptions such as arcades on the lower floor and for public plazas which follow the guidelines on outdoor spaces.

Values Supported

Sense of History
Dense Urban Character
Economic Vitality
Safety



When buildings meet the street they acknowledge the greater importance of the public space and create an awareness of the greater importance of the civic whole

Provide Multi-Tenant, Pedestrian-Oriented Development at the Street Level

Values Supported	Issue
Dense Urban Character Sustainability Diversity	The street level of buildings holds the greatest potential for pedestrian use and walk-in commercial activity. The lower two levels of urban buildings should provide a framework for exploiting that potential.
Economic Vitality	Pedestrian oriented cities require that the scale of activity be compressed to something much smaller and more intimate than one appropriate to cars. People walking on the sidewalk move much slower than cars and their attention is naturally more focused. Because of this, buildings which offer only one walk-in business or retail opportunity at street level will frustrate the natural behavior of pedestrians.

Recommendations

- Buildings should provide street-level, pedestrian-oriented uses on all street fronts.
- A public plaza which follows the guidelines on outdoor spaces may be considered a pedestrian-oriented use. If a single building occupies an entire street front on a block, the public plaza may occupy no more than half the block. Pedestrian-oriented uses in the building should face the plaza. The plaza design should recognize the responsibility to define the street.
- No more than 25% of net street frontage should be occupied by uses which have no need for or discourage walk-in traffic. Drive-through facilities are not allowed.
- Building design should encourage multi-tenant occupancy at the lower two floors.



Buildings can provide a framework for exploiting the potential pedestrian use and walk-in commercial activity

Accentuate Primary Entrances

Issue

City dwellers will feel more comfortable in a dense environment if they feel welcome and accommodated. If the streetscape offers cues to the use of buildings, and is clearly defined as a human place, people may be less frustrated living and working there.

Primary entrances connect to lobbies and elevators, while storefront entrances open onto ground level businesses. Because buildings seen from the street present foreshortened views, it is often difficult to distinguish one from the other—even when a large opening has been created for the lobby entrance. Providing some indication from the sidewalk about the location of the entrance can make using the building more comfortable.

Larger buildings which do not provide lobby entrances on each street may force pedestrians to search for the way in. Not only can buildings provide indications of the entrance locations, but they can offer multiple ways into the building, making downtown more comfortable for everyone.

Ease-of-use issues like this can increase the sense that an urban place was created for and belongs to everyone. Buildings which cooperate with larger scale, city wide issues regarding the way people move can assist in creating a more successful development.

Recommendations

- Large buildings which front multiple streets should provide multiple entrances. Building entrances which connect to a central lobby should be distributed on different street facing facades.
- Primary building entrances should be accentuated. These entrances should be designed so that they are not easily confused with entrances into ground level businesses.
- Primary entrances should be recessed off the sidewalk to limit conflicts between swinging doors and pedestrians.
- Civic art and artistic crafting of building materials can help distinguish building entrances.

Values Supported

Humane Character

Safety

Civic Art



When the streetscape offers cues to the use of buildings, and clearly defines it as a human place, people may be less frustrated living and working there.

Encourage the Inclusion of Local Character

Issue

Values Supported

Sense of Time
Unique Character
Authenticity
Humane Character
Sustainability
Civic Art

Our city is a collection of what we find valuable in our region, the visual form of the city with its special places, building types, architectural details and town form, as well as the everyday and special activities of our diverse population and their individual and collective cultures. Within this collection of activities lies an individual spirit, valuable because it gives us a stronger sense of identity in a world which is quickly losing individuality.

One reason for the growth Austin is currently experiencing is the attraction others feel to Austin's unique character, rich with its network of economic, social, physical and cultural life. Many people are moving here from cities which offer little sense of membership because they are too similar to other cities, and because they don't possess the quality of living that one finds in Austin. The fact that individuals and corporations find it unique, memorable, distinctive, and humane is a strong economic force and a key element in the creation and nourishment of a healthy community.

Recommendations

- The use of quality local materials is encouraged / local character should be included in the design.
- Care should be taken to avoid nostalgic reproductions, but to use the materials in a meaningful manner
- Encourage the participation of local artists and artisans in detailing and materials.
- Building design should exhibit a response to the local climate.



Expressing Austin's unique character, rich with its network of economic, social, physical and cultural life is a key element in the creation and nourishment of a healthy community

Control On-Site Parking

Issue

As density increases in any area, parking requirements will increase in the short term, and should be planned for and developed as an integral component of a successful urban center. Throughout the transformation of our dense areas into pedestrian-oriented places — places with transportation options, and a significant resident population — the number of parking spaces will need to increase dramatically. Acknowledging this, and the positive and negative impact that structured parking can have on the fabric of a city, requires that attention be paid to the potential conflicts on-site parking can create.

Parking garages are generally considered necessary but unfortunate and expensive components to downtown projects. Their costs can vary widely depending upon the complexity of the design, and are difficult to recoup. These factors contribute to a pattern of development seen across the country where open sided concrete frame garages with sloped floors take the place of habitable buildings. The problem with these structures is not what they create—useful storage for cars—but in what the typical model tends to displace—pedestrian oriented street-level activity and multi-uses per block.

Recommendations

- Parking should be located below grade, or in interior courts above grade. It should not occur at grade along property lines which are adjacent to a street.
- Where above ground structured parking is located at the perimeter of a building, this should be screened in such a way that cars are not visible from adjacent buildings or the street.
- Above ground parking should be designed in such a way that neighboring buildings are not adversely affected by headlights.
- Structured parking should not be treated in such a way that it is indistinguishable from inhabited areas of the building.
- Inhabitable space must occupy at least 50% of the cumulative length of the streetwall of the building. Where a building occupies an entire block, the inhabitable streetwall must be distributed so that it is not all located on one half of the block.
- Certain streets may be so important that parking in the streetwall along them will not be allowed.
- Shared Parking requirements can help alleviate parking requirements without building additional infrastructure.

** streetwall is vertical face of a building in levels two, three, four, five and six, where they are adjacent to a public street. These are the faces of the lower portion of the building which are visible from the sidewalk and which — other than the ground level — have most impact on the character of the street. Because the ground level is addressed, separately, it is not defined as part of the streetwall. The percentage of streetwall occupied by inhabitable space is calculated per level.

Values Supported

Dense Urban Character
Humane Character
Diversity
Economic Vitality



Above ground on-site parking at the street face unfortunately displaces pedestrian oriented street-level activity and multi-uses

Create Quality Construction

Values Supported

Sense of History
Authenticity
Humane Character
Sustainability



Well-built buildings provide social and economic value, holding their value longer and enhancing the economic viability of the whole city center

Issue

The well-built building can provide a sense of continuity and history simply by having stood for a long period of time. This is because buildings can tell a history of our town as part of the urban fabric. They can remind us of our past and the story of our lives in Austin, and make us feel that we belong to something bigger than ourselves. Their appearance can affect our immediate sense of pride, and our developed sense of continuity; the slower the physical world around us changes, the more permanent it feels, and the more we will feel a part of a town that existed before us and will exist after us.

Urban buildings should not only provide the appearance that they will be there for a long time, they should also provide facades and structures which actually will be there for a long time. Well-built buildings provide greater resale value, and holding their value longer can help the economic viability of the whole city center. Property can be affected by the value of adjacent property, and as poor quality buildings age, the value of its neighbors may decrease.

A stock of quality buildings which can be used for a relatively long time can also be a better use of natural resources. If the design and construction facilitate extended use, less energy may be spent creating new building materials. Energy costs could easily be higher in the future, raising construction costs and limiting incentives for new construction.

Further, reconstruction and mitigation of problems related to poor building methods affects more than just the property owner. It impacts the city's movement around the building as scaffolding is installed at the sidewalk and as traffic is impacted by the work.

Recommendations

- Buildings should be built as high-quality, long-term components of the urban fabric.
- Buildings should be constructed as maintenance free as possible and should be designed to achieve a life span greater than seventy-five years.
- A building is at the end of its lifespan when factors including operating or maintenance costs, repair or reconstruction costs, pressure for more flexible spaces, among others, outweigh the cost of building a new similar building.
- Buildings should have a built-in flexibility to their design and recognize that buildings frequently undergo alterations to conform to uses not considered in the original design.
- Consideration should be given to floor-to-floor heights and structural grids as they may impact possible future uses.
- Consideration should be given to the pedestrian's visual and tactile experience in the selection and configuration of building materials.
- Consideration should be given to the design of exterior walls and skins of buildings. These should not be considered sacrificial surfaces to be replaced several times in the life of the building.

Create Buildings with Human Scale

Issue

Cities are large manmade environments, and while they provide many necessities we have come to expect from our world, they are still not natural environments, but designed places which can be uncomfortable and unhealthy as easily as they can be comfortable and appropriate. With proper attention to design, cities can be comfortable, appropriate and inspiring.

Contemporary building materials are typically machine made rather than hand made, and are frequently installed without alteration or customization. Through this historical inevitability, recent buildings inadvertently present this industrial reality as an aesthetic, deferring to the industrial and eliminating evidence of human hands and craft.

However, the use of modern building materials does not condemn a city to an inhumane character, as any materials may be used to create human scale in a design.

The phenomenon of standardization has exerted similar pressure on the form of contemporary buildings. Structural components are less costly when uniformly designed and mass produced. Fortunately, the industry has seen innovations which make non-standard parts less costly for a more appropriate and humane consideration of the user.

A city which appears to be created to fit people can generate in those who live there the feeling of belonging to a community.

Recommendations

- Buildings should be designed with a variety of scales, creating a scale and level of detail at the street level appropriate to the pedestrian.
- Clearly articulating different uses at lower building levels will aid in creating a sense of human scale in mid- and high-rise buildings. Addressing human scale may further be achieved through architectural detailing, and by variation in the three dimensional character of the building mass as it rises skyward. Monolithic, vertical extrusions of a maximum building footprint are strongly discouraged.
- The lower floors should be differentiated architecturally.
- Where existing adjacent buildings have a consistent massing, this should be continued.



Human scale can be created while using modern building materials. With proper attention to design, cities can be comfortable, appropriate and inspiring

Values Supported

Humane Character
Safety
Sustainability



Glossary

Density	The relative amount of habitable building in a bound area. This is usually expressed in amounts of Floor Area Ratios for commercial projects and units per acre for residential projects (see below). Mixed use projects can use a combination of standards.
Floor Area Ratio	The relationship between the area of land inside the property lines and the gross area of building built on that land. As the illustration below expresses, there can be many ways to achieve the same floor area ratio. A one-story building built over the entire property will result in a floor area ratio of 1.0 or one-to-one. A two-story building built over half the property creates the same floor area ratio. A three-story building built over half the property equates to a floor area ratio of 1.5 or one and a half-to-one.
Façade	literally, face. Usually the vertical outside wall of a building. Usually exposed to view.
Structure	A frame created to support a building. Floors, walls and roof are all attached to the structure.
Arcade	A covered public sidewalk, typically carved from the ground floor of a building and adjacent to a public street.
Setback	A distance from the property line to the building.
Pedestrian-Oriented Use	Businesses which promote and are promoted by the greater use of public sidewalks. As opposed to those which are accessed primarily by cars, and those for whom walk-in business is of little value.
Street Level	The first floor of a building to forty feet inside the property line.
Grade	The level of the ground at the outside of the building.
Structured Parking	Multi-story buildings created to store automobiles.
Streetwall	The vertical face of a building in levels two, three, four, five and six, where they are adjacent to a public street. These are the faces of the lower portion of the building which are visible from the sidewalk and which – other than the ground level – have most impact on the character of the street. Because the ground level is addressed, separately, it is not defined as part of the streetwall. The percentage of streetwall occupied by inhabitable space is calculated per level.

Resolution requesting Design Commission to Develop Design Guidelines for Downtown

RESOLUTION 971106-23

WHEREAS, Austin's current economy promises to bring new development to the downtown area which should be consistent with Austin's character; and

WHEREAS, the Austin City Council provides policy direction to the development community and staff for encouraging desirable development; and

WHEREAS, past Council actions such as creation of the Public Improvement District, code changes and incentives encouraging downtown housing, and approval of sidewalk cafes on public right of way have enhanced the vitality of downtown; and

WHEREAS, other community planning exercises such as the Regional Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT), the Heritage Society, and Citizen's Planning Implementation Committee have taken place which have expressed a vision for downtown; and

WHEREAS, other cities have found ways to preserve their character through the development and use of design guidelines; and

WHEREAS, the City has a resource such as the Design Commission, which makes recommendations on architectural excellence for the community; NOW, THEREFORE,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF AUSTIN:

The City Council requests that the Design Commission prepare draft design guidelines for the city's downtown region within 60 days; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

That these guidelines should exemplify ideals such as a pedestrian and bicycle mobility and urban core vitality expressed through past Council actions, previous planning studies and recommendations and community consensus building exercises such as the Citizen's Planning Committee, the Heritage Society, and R/UDAT