

City Design Glossary

accessible

public spaces, buildings, and facilities which accommodate people with special needs or disabilities

accessory use

a use incidental to, and on the same lot as, a principal use, such as a detached garage apartment on a residential lot

adaptive reuse

conversion of a building into a use other than that for which it was designed, such as changing a warehouse into gallery space or housing

air rights (see transfer of development rights)

the ownership or control of development rights which allows the use of air space over property such as buildings, highways, and railroad tracks

amenity

design features which are valued by the users of a building or public space; examples of amenities include good architecture, open space, landscaping, seating, and public art

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)

the federal law which requires public buildings and facilities, including transportation facilities, to be accessible to persons with disabilities

architectural drawings

used by architects and other design professionals during the design process:

- an axonometric drawing appears three-dimensional and is generally an overhead view
- an elevation is a two-dimensional drawing which shows a facade or side of a structure
- a perspective also creates the illusion of three-dimensionality, but with reference to relative depth or distance
- the plan illustrates the room layout, as well as the placement of windows and doors
- a section cuts through the structure, illustrating wall thickness and ceiling heights

average daily traffic (ADT)

the average numbers of vehicles passing a fixed point in a 24-hour period; a conventional measurement of traffic volume

axonometric (see architectural drawings)

axis

a real or imaginary straight line around which the parts of a structure or space are symmetrically or evenly arranged or composed

background buildings

buildings that lack individual architectural merit but contribute to the overall character of an area or district; simple commercial buildings in a historic district function as background buildings

barrier (see edge, hard)

bike share

a system for short-term bicycle rental available at unattended stations

bikeway

a facility intended to accommodate bicycle travel for recreational or commuting purposes

Bilbao effect

the economic and tourism impact of a significant architectural work

build-to-line

a zoning device which controls the location of buildings to create consistent streetwalls or define public spaces; unlike a set back, which establishes a minimum distance from a property line or street, a build-to-line establishes the maximum permitted set back or exact location of a building facade

building cap

maximum allowable construction in a designated area or city; for example, San Francisco limits annual downtown office space construction to 475,000 square feet and Petaluma, CA, limits the number of residential building permits issued annually

buildout

the maximum allowable buildable area as stipulated by land use controls like zoning or a building cap

bulk (see mass)

certified historic structure

for the purposes of the federal preservation tax incentives, any structure subject to depreciation as defined by the National Register of Historic Places or located in a registered historic district and certified by the Secretary of the Interior as being of historic significance to the district

certified rehabilitation

any rehabilitation of a certified historic structure that the Secretary of the Interior's standards has determined is consistent with the historic character of the property or the district in which the property is located

charrette

a French term used to describe an intensive, collaborative design exercise that generates ideas for a project or plan

circulation

movement patterns of pedestrians and vehicular traffic

cluster development

a development design technique that concentrates buildings in specific areas on a site to allow the remaining land to be used for recreation, common open space, and preservation of environmental resources; units are grouped on smaller parcels than zoning would otherwise permit, but the average density for the tract is maintained

collaboration

a team effort with contribution from professionals in different fields, such as architects, landscape architects, engineers, artists, and other interested parties

colonnade

a linked row of columns providing shade and protected passage

compatibility

- the characteristics of different uses or activities which allow them to be located near each other in harmony; some elements affecting compatibility include intensity of occupancy as measured by dwelling units per acre, floor area ratio, pedestrian or vehicular traffic; also, complimenting uses may be compatible, like residential and retail uses
- the characteristics of different designs which allow them to be located near each other in harmony, such as scale, height, materials, fenestration, etc.

complete streets

streets that are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities

comprehensive plan (see master plan)

a broad-reaching general plan for a large area such as a state, county, or municipality; elements of the plan may include land use, housing, natural resources, traffic and circulation, hazard, and demographics

cornice

a top of a wall or building element made evident by an assembly of projecting moldings which strike a definitive limit to that section of the building

creative placemaking

a field that emphasizes the role of the arts, in addition to traditional planning and design tools, in shaping successful community development projects

demolition by neglect

the destruction of a building through abandonment or lack of maintenance

density

measurement of the number of units, e.g. housing, or persons per acre, which may indicate the level of activity in an area

design competition

a way to select design professionals, not merely on the basis of reputation, but on the basis of a specific response to a program or site; a competition may take a variety of forms, but most include a detailed program which defines the project, and a jury of professional and lay people to review entries and select winners

design guidelines

a tool which defines appropriate architectural and urban design responses in specific areas of a city; design guidelines have been used as the basis for the review of development proposals in historic areas, special districts, and planned unit developments

design review board

a public body, generally made up of designers and laymen, appointed to administer design guidelines and review proposed developments or modifications to existing developments, generally within a specified area such as a historic district or downtown

directional emphasis

refers to a predominant emphasis of the building, either horizontal or vertical; recognizing this aspect of design is especially important when designing additions to historic buildings or when planning a new development in a historic district

dismantling

taking apart a structure piece by piece, often with the intention of reconstructing it elsewhere

displacement

the movement of individuals, businesses, or industries from property or neighborhoods because of development activities like redevelopment (eminent domain or gentrification)

district

an area which has a distinct character or purpose, such as an area with predominantly historic buildings, arts facilities, ethnic residents, or unique topography

easement

a less-than-free interest in real property acquired through donation or purchase and carried as a deed restriction or covenant to protect important open spaces, sensitive natural resources, views, building facades, or interiors

edges

delineation of districts or areas which could be physical in nature (e.g. medieval walls or greenbelts) or physiological (e.g. major street joining residential and commercial districts); hard edges create a break between areas; freeways and busy thoroughfares are generally disruptive hard edges, which create a physical or psychological barrier; soft edges create a subtle break or transition between areas or uses and, unlike hard edges, are not particularly difficult to cross; for instance, a plaza, park, or non-offensive change in land use is considered a soft edge

eminent domain

the power of the government to acquire private property for public use for which the owner must receive “just compensation”; redevelopment authorities, state universities, and special districts may also be empowered with eminent domain to acquire parcels of land for economic development purposes, infrastructure improvements, and other purposes deemed in the public interest

enclosure

the state when a pedestrian feels sheltered within a semi-private space; trees, narrow streets, awnings and canopies, and articulated edges create a sense of enclosure

environmental impact

influence of a development on the natural or built environment; Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) are designed to measure the impact of a proposal and recommend appropriate mitigation strategies

environmental simulation

images graphically representing the impact of proposed changes to the built or natural environment; images may be generated through a combination of a computer, photographic, and film media

equity

cash investment (as opposed to mortgage debt) in a project; sweat equity is the investment of occupants' own labor in rehabilitation work

Euclidean zoning (see zoning)

the most common type of zoning named after a U.S. Supreme Court case involving the town of Euclid, Ohio; regulates development through land use classifications and dimensional standards with a focus on separating incompatible uses

extended use

any process that increases the useful life of an old building, e.g., adaptive reuse or continued use

fabric or urban fabric

the physical material of a building, structure, or city, connoting an interweaving of component parts

façade

the exterior wall of a building exposed to public view or that wall viewed by persons not within the building

FAR (floor area ratio)

a formula for determining permitted building volume as a multiple of the area of the lot; the FAR is determined by dividing the gross floor area of buildings on a lot by the area of the lot; for example, a FAR of 6 on a 5,000 square foot lot would allow a building with gross area of 30,000 square feet

fenestration

design elements of the exterior (architectural) window treatments such as patterns, rhythm, and ornamentation

figure/ground drawing

a drawing which shows only building footprints, rendered in black, with the ground plane left white, providing an abstract representation of development density and the extent that buildings define public spaces

form-based code

regulates the form and scale of buildings in relation to the public realm rather than only by land use types; the code can be presented in written and diagrammatic form

gentrification

a term used to describe what happens when new residents (gentry) purchase and renovate older, inner-city housing in an otherwise distressed area; gentrification often causes the displacement of lower income residents- as real estate values rise so do rents and property taxes

greenbelt

a complete or partial ring of open space (green) encircling a city or development

grid

a traditional method of land subdivision which results in the creation of square or rectangular blocks and public streets which intersect at right angles

growth management

the process of regulating the pace and character of development in a community; several states including Florida, Washington, and Oregon for example, require local governments to develop, adopt, and implement some form of a growth management plan

historic district

a geographically definable area with a significant concentration of buildings, structures, sites, spaces, or objects unified by past events, physical development, design, setting, materials, workmanship, sense of cohesiveness, or related historical and aesthetic associations; the significance of a district may be recognized through listing in a local, state, or national landmarks register and may be protected legally through enactment of a local historic district ordinance administered by a historic district board or commission

homesteading

programs under which abandoned buildings are made available at little or no cost in return for an agreement to rehabilitate and occupy them for a specific period of time

imageability

the quality in a physical object, building, or place which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image (physical form or shape) in any given observer

infill

housing or other development in an urban area that is designed to fill a void left by vacant property, such as redevelopment land; generally, the purpose of infill is to revitalize the surrounding area

inventory of cultural resources (a survey)

a list or matrix of cultural resources within a community or area; the inventory is a valuable tool for maximizing the use of existing facilities and assessing needs for new and improved facilities

ISTEA (Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991)

the federal law which provides the basis for transportation project selection and funding at the federal, state, and metropolitan levels of government; under ISTEA, transportation projects are selected based on their consistency with a state's and region's long-range plan and short-range transportation improvement plans

landmark

- a structure or feature of historical, cultural, or architectural significance (see National Historic Landmark)
- an object that is useful for orientation

landmarks register

a list of buildings, districts, and objects designated for historical, architectural, and other special significance that may carry protection for listed properties

leapfrog development

development that occurs well beyond the existing limits of urban development and thus leaves the intervening vacant land behind and results in sprawl

linkage

a legal mechanism used to mitigate the negative effects of new development; for example, many localities require developers of new office space to provide open space, transit facilities, or adjunct services such as child care to compensate for the development's impact on the community

mapping

technique used for communicating information about the physical environment; maps may represent physical features such as land and climate conditions or abstract concepts such as view corridors and pedestrian nodes

mass

a term used to describe the three dimensional form or bulk of an object or building

master plan

an overall plan for a defined area such as a downtown, district, neighborhood, or waterfront; master plans are typically more specific and detailed than comprehensive plans

mixed use

a building or district which combines different land uses such as housing, retail, and office uses; vertical mixed

use refers to a mix of uses on different floors in a single building; typical early 20th century commercial buildings were designed to accommodate vertical mixed uses- stores on the first floor and residences or offices on upper floors

MPO (Metropolitan Planning Organization)

the agency designated by the governor (or governors in multi-state areas) to administer the federally required transportation planning process in urbanized areas

node

a hub of activity

parklet

a repurposed part of the street (usually 1-2 parking spaces) that provides seating area or other amenities for people; can either be temporary or permanent structure

pedestrian flow

the direction, rate, and frequency of pedestrian movement in an area

pediment

the triangular face of a gable

perspective (see architectural drawings)

plan (see architectural drawings)

planned unit development (PUD)

a zoning category which permits mixed use development on a single parcel or tract of land; typical PUD zones permit a variety of housing types, common open space areas, and the clustering of buildings; densities are calculated relative to the tract size, rather than on a lot-by-lot basis

pocket park

a small park in an urban area

preservation

providing for the continued use of deteriorated old and historic buildings, sites, structures, and objects; the means for preservation include restoration, rehabilitation, and adaptive reuse; according to the Secretary of the Interior, it is “the act or process of applying measures to sustain the existing form, integrity, and material of a building or structure, and the existing form and vegetative cover of the site; it may include stabilization work, where necessary, as well as maintenance of the historic building materials.”

preserve

a vulnerable area protected from development such as a natural area or an agricultural area

proportion

the ratio or relative size of two or more dimensions; the term can be used to refer to the ratio of the width to the height of a door or window opening, or to the ratio of the width of a street to the height of adjacent buildings

public art

works of art that are located in public space; public art may exist in a variety of forms, from freestanding sculpture to well-crafted street lights and benches

ratio of solid to void

the solid-to-void relationship refers to the proportions between the total area of a wall surface and the area of “voids” (windows, doors, arches, etc.) on a building’s facade

reconstruction

the act or process of reproducing by new construction the exact form and detail of a vanished building, structure, or object, or a part thereof, as it appeared at a specific time

rehabilitation

the act or process of returning a property to a state of utility through repair or alteration which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions or features of the property which are significant to its historical, architectural, and cultural values

renovation

modernization of an old or historic structure; unlike restoration, renovation may not be consistent with the original design

restoration

the act or process of accurately recovering the form and details of a property and its setting as it appeared at a particular period of time by means of the removal of later work or by the replacement of missing earlier work

RFP (Request for Proposal)

a written set of guidelines used in soliciting proposals from consultants, architects, developers, artists, and other contractors

RFQ (Request for Qualifications)

a call for qualifications such as a resume, portfolio, and project list

rhythm and pattern

relate to materials, styles, shapes, and spacing of building elements and the buildings themselves; the predominance of one material or shape, and its patterns of recurrence, are characteristics of an area that need to be maintained

scale

the apparent size of a building, window, or other element as perceived in relation to the size of a human being; scale refers to the apparent size, not actual size, since it is always viewed in relationship to another building or element; for instance, the scale of one element may be altered simply by changing the size of an element nearby, such as windows, doors, or other architectural details; these relationships contribute to the experience of a place as intimate, vast, “larger than life,” and daunting, etc.

scenic corridor

a strip of land on either side of a right-of-way or resource such as a stream that is generally visible to the public and is valued for its scenic qualities

scenic easement

a restriction on the use of land or buildings to protect an important view or scenic corridor

section (see architectural drawings)

Section 106

provision of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 which requires the head of a federal agency

financing or licensing a project to determine the effect of the project on property in or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places

sense of place

the emotions and images associated with a location, based on its unique identity and other memorable qualities

setback line

zoning code standard for locating a building or structure at a minimum distance (set back) from a street or lot line

sign ordinance

a legal mechanism for controlling the design, size, height, placement, etc. of signs

site plan

a plan prepared to scale, showing accurately and with complete dimensioning, the boundaries of a site and the location of all buildings, structures, uses, and principal site design features proposed for a specific parcel of land

smart growth

compact development strategies that support higher density, mix land uses, bring housing closer to jobs and transit, preserve open space and natural habitats, use the existing infrastructure, and provide a variety of housing and transportation choices

sprawl

a pattern of low density development dispersed over land previously undeveloped or in agricultural use; sprawl tends to be more costly to serve with public infrastructure and more damaging to the natural environment than more compact, moderate, and high density development

stabilization

the act or process of applying measures designed to reestablish a weather resistant enclosure and the structural stability of unsafe or deteriorated property

street furniture

municipal equipment placed along streets, including light fixtures, fire hydrants, police and fire call boxes, trash receptacles, signs, benches, newspaper boxes, and kiosks

streetscape

the distinguishing character of a particular street as created by its width, degree of curvature, paving materials, design of the street furniture, and forms of surrounding buildings

subdivision

the process of laying out a parcel of raw land into lots, blocks, streets, and public areas; its purpose is the transformation of raw land into distinct building lots for recordation in local land records, sale, and development

survey of cultural resources (see inventory)

tactical urbanism

a small-scale, often temporary, low cost project that enhances the public realm and engages the community (e.g., painting a crosswalk or bike lane)

tax increment financing (TIF)

a public financing tool used to subsidize redevelopment, infrastructure, or community development projects through projected tax gains from the increase in future real estate value of the proposed development

townscape

the relationships among buildings, public spaces, and land forms that gives a town or area a distinct visual character or image

traditional neighborhood development (TND)

a compact, pedestrian-oriented development with a mix of uses, traditional buildings and streets, convenient services, and well-defined public spaces

transfer of development rights (TDR)

a system of land development control wherein rights, or development units, are assigned to parcels of land based upon planning studies and density control factors; these rights are separable and maybe transferred from properties in “sending” zones to properties in “receiving” zones; thus they are marketable; once a development right is transferred or sold, a restriction is placed on the “sending” parcel; TDRs have been used to protect agricultural land and historic resources, and permit increased density in target areas

transit-oriented development (TOD)

compact, mixed use development concentrated in an area to support an existing or proposed regional mass transit system; a TOD ordinance or zoning district aims to reduce car trips by facilitating pedestrian and transit access to jobs, housing, and services

transition space (see edge)**transparency**

refers to the interaction between observer and an activity in an environment; it allows the observer to “read” what is happening inside a structure or in another area; for example, a commercial building is considered transparent if the pedestrian can view the merchandise or interior activity from the street

universal design

design which is accessible to “all” people, regardless of age, disability, etc.

urban acupuncture

coined by former Curitiba, Brazil Mayor Jamie Lerner, a quick and inexpensive strategy that uses small-scale interventions to transform the larger urban context

urban growth boundary

a development boundary used to protect rural or agricultural lands from encroaching urban development; an urban service boundary is a related term which describes limits for the extension of urban services, e.g. sanitary sewer, potable water, street lights, etc.

urban renewal

the rehabilitation of city areas by renovating or replacing dilapidated buildings with new housing, public buildings, parks, roadways, industrial areas, etc., often in accordance with comprehensive plans; its role in the destruction of neighborhoods in the 1950s and 60s led to the term use as a pejorative within urban planning and design

vernacular

landscape, settlement patterns, and building types which result from local or regional building traditions and conventions (“low-style” rather than “high-style” architecture)

view corridor and view shed

refers to the line or range of vision from an observation point to a viewpoint, often used in determining the extent of scenic easements

wetland

a fresh or saltwater marsh; wetlands, under federal law, are delineated based on soil type and vegetative species and fall under the jurisdiction of the Army Corps of Engineers

zoning

a zoning ordinance divides a locality into discrete zones, each with specific restrictions on permitted land uses and development densities

- Downzoning and upzoning are changes in the zoning which allow more (upzoning) or less (downzoning) intensive uses or densities than previously prescribed
Euclidean is the conventional zoning practice which hierarchically ranks uses, with housing as the highest use and manufacturing as the lowest; euclidean zoning encourages a strict separation of uses
- Incentive zoning uses bonus credits which allow more intensive use of land in exchange for providing one or more amenities, such as a density bonus in exchange for open space
- An overlay zone is a special purpose zone which is overlaid on the city's general zoning map; the overlay zone designates applicable areas for special condition or use, including historic districts; PUDs, TNDs, and TODs are overlay zones
- A floating zone is a category which replaces a base zone and confers specific benefits and constraints on a property owner
- Performance zoning uses flexible regulations based upon performance standards; in order to mitigate street noise in a house, restrictive zoning might stipulate minimum setback requirements; performance zoning would state a minimum acceptable noise level and permit creative solutions to solve the problem

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The City Design Glossary was compiled by the Mayors' Institute on City Design in cooperation with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Sources used in compiling the glossary can be found below:

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