

# Design Guidelines: Placemaking in Practice

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Zoning laws often fall short in telling developers how to fit a project into your community. Sure, the zoning law will set forth lot sizes, parking requirements, height limits and yard setbacks. Many communities also have site plan review, which provides authority to the planning board toward reviewing specific arrangements for building access, parking layout, lighting, and landscaping. Unfortunately, the typical site plan review law has little guidance toward determining the key parameters for approval such as, "adequate landscaping", or "compatible with the character of the neighborhood". This is where design guidelines can be helpful.

Defining a "sense of place" is more art than science. Establishing design guidelines will help communities guide the creation of a place that will sustain both the economy and the human spirit. We will have lost something if our developments have adequate parking yet the place that is built is not attractive and dampens the human spirit. We will have lost something if the signs and lighting overpower the landscaping and the architecture. We will have lost something if we look back on what we have built we see that the cars are well cared for but the people are not.

Design guidelines offer an organized set of principles and development standards to guide building construction, renovation, and site development. Design guidelines have been used to define how to successfully build/renovate in:

- Historic districts
- Commercial areas
- Residential districts
- Highway corridors
- Drinking watershed areas
- Rural areas
- Neotraditional communities
- Just about anything!—the University of South Carolina has "Greek Housing Development Design Guidelines", for example.



A recommended outline for design guidelines will include the following:

1. Definition of Character Areas. For example, what is the historic development pattern in the area and are their parts of the district that have a distinct architectural character. Perhaps part of the district has more of a “small box” franchise pattern. The guidelines will establish how one introduces new uses or renovations to fit the desired fit and feel of the place—and what not to do.
2. Principles. For example, what are the most important big concerns. In one community, the first principle was to “relate buildings and sites to the ‘main street’ frontage. These are the big ideas you want no one to miss or misunderstand.
3. Elements of the Guidelines. This section addresses both district-wide concerns and special details and considerations for individual character areas:
  - a. Applicability. This section defines how the guidelines are to be applied to renovations and new construction.
  - b. Architectural Issues
    - i. Building siting,
    - ii. General architectural standards
    - iii. Height and rooflines
    - iv. Etc.
  - c. Site Issues
    - i. Transportation and mobility
    - ii. Linkage, curb cuts, parking, and circulation
    - iii. Open space, landscaping, lighting, and amenities
    - iv. Etc.



Design guidelines are a great tool to help communities make places special.

For reference: The City of Seattle has a well-developed design guidelines program, including guidelines for several types of development and for some of the city's individual neighborhoods; see: [http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/Planning/Design\\_Review\\_Program/Applicants\\_Toolbox/Design\\_Guidelines/DPD\\_001604.asp](http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/Planning/Design_Review_Program/Applicants_Toolbox/Design_Guidelines/DPD_001604.asp) The New York Planning Federation has had a set of design guidelines available at <http://www.nypf.org/publications.htm> Many communities have adopted design guidelines which can be researched. General Code Publishers based in Rochester has many municipal codes published on their website.

I would not recommend adopting any generic set of design guidelines from another place for your community (though these can be useful references). Rather, it is best to engage in a public conversation about your community's unique characteristics and develop your own set of guidelines that define your own sense of place.