



AIA Best Practices: Harnessing the forces that make urban design succeed

This article was originally written by David Dixon, FAIA, from The Architects Handbook of Professional Practice

Summary

Successful urban design can increase the quality of life for those who work, live, or play in or around the designed environment. The author describes four steps that help achieve a successful urban design: Define the project, analyze the issues, articulate the vision, and develop a plan.

Defining urban design

Urban design gives form and definition to the full spectrum of forces—cultural, ecological, political, social, and aesthetic—that shape the built environment and the public realm. Urban designers synthesize these factors into plans, guidelines, and regulations that shape the physical character of everything from individual sites to entire regions. Their work establishes the parameters (height, massing, use, total development capacity, design character, connection to the surrounding context, and comparable elements) that enable other architects to design buildings, developers to initiate projects, mayors to revitalize cities, governors to launch smart-growth initiatives, and similar activities.

Though many urban designers work in the public sector for government agencies and other public entities, the following process focuses on professional firms offering urban design as a service. Urban designers in private practice generally collaborate with interdisciplinary teams or an active community. In many cases, urban designers lead these teams; in other instances, they serve as team members representing design and planning disciplines.

For all of these projects, urban designers assume significant responsibility for community outreach.

Considerations for success

Urban design projects are structured to accomplish particular goals. Four important considerations can measure the success of most urban design projects:

- Do the recommendations of the urban design team solve the problems that spawned the project? For example, do they map out a convincing path to achieving neighborhood revitalization or a more active waterfront?
- Do the urban design recommendations form a cohesive, compelling vision that offers convincing guidance for going forward?

- Are the recommendations feasible? Is there reliable funding and an agency or developer that will implement the project?
- Are the recommendations politically achievable? Is there sufficient buy-in from the community, elected officials, key property owners, or others whose support is essential?

Four steps to an achievable vision

The process of creating an achievable vision in urban design incorporates steps analogous to designing a building but with a very different emphasis. By the time an architect designs a building, decisions have already been made about its size, use, and design character. These decisions are the products of the urban design process, which is ultimately about creating ideas to be expressed in policy documents, reports, and drawings. This process falls into four stages of exploration and resolution.

Define the project. Certain aspects need to be clarified to set the parameters of an urban design project:

- Who are the key participants, and what approaches will best integrate them into a collaborative process?
- What are the key milestones?
- What are the core opportunities and challenges?
- What broader social, economic, or environmental goals can be achieved?
- What technical, political, or other challenges stand in the way?
- What are the options for implementation?

Identify and analyze the key issues. What technical issues are critical to producing meaningful recommendations? For a given project, transportation, real estate, economics, environmental, or other issues will drive the study process. What role should community values, history, and other subjective issues play?

This step is really about education, and it should be highly interactive. The urban designer and other support staff work with the client and community to ensure all participants have an opportunity to learn from each other, usually through workshops and community meetings.

Articulate a vision. What qualities and aspirations should give shape and character to the urban design plans and recommendations that will result from a project? For example, if a new or revitalized neighborhood is to be walkable, this implies certain things about its density, mix of uses, and street pattern. Defining a vision also helps participants make difficult tradeoffs. Nowhere is perfection more the enemy of progress than in urban design. Historic preservationists, advocates of affordable housing, environmentalists, and others can all enrich a vision. However, the urban designer must work with all stakeholders to find the balance that makes it possible to achieve much—though rarely all—of what they seek in an urban design process.

Develop a plan. This last step usually begins by identifying the alternatives a project presents and working with participants to evaluate them. Gathering the best elements from each often forms the basis for a final project.

Urban design projects tend to focus on materials that communicate ideas—planning concepts, conceptual site designs, and the scale and character of potential buildings and public spaces. The product may take the form of a printed document—a plan, guideline, or report—or it may involve conceptual and illustrative drawings; three-dimensional computer models; “fly-through” computer animations; and PowerPoint or other presentation materials for public meetings, websites, posters, and other communication tools. While a well-conceived, well-produced report can take three months to complete, and professionally rendered sketches can cost several thousand dollars, preparation of urban design products is far less time-intensive than preparing the working drawings and other highly technical documents required for designing a building.

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