

Ms. Diane Sugimura
Director
Department of Planning and Development
City of Seattle
700 Fifth Ave., Suite 2000
P.O. Box 34019
Seattle, WA 98124-4019

Re: Design Review Process Recommendations and Considerations

November 25, 2014

Dear Diane:

AIA Seattle, our professional association for architects in Seattle, has been working with our members to gather their experiences with the City's Design Review Process. Understanding that the City is interested in exploring ways to improve this important function of DPD, we appreciate this opportunity to share with you the attached Recommendations and Considerations.

AIA Seattle's members – around 2,000 architects and professionals working on the design of our city – care passionately about making better buildings and neighborhoods. Our members possess a deep body of experience with Seattle's current Design Review process, encompassing the full range of project types and scales, as well as a diversity of perspectives. In addition to representing applicants, our members serve as volunteer board members for Design Review Boards across the city and possess extensive familiarity with similar processes in other cities.

Recognizing the challenges with our current Design Review process, AIA Seattle would like to engage the City and other community stakeholders to make the process better—more consistently rigorous, equitable and effective in fostering good design. We would like to share our wealth of diverse, individual insights about the parts of our current process that have worked well, along with its more challenging aspects. As a group of committed professionals, we also stand ready to assist in coming up with creative changes to Design Review that will result in more productive dialogue, improved permitting efficiencies and a better built environment.

Early this year, AIA Seattle convened a member task force of active participants in the Design Review process, including several current and past Design Review Board

members to make an initial assessment of the current process to identify opportunities for improvement. In addition to a series of internal brainstorming sessions, the group also engaged the City's Design Review leadership in a preliminary information exchange session. The attached goals, recommendations and considerations are an outgrowth of that process.

We hope that you consider our recommendation and preliminary considerations as an expression of our willingness and commitment to work with the City and other community stakeholders to improve the Design Review process. Seattle is a dynamic and rapidly evolving city, thus it only follows that the processes for how we make our physical environment must also continue to adapt to our changing world.

We look forward to working with your department moving forward, to hone and improve the existing Design Review process, so that it realizes its full potential to make buildings and communities better for the people that live in them.

Regards,



Sam Miller AIA
President



Lisa Richmond
Executive Director

Cc: Mayor Ed Murray
Deputy Mayor Kate Joncas
Councilmember Sally Bagshaw
Councilmember Tim Burgess
Councilmember Sally Clark
Councilmember Jean Godden
Councilmember Bruce Harrell
Councilmember Nick Licata
Councilmember Mike O'Brien
Councilmember Tom Rasmussen
Councilmember Kshama Sawant
Lisa Rutzick

Design Review Process

Recommendations and Considerations

Goals

Better design

We believe the ultimate goal of the Design Review process is to produce better projects that are good neighbors and positively contribute to the life of our city.

Greater consistency

The process must be consistent and predictable—in terms of the time it takes, its rules of engagement, and the outcomes it produces. An improved process will reduce costs to both the city and to business, and also lessen frustration on all sides.

Better communication

Design Review should promote healthy communication between the applicant, the Board and the public with clearly established rules of conduct that provide appropriate focus and structure to each step of the process.

Recommendation

Empower an Independent Design Review Task Force

The challenges with the current Design Review process are complex. The process must answer to multiple stakeholder groups, and issues of land-use entitlement are interwoven with actual design review. This makes for a complex mix of issues and participants. Even within our own AIA Seattle membership there are a wide variety of experiences and viewpoints, and thus no simple set of recommendations will yield the significant, inventive changes we hope to see.

AIA Seattle recommends appointing an independent Mayor's Task Force, supported by staff or a paid consultant, and including architects, developers, owners, legal experts and citizen representatives. The parameters of the task force will be guided by the expressed goals and shared commitment to make Design Review more efficient and predictable, while also fostering good design as core element of the land-use process.

Considerations

Clearly define goals

The city states that Design Review is intended to “design new buildings that enhance their surroundings.” Design Review Boards sometimes vary in their own conception of their role and procedures for achieving these aspirations.

We believe that, in general, the design review process should seek to establish a baseline level of design quality. It should require improvement to sub-standard project proposals, and seek to promote a higher level of design quality for proposals that exceed the baseline. The board should not require changes to projects that meet or exceed the baseline quality.

The process should advise and advocate for design approaches in response to particular project / site factors, but should not dictate specific design solutions. The process should also afford opportunity to innovate beyond what the current Design Guidelines and Design Review process mandate.

Streamline the process

The current process does not always effectively align with the particular parameters and circumstances a project. This results in inefficiencies of that are costly to all participants, including the applicant and the City.

There are many opportunities to improve the efficiency of the process and reduce its time burden. The time between submitting the EDG packet and the initial meeting should be reduced so that project teams have an opportunity to maintain productive progress. Time between DRB meetings should be reduced to avoid unnecessary project delays and associated financial penalties. For small projects, the EDG and Recommendation meetings should be combined. The City could employ underutilized Boards that are not reviewing many projects to help with the scheduling challenges.

Plan for consistency

As a process populated by volunteers and administered by individuals, Design Review naturally struggles to maintain consistency from meeting to meeting. Yet maintaining consistent knowledge of the particulars of projects under review is key to producing good long-term outcomes.

Consistent attendance of Board members is critical for projects requiring multiple meetings. Consider reducing the number of Board members from 5 to 3, which may reduce the likelihood of no-shows and increase the focus of design review dialogue.

When a quorum requires the presence of substitute board members, those volunteers need to be fully informed on the project process to date. Consider whether the substitutes should then stay with the project until it is completed to maintain consistency. If substitute board members join the process following the initial Early Design Guidance they and the board should be accountable to the initial guidance.

Consider adoption of a small number of “universal board members” who sit on multiple DRBs, thereby lending consistency and experience in how to effectively conduct the process.

Clearly define roles

Board members vary in their understanding of their role and that of other Design Review participants. A clear, shared understanding of roles and a more detailed operating protocol would result in a more predictable process.

The process would benefit greatly from increased consistency in the qualifications, roles and responsibilities of all participants. We recommend additional training and adoption of a certification process for board members, with clear guidelines for member responsibilities.

Increased consistency requires substantiating documentation for: Board Members, Board Chair, Planner, Applicant, and the Public. The public is often unclear of their role in the process and how to engage. It is incumbent that the planner as the moderator and the chair clearly address the role of each participant at the beginning of each Design Review meeting and maintains a consistent presence throughout the process.

Promote rigorous communication

Design Review meetings tend to veer away from the stated agenda, which is understandable given that Board members and public participants want to use Design Review as an opportunity to comment on all aspects of a project, not just those currently under review. The current communication protocol unnecessarily limits productive dialogue, interactive discussion and factual verification.

Adopt a consistent framework of dialogue that allows both applicant and Board to offer comment and questions throughout the entire proceeding, including Board deliberations. Consider how to address the roles of the Planner and Public in this exchange.

The requirement for three developed options is unnecessary and often counter-productive. It is often more appropriate for the design team to present design analysis

and preliminary studies and design evolution as the basis for the proposed design solution at EDG and Recommendation meetings.

Time allocated to the design presentation is short-changed in the current process, as 20 minutes is insufficient, especially for complex projects. We recommend 30 minutes as a minimum standard, with additional time allotted for large-scale or complex projects.

Board members should be required to stick to the issues under their purview and refrain from attempting to redesign the project. Strong leadership from the Board Chair or Planner should manage the Design Review dialogue to keep it on topic.

Focus public engagement

Public engagement in the Design Review process is important to help ensure that projects are responsive to their community context. However, the current process is often dominated by special interest groups that are opposed to the project for reasons independent of design, wasting time and creating frustration on all sides. Consider how to meaningfully engage the public while maintaining focus on the design issues related to the proposal.

Consider whether public participation needs to occur at so many stages throughout the process. Currently it occurs at EDG, MUP submittal, Recommendation Meeting and Decision Publication. Often the public comment is the same at each stage, and does not consider the progress of the proposal in response to the guidance of the city.

Clearly document outcomes

The current process does not provide reliable, consistent feedback. Meetings are not audio-recorded, and Design Guidance may reference items that were not discussed at the meeting. Currently issues that were previously ruled on by the Board may be open to further debate in future meetings.

All Design Review meetings should be audio-recorded to ensure and corroborate the accuracy of meeting transcripts and DRB directives. Once a particular project issue is discussed and effectively ruled on by the Board, it should not be open to further debate or disapproval – in other words, no “double jeopardy.”