

# AIA Seattle Issue Brief: Seattle Downtown Urban Design Framework Plan

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## Overview

The City of Seattle completed the state mandated update to its Comprehensive Plan on October 17, 2016. The plan will guide future growth and manage the 115,000 new jobs and 70,000 additional housing units anticipated over the next 20 years. While we support the basic framework of the Comprehensive Plan, AIA Seattle believes that more specific urban design guidance is required if we are to realize a collective vision for our city and this is especially true for downtown. While many of our neighborhoods employ urban design frameworks to direct their physical growth toward a shared design vision, downtown does not have such a plan. This plan would provide location specific and physical *design* recommendations for the downtown public and private realms in both written and graphic form, including plans and illustrations to allow the recommendations to be easily visualized and understood by all city residents.

## Urban Design Framework

By adding an urban design framework to the growth strategy outlined in the Comprehensive Plan, the City can better coordinate downtown planning efforts. In so doing the city can identify opportunities it might otherwise forego, resolve potential conflicts and ensure that future growth enhances the qualities that make Seattle the unique city it is.

An urban design framework would describe the ***physical form*** of downtown Seattle through three lenses: the natural environment, the built environment and public space. In each of these three categories, the framework should contain:

- An identification of Seattle's unique qualities and patterns including an inventory of existing conditions, challenges and opportunities.
- An understanding of how the character of existing development within our downtown shapes our experience.
- An understanding of the broader physical context surrounding downtown including connections to adjacent neighborhoods and how the Pacific Northwest landscape defines its sense of place.
- A set of fundamental urban design principles describing a vision for downtown Seattle and identifying concrete proposals for future structures and places.
- Graphic illustrations and guidelines that reinforce desired patterns of development and suggest modifications to existing patterns that fall short of the vision.
- A public engagement process including strategies to allow citizens and stakeholders to express their ideas, observations and concerns about their downtown and its future.

## **A Coordinated Effort**

A downtown urban design framework will identify opportunities that may otherwise be overlooked. It would also provide the framework to foster a coordinated planning approach to the various efforts by City offices, departments and commissions. There are many separate planning and development initiatives currently underway downtown including the waterfront, Convention Center and the Pike/Pine corridor to name a few. By identifying a set of unifying urban design goals and objectives the framework will provide a clearer focus and direction for these autonomous public and private efforts while fostering a synergy between them in which the whole exceeds the sum of the parts and limited resources are used more efficiently.

If the City had such a plan in place there would be clearer direction regarding the Convention Center expansion, SODO sports facilities, the waterfront and its connection to downtown and the need for schools and other services downtown. The plan would also allow citizens to visualize building forms, configurations and relationships other than those that primarily serve the interests of individual public and private developments.

## **Quality Public Realm**

The quality of our public realm is critical as roughly 30% of our city's land area consists of streets and sidewalks. They allow for movement and connections between places but they are also a system of public open spaces that stitch our public and private worlds together, creating the essential interactions for a healthy and vibrant community. An urban design framework would assure that our public realm be safe and comfortable for pedestrians, which encourages more people and interaction on the street. The plan would encourage well-designed streets that are easy to navigate, provide urban amenities and offer opportunities for people to socialize with friends and make connections with new ones. An urban design vision is essential to fostering a public realm that supports the life and vitality of our city.

## **Why Now?**

There are many current development initiatives both public and private that would benefit from an inspired and well-illustrated urban design framework for downtown. Housing is permitted and encouraged downtown but its location, form, density and integration with other uses is currently left to chance. A downtown mobility and public realm planning effort is currently underway. While this is a great first step in creating an urban design framework it doesn't leverage other opportunities such as urban form and density, public and private open space, culture and entertainment centers, housing, public service facilities, lighting, environmental safety and the like.

An inspiring, clearly written and richly illustrated urban design vision for downtown is critical to our "core value" of social equity and to Mayor Murray's Executive Order 2014-02 committing our city to equitable development. Current and future planning policies alone are not adequate for land use decisions that shape the form of our city. Seattle 2035 should be an inspired vision that guides our downtown growth while promoting a vibrant public realm and private sector investments that are shared by all.

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## **Key Messages**

A vision in the form of a well-written and -illustrated urban design framework for The City of Seattle downtown would:

- Identify opportunities in the downtown that may not be readily apparent without plan guidance.
- Yield creative solutions.
- Identify common goals, objectives and projects regarding physical improvements and benefits to our downtown.
- Provide focus and direction for many autonomous public and private proposals and foster a synergy between them.
- Facilitate a coordinated planning approach for all City offices, departments and commissions.
- Result in a more efficient and effective allocation of City resources.
- Clearly establish a relationship between transit, urban development and associated density contributing to overall sustainability.
- Provide input to establishing accessibility, legibility and wayfinding in the downtown.
- Enhance and encourage business.
- Provide a process to evaluate actual realistic physical alternatives and assess their issues and opportunities for the City.

## **Background**

Other communities that have successfully produced or included in their coordinated planning a physical or urban design framework include San Francisco, New York, Vancouver, Philadelphia, Portland, Toronto, Cincinnati, Charlotte, Austin, North Miami Beach, and many others.

Wall Street Journal's *2009 Market Watch: Best Cities for Business Top 10 cities* all have downtown urban design plans, design guidelines, preservation guidelines and design review.

"Forbes' *2009 America's Most Livable Cities Top 10* have made a commitment to quality investment. Each has city or regional urban design policies, downtown urban design plans, design guidelines, preservation guidelines and design review." Bruce Race FAIA, AICP

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