

# CHAPTER 1: URBAN DESIGN CONCEPTS

The design guidelines in this document draw upon urban design principles that address how streets are crafted to be active and pedestrian-friendly and to establish a sense of relatedness among properties. At the same time they also promote excellence in creative, new design, sustainable building and economic development. Some of these urban design principles are also implied in the zoning regulations for downtown. Many of these concepts are used commonly in the design community, and are set forth here to assure a broader understanding of how they are applied in the design guidelines.

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Balancing context and goals. Many of the design guidelines encourage designs that draw upon basic framework features of the established context. This is especially important in historic contexts, but also in areas where creating a stronger sense of visual continuity and connection with the traditional commercial centers is a primary objective.

For this reason, many guidelines look to established patterns of facade articulation, use of materials and massing. Nonetheless, new, creative designs that reinterpret these traditional patterns are to be welcomed.

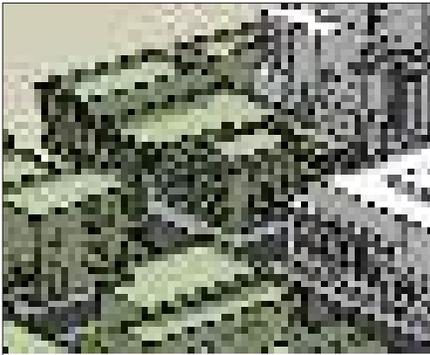


*Building rhythm and space and consistent public streetscape designs are features in the framework patterns which help to establish the existing urban design context in downtown Ann Arbor.*



## Street Types

There are several different sets of objectives for street character in downtown Ann Arbor. Some streets are envisioned to be retail-oriented at the street level, while others would have a mix of retail with other commercial uses (offices and services). Still others would have a mix of commercial and residential uses at the street and some may have a stronger residential emphasis. While all of these areas are zoned for the same mix of uses, these variations in the focus of uses should be reflected in the character of the street edge. These variations are outlined in Frontage Standards in the zoning code. The guidelines for the different character areas also reflect those policies. The basic objectives for these street types are summarized as follows:

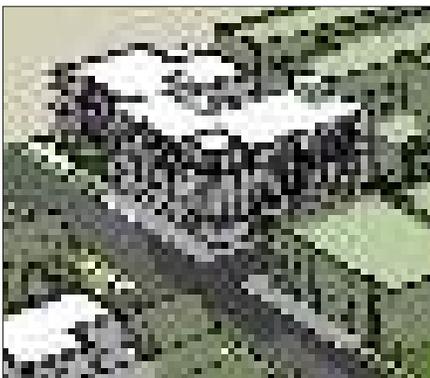


*Shopping (primary frontage) streets have a clearly defined streetwall at the sidewalk edge.*

**Shopping Streets (Primary Frontage areas).** Shopping streets are areas where there is a clearly defined streetwall, closely framed at the sidewalk edge with zero setbacks. These streets are designated as “Primary Frontage” in the zoning requirements, where minimum dimensions are established for the percentage of building wall to be placed at the sidewalk edge. The primary objective for shopping streets is to have a retail focus in which most buildings have first floor storefronts aligned at the sidewalk edge. Establishing a pedestrian-friendly character using creative designs at the zero setback line is also an important objective for these streets.



While having strongly defined, active storefronts is preferred, other design treatments that provide visual interest to pedestrians, convey a sense of scale and express a liveliness in terms of activity are also appropriate at the street level. Small plazas and courtyards, for example, may offer places for outdoor activities. In these cases, a portion of the building wall may be setback from the sidewalk edge. When this does occur, the resulting space should be one that is animated and that contributes to the attractiveness of the walking experience. In other instances, using display cases, architectural detailing or artwork are techniques that would serve the same purpose.



*Mixed-use (secondary frontage) streets have a varied sidewalk edge, often with plazas and other open spaces occupying setbacks.*

**Mixed Use Streets (Secondary Frontage areas).** Streets classified as Secondary Frontage areas in the zoning requirements should have a more varied street edge, with some buildings positioned at the sidewalk edge while others are set back with plazas, courtyards and lawns. This does not imply that the character of the street edge in these areas is less important. It simply means that more variety in setbacks is anticipated. Some of these mixed-use streets are corridors that are very important in terms of linking retail activity centers in the downtown and providing a transition to areas with more landscaped street edges. Creating an inviting street edge remains a paramount objective, and a wide range of approaches that would achieve this are encouraged.

Green Streets (Front Yard Frontage Areas). Streets classified as Front Yard Frontage in the street frontage standards have a residential heritage that stems from rows of single-family houses with green yards in front. While commercial uses mixed with multifamily residential are anticipated in these areas, the established pattern of a green street frontage remains an objective. The majority of building fronts should be set back from the sidewalk, with yards, plazas and courtyards in the foreground. The depths of these yards may be less than those seen historically, but general alignment with established building fronts is preferred. The primary objective for these streets is for a sense of progression of space be established, from the public realm to the private realm.

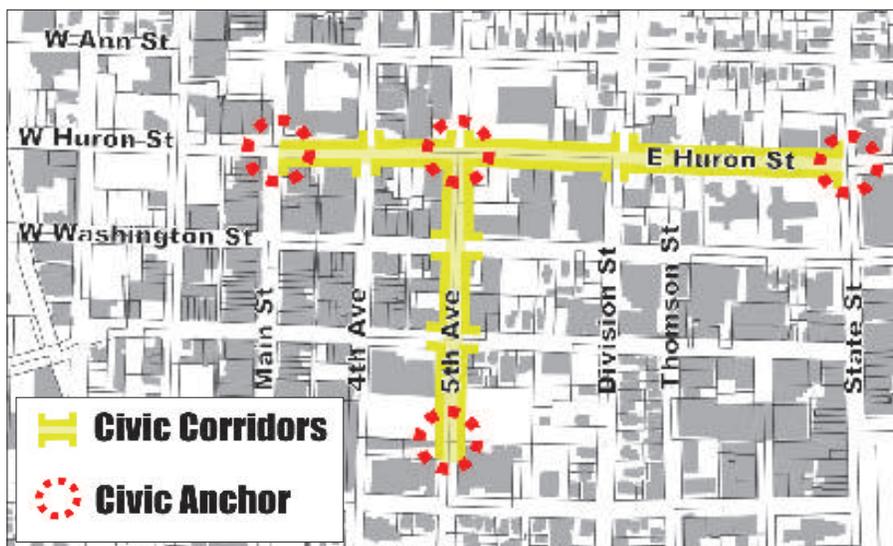


*Green (residential frontage) streets maintain an open space frontage along the street front.*

Civic Corridors. Although most streets in downtown Ann Arbor are an important part of the city’s civic realm, certain streets play a unique role. These civic corridors are distinguished by important civic anchors and institutions such as the Ann Arbor City Hall, Washtenaw County Courthouse, Ann Arbor District Library and University of Michigan campus.

Because civic corridors such as 5th Avenue and Huron Street pass through different character areas, some differences in design character can be expected along their length. However, it is important to consider their overall civic role through the thoughtful placement and coordination of institutional facilities and public places.

Civic corridors should contribute to a sense of community and provide places for celebration. Special design consideration should also be given to view corridors as well as the placement and orientation of institutional buildings to ensure that they are perceived as community spaces. Institutional buildings and their primary entrances should be oriented towards civic corridors along which they are located. View corridors towards civic anchors and institutions should be promoted.



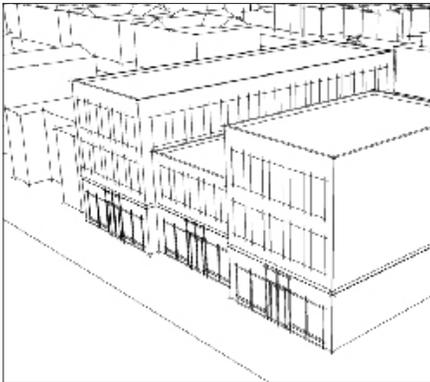
*Civic corridors such as 5th Avenue and Huron Street are distinguished by important civic anchors and institutions such as the Ann Arbor City Hall, Washtenaw County Courthouse, Ann Arbor District Library and University of Michigan Campus.*



*Civic corridors contribute to a sense of community.*



*Perception of streetwall height from sidewalk.*



*Traditionally, the height of building fronts is varied in downtown Ann Arbor, contributing to a varied and interesting skyline.*

## Context-Related Design

The guidelines encourage design solutions that will help to reinforce objectives for street edge character as well as building mass and scale as defined for the different character areas. In many cases, established patterns of development provide a desired context that is to be continued and reinforced in new development. Still other places need a stronger sense of continuity, and in these cases forward-looking guidance encourages establishing a new context.

A specific set of terms is used in the guidelines to describe how individual buildings may be composed. Many of these are familiar elements, but are presented here in the context of how buildings may be designed to relate to others in the area while also expressing their own individual identities. These terms are summarized in this section. Additional terms are defined in the Appendix to the Downtown Design Guidelines.

**Building height and scale.** A key objective in the Design Guidelines is that new buildings should appear to be in scale with those of the established context that are valued, while also accommodating greater densities. While overall height may be a factor, a building may be sculpted in ways that convey scale at the street level, as perceived along a block and from a greater distance on the horizon. Some of these aspects of building height are related to the following context-related design topics.

**Streetwall height.** The height of a building as it is seen at the sidewalk edge is a key consideration, as this has a strong influence on the sense of scale experienced by pedestrians at the base of a building. “Streetwall Height” is a term used to describe the scale of the front plane of a building as it faces a street. In general, buildings should express a streetwall height that corresponds to the requirements set forth in the downtown overlay zoning districts.

Traditionally, the height of building fronts is varied in downtown Ann Arbor, contributing to a varied and interesting skyline. While buildings that are relatively tall can be found throughout downtown, there are areas where two-story heights are typical, and others where a range between three and four stories is predominant. In these areas, maintaining these scales is desired, even when buildings would be taller than these precedents. New buildings that provide some sense of streetwall height within these ranges are to be encouraged, while at the same time, variation in building height at the street edge is an essential character-defining feature to maintain.

Parapet block. The term “Parapet Block” is used to describe the roof profile that results from a set of buildings as seen at the sidewalk edge in a traditional Main Street setting. A row of building fronts that align at the sidewalk edge and have relatively similar building heights at the street front will combine to create a uniform “Parapet Block” effect. Where heights at the street edge vary, so will the Parapet Block. In downtown Ann Arbor, a variation in height typically occurs along this parapet block line, and continuing this feature is promoted in the guidelines.



*A row of building fronts that align at the sidewalk edge and have relatively similar building heights at the street front will combine to create a uniform “Parapet Block” effect.*

Base, middle, cap. Many buildings in a downtown urban setting are composed of three elements, a base, middle, and cap. These may be expressed in traditional ways, or in more contemporary interpretations, but when this organizational principle is used, it helps to establish a sense of scale. This massing organization also correlates with the principle of establishing a consistency of height at the street edge, and in the way in which guidelines for upper tower portions are expressed.



*Many buildings in a downtown urban setting are composed of three elements, a base, middle, and cap.*

Horizontal alignment. A design technique for building a sense of visual relatedness among buildings is to extend horizontal lines in facades that will generally align with other facades in the block. Historically, this was accomplished with moldings, cornices and other details. But other techniques may achieve these same results. A change in material or even color may do so. A horizontal line of balcony rails, sun screens or light shelves may do so as well.

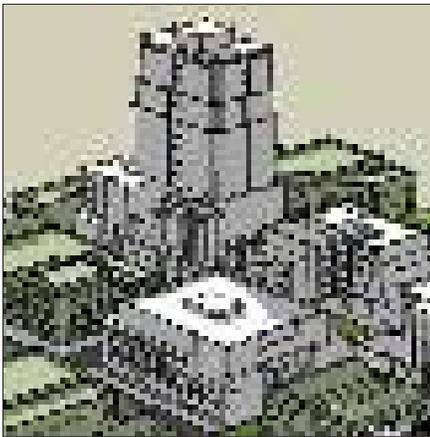
Articulation. A building may be articulated with changes in massing, materials and surface treatments that give interest and convey scale. This articulation can serve to reduce the perceived scale of a larger building by dividing it into modules, or sub-parts, that appear to be similar in size to smaller established buildings. This is a concept that is reflected in many of the downtown design guidelines.

Fenestration patterns and transparency. The relationship of solid building wall to more transparent glass areas conveys scale and establishes a sense of visual continuity among buildings along a block. Fenestration patterns that reflect traditional commercial block composition are encouraged in the guidelines. However, they also recognize that new patterns may evolve with changing uses, building technologies and sustainability objectives.



**Tower massing.** While overall building height can be a concern in the design of a structure, the manner in which upper portions are massed is more important. Compatibility with the desired neighborhood context is a key consideration, and to achieve this the overall height of a building is less important than its treatment of the street edge.

A tower may take on a variety of forms, but will be constrained by site dimensions as well as the uses for which the building is intended. Several methods for sizing and positioning tower masses exist. Setting back portions of a tower is one approach which is stipulated in the zoning standards. Other techniques are addressed in the design guidelines such as the use of a point tower placed on a lower “podium” that reflects traditional scale in a block. A maximum diagonal standard is also used as a method to keep upper stories in proportion to their lots. FARs (Floor Area Ratios) also work to establish a ratio of building mass that will be in keeping with the scale seen traditionally while accommodating new infill development.



*The massing of a building tower is more important than its overall height.*

**Setbacks.** In areas that abut established residential neighborhoods, locating a new building away from adjoining buildings may be important. For this reason, setbacks are defined that seek to respect these established patterns. The objective is to provide a yard, plaza or courtyard in this foreground and to keep building fronts roughly in line with traditional residential buildings in the area.

**Offset.** The downtown strategy calls for new buildings to have upper portions that are placed back from the street edge in order to maintain a sense of a lower scale for pedestrians. This offset of the upper building mass is a means of accommodating more volume than what would otherwise be considered excessive for the context.

## Special Design Principles

In addition to the context-related design principles set forth in the preceding section, there are some key design concepts that are more general.

**Landmark Buildings.** While many buildings downtown may be considered background structures, in that they reflect design similarities that contribute to a sense of visual continuity, there are others that stand out as landmarks. These are typically civic, cultural and institutional facilities which are designed to serve a public function. Often they are designed as unique accents in the urban framework, and frequently establish a more monumental presence. Even so, each landmark building should be designed with its context in mind.

Some open spaces also fit into this category. The Farmer's Market, for example, may serve as a landmark of a different nature. Special guidelines for landmark buildings are provided for such resources. They acknowledge that these facilities will merit individual consideration, both in terms of their landmark qualities as well as how they relate to other civic facilities and the broader context of commercial and residential uses in the area.

Civic buildings should be designed to serve as landmarks and therefore a greater flexibility in design is appropriate for them.

**Spaces, Places and Paths.** Each street should have sidewalks that are designed to support its envisioned functions and to encourage pedestrian activity. Specific streetscape designs are provided in other city planning documents. The guidelines, through concepts for building massing, setbacks, and fenestration patterns, reflect objectives for street character. The manner in which buildings frame the street or define open spaces, and the ways in which they help to activate the sidewalk, are important considerations.

Providing active parks, plazas and open spaces are also key considerations. In some cases, detached trails and paths may also be developed. Some of these spaces may be in association with planned greenways, but others may be smaller, incremental passageways. These incremental passages would serve to connect properties and provide links to other blocks, secondary entries, parking facilities and other services.

As described earlier in this chapter, streets defined as civic corridors such as 5th Avenue and Huron Street provide special opportunities for public places. These streets provide a visually linked path through downtown which should convey a sense of relatedness through placement of institutional facilities and linked pedestrian spaces.



*A Farmer's Market serves as a landmark in the Kerrytown character area.*



*Sidewalk and streetscape design which supports its uses and level of pedestrian activity.*

**Sustainable Design.** Sustainable building, site and landscape designs can provide energy and environmental benefits as well as benefits to their users. For example, sustainably-designed buildings often have pleasant, healthy and productive interior environments. Sustainably-designed sites and landscapes can help support outdoor spaces that are comfortable for year-round uses.

The City of Ann Arbor is committed to promoting building, site and landscape designs that conserve energy and reduce environmental impacts. These include concepts for sustainable building, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards, green building construction and carbon footprint reduction. All designs should help to achieve excellence in these areas, and the downtown design guidelines support this objective.

Sustainability is an important topic in design; as such it is addressed in its own right in each of the three general levels of the design guidelines: site planning, building massing, and building elements. The design guidelines for sustainability may resemble other guidelines throughout the document. Where guidelines may overlap, sustainability should be a high priority.

The sustainable design guidelines provided herein are not comprehensive, and projects are encouraged to provide additional strategies for sustainable building, site and landscape design. New theories and technologies continually emerge in approaches to green building in its broadest sense. As they do, they should be applied to the greatest extent feasible.

**Accessibility.** Downtown should be accessible for all users, including those with disabilities, and this may translate into design techniques that provide zero step entries as well as other special treatments. Some accessibility standards are established in city and state codes, as well as in the criteria defined in the Americans Disabilities Act. Nothing in the downtown design guidelines should be construed to impede one from meeting those standards or from achieving higher levels of accessibility.



*The Ann Arbor YMCA property incorporates several sustainable site design principles.*



*Downtown Ann Arbor should be accessible to all users.*