America’s communities are facing a time of transition, and the AIA conducted a poll in 2012 on design review processes. The results echo the AIA’s ongoing conversations with government leaders and citizen architects about ways to support good design. Highlighting a spectrum of more and less effective boards created from the 1970s to the 2000s, the poll’s results offer a starting point for discussing challenges and opportunities. It is notable that a number of architectural design review boards explicitly report strained relationships with their communities. However, design review boards have many opportunities to improve their processes.

**Case In Point: Design Review Board, Mid-Size City, Midwest**

Members are selected with the recommendation from the AIA and the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA). They also represent key viewpoints: four design professionals and one alternate with demonstrated interest in design, an alder, and two community representatives. Despite this, other less effective practices continue to perpetuate the community’s perception of the board as a “hurdle and a challenge” in development, not a resource improving projects for the public:

- **Design Guidelines:** Not revised since their establishment before 1990, some guidelines are too prescriptive.
- **Community-Based Efforts:** Never used to gain support for the guidelines.
- **Meeting Procedural Processes:** Need improvement.
- **Building Review Process:** Overall lack of clarity. The Landmarks Commission also reviews some projects, overlap between Planning Commission issues and design issues. The Board serves in an advisory role to the Planning Commission, whose action is not always synonymous with the Board’s recommendations.

**Updating Design Review Guidelines**

- **Establish Design Review Guidelines**

  In response to the AIA’s 2012 poll on architectural design review boards, some board representatives reported that they do not consult a set of clear guidelines for effectively managing the review process. Establishing such guidelines is a key step to creating a well-functioning design review board.

- **Update Guidelines Regularly**

  Larger municipalities with significant construction activity will typically need to update their design review guidelines more frequently than smaller communities – at least once every 10 years. Some boards update their guidelines every 2-3 years, and some do so every 5-10 years, or as needed. A few of the poll responders (who tended to have less detailed guidelines established around the same time as the board) reported not having updated them in a couple of decades. Responders also frequently reported not having a regular schedule for reviewing the guidelines.
Allowing for Innovation

“Our guidelines have flexibility and the board has leeway to approve good projects that don’t meet the specifications exactly… If you adhere to strict guidelines, innovative design will never happen. People will follow the cookbook and give you the gingerbread specified in the guidelines, and that will be the end of it.”

− Former Design Review Board Chair
  Small City, East Coast

Seizing the Opportunity

“Our board is perceived positively as a result of new efforts to upgrade the guidelines by making them more meaningful and easier to follow.”

− Design Review Board Member
  Small Town, West Coast

Ensure Appropriate Guidelines Specificity

Effective guidelines exhibit a moderate degree of specificity. When guidelines are overly prescriptive, architectural design review board members report ineffectually devoting too much of their time to issues like color selection.

Clearly delineated and visually informative standards can go a long way to improve both design and process efficiency. For some communities, form-based codes can be beneficial in preventing inadequate design. However, it is also essential to ensure that these efforts do not become prescriptive to the point of impeding innovation. Importantly, design review boards should also have the power to make exceptions to the rules, which is possible when clear principles exist for ensuring strong board member expertise.

Perform Community Outreach

Community outreach is one of the most important aspects of an effective review process. One of the most common reasons for a project to be rejected as a first proposal is that the applicant has not presented sufficient information to render a decision. Local governments should take advantage of opportunities to promote a productive dialogue about design review guidelines. For instance, poll responders who tend to updated their guidelines regularly, or have done so recently, also tend to use community-based efforts to gain support for their guidelines.

Benefiting From a Productive Conversation

“We had a very inclusive process to write and test the design guidelines prior to implementation. With this process, the community embraces them.”

− Design Review Board Member
  Large City, Western United States
Streamlining the Architectural Review Process

- **Align Review Process Expectations**

For some design review boards, the most common reason for a project to be rejected as a first proposal is that the applicant has not presented sufficient information to render a decision. The process should include clearly outlined submittal requirements and due dates.

- **Provide Adequate Staffing Support**

Updating the design guideline as needed is difficult without staff support. Board members also report that an efficient review process requires adequate research support from the planning and zoning department.

Some of the most common disruptions to the design review process center on lack of compliance with minimum planning regulations. To streamline the review process, planning and zoning staff should also ensure that proposals appearing before the board comply with municipal codes, ordinances, and zoning regulations.

- **Use Preliminary Meetings Effectively**

Many effective boards recommend that applicants appear for one or more “preliminary” reviews before asking for a formal approval vote. In order to accelerate the approval process, some boards find it helpful to establish a preliminary review committee for certain types of projects (such as small residential developments). Holding these meetings publicly ensures that parties stay on the same page regarding the board’s feedback to the applicant. Applicants should attend meetings with their architect so that suggestions that may alter the submission can be considered during the session.

- **Improve Meeting Processes**

Architectural design review boards should follow clearly defined and prioritized agendas, as well as set processes for debate and voting. Recording and distributing meeting minutes publicly is essential to minimizing the chances of misunderstanding between the board and project developers. To help avoid misunderstandings, board members should retain any visual diagrams drawn by them during the meeting.
Enhancing Design Review Boards’ Expertise

- **Ensure Adequate Architectural Expertise on the Board**

The broad mix of expertise on the board should include architects, urban planners, landscape architects, and other design professionals with experience in project review. Local AIA Chapters should recommend highly qualified appointees to serve as members on architectural review boards. Board staff should also include design professionals.

- **Hire Support Staff With Architectural Expertise**

Architectural design review boards are frequently supported solely by staff with expertise in urban planning. Hiring architectural consultants helps to eliminate some of applicants’ most common design mistakes before submissions are given to the board.

**Meeting the Baseline**

“Not only do architectural design review boards need to have architects as committee members, but they need to have knowledgeable staff… If they are going to regulate the aesthetics of a building, they need to have at least one architect or someone knowledgeable about design on staff.”

– Former Design Review Board Chair, Small Town, East Coast

- **Establish Principles for Board Member Qualifications**

Municipalities should have clear principles for the qualifications of individuals eligible to serve on the board. Some communities may not have the resources to record these explicitly as policy, but they should still adhere to a clear set of principles.

- **Define Appropriate Board Member Tenure**

Board members frequently mention that having an experienced chair, a former board chair, and members with long tenures are key to the board’s success. However, municipalities should consider setting locally appropriate limits on the chairperson’s tenure in order to help the board evolve as needed.

**Leadership for Flexibility**

“There should definitely be a process for supporting appropriate turnover in board chairmanship every 3-4 years. Otherwise, the board will have a more difficult time evolving.”

– Former Design Review Board Chair, Small City, East Coast