

AIA Seattle Issue Brief: Design Review

Issue Brief

Issue

City of Seattle Design Review

Description

Seattle's existing design review process needs to be improved in order to achieve better design outcomes for our city and neighborhoods, to offer greater consistency and predictability to all parties, and to promote healthy communication between the applicant, the board, and the public.

AIA Seattle supports a design review process that promotes a higher level of design quality in our built environment, bringing substandard projects up to a baseline design standard, and supporting projects that go beyond that standard. 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.

The challenges with the current Design Review process are complex. The process must answer to multiple stakeholder groups. AIA Seattle advocates for an independent task force that represents all stakeholders, to review the current process and recommend improvements.

AIA Seattle Action

Advocacy Goals

Overhaul the design review process for the City of Seattle so that it incentivizes good design, and is efficient, transparent and consistent for all stakeholders.

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.

Actions

Advocate for a mayor-appointed task force to review the process and make recommendations (done, March 2015)

Appointment an AIA representative to the task force (done, March 2015)

Share our members' key recommendations with the task force, DPD, and City Council (done, December 2014)

Meet with City Council members to discuss design review recommendations (done, February 2015)

Participate in task force process, sharing views of architect members on proposed changes (done, October 2015)

Meet with DPD to discuss final recommendations (scheduled, Nov 2015)

Inform members

Key Messages

Design Review should produce better designed buildings.

Trained and empowered staff and design review board members are critical to a good design review process.

Public comment can most productively be focused on design issues that the design team and review board have the authority and ability to address.

Background

Research Conducted

AIA Seattle Public Policy Board Member George Shaw AIA convened a task force of AIA members with a wide range of experiences as users or participants in Seattle's design review process. That group met several times to discuss the benefits and challenges of design review in its current format, and identified a set of considerations for revisions to the process. The group also engaged the City's Design Review leadership in a preliminary information exchange session. Group leader George Shaw met with other stakeholder groups that have been discussing the process.

Impact on Architects or the Built Environment

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.

Our members are directly impacted by the Design Review process, and have a clear stake in making it produce the best buildings for our city and neighborhoods.

Partners

We have been in contact with a similar group convened by DSA and the Chamber of Commerce.

Member Input

See above.