

Chapter 9

Urban Design

Element





Overview 900

THE URBAN DESIGN ELEMENT ADDRESSES THE DISTRICT'S PHYSICAL design and visual qualities. The Element describes the ways in which different aspects of the city's landscape—especially its buildings, streets, and open spaces—work together to define impressions of Washington and its neighborhoods. The design and appearance of physical space can create connections or barriers. It can create a sense of safety or a sense of discomfort. Ultimately, urban design shapes perceptions of the city, and contributes to the way people interact and experience the environment around them. 900.1

The critical urban design issues facing the District of Columbia are addressed in this element. These include:

- Strengthening civic identity through a renewed focus on assets such as public spaces, boulevards, and waterfront areas
- Designing for successful neighborhoods and large site reintegration
- Improving the public realm, particularly street and sidewalk space
- Addressing infrastructure and other barriers that affect aesthetic qualities
- Promoting design excellence throughout the city. 900.2

Urban design is important to all American cities but has particular significance and importance in the Nation's Capital. The city itself was designed to inspire American growth and prosperity. Streets were deliberately aligned to take advantage of natural topography and vistas, providing sites for monuments and important buildings and creating grand ceremonial spaces. 900.3

While great attention has been focused on the design of the monumental core of the city, its basic form has been set for many years. The same attention has not been consistently provided to the rest of Washington. Although the design of the built environment inspires civic pride and a strong sense of identity in some parts of the city, it has the opposite effect in others. 900.4

There is more that can be done to enhance Washington's physical appearance. More of the city should benefit from the magnificent network of open spaces, waterfronts, and boulevards that is already in place. The traditional focus on the city's symbolic identity must be matched with a greater focus on its urban identity—its identity as a city of distinct and beautiful neighborhoods. A stronger policy foundation is needed to protect the positive qualities that distinguish each of Washington's communities while still allowing for innovative and creative design. The Urban Design Element includes diagrams to illustrate the principles suggested by its policies and actions. These diagrams are illustrative only. 900.5

The overarching goal for urban design in the District is:

Enhance the beauty and livability of the city by protecting its historic design legacy, reinforcing the identity of its neighborhoods, harmoniously integrating new construction with existing buildings and the natural environment, and improving the vitality, appearance, and security of streets and public spaces.

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Urban design objectives are interwoven through many of the Comprehensive Plan's Elements. In particular, the Land Use, Transportation, Environmental Protection, Historic Preservation, and Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Elements all speak to the role that design should play in shaping the future of the city. The Plan as a whole recognizes the power of good design to transform and revitalize the city and its neighborhoods. 900.6

Urban Design Goal ⁹⁰¹

The overarching goal for urban design in the District is:

Enhance the beauty and livability of the city by protecting its historic design legacy, reinforcing the identity of its neighborhoods, harmoniously integrating new construction with existing buildings and the natural environment, and improving the vitality, appearance, and security of streets and public spaces. 901.1

Policies and Actions

UD-1 Toward A Stronger Civic Identity ⁹⁰²

Washington's identity is defined by a particular set of physical features, including the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, the topographic "bowl" of the original city and the rolling hills that surround it, the open spaces and dense tree canopy of its parks and neighborhoods, and the wide diagonal boulevards and rectangular street grid. The city is further defined by its horizontal skyline. The Virginia and Maryland suburbs contain the region's tallest buildings while the central city is characterized by lower buildings of relatively uniform mass and height. 902.1



The Height Act has given the District its unique horizontal character.

The character of the central city has largely been shaped by the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans and the 1910 Height of Buildings Act. The L'Enfant Plan in particular set the stage for conditions that define almost every new development in the historic center of the city today. The radial arrangement of streets and public spaces has created many irregular and prominent building sites. The Height Act has resulted in a predominance of structures that are as wide as they are tall, and a street environment that has more in common with Paris than it does with New York, Chicago, and other cities in North America. ^{902.2}

Beyond the city center, much of the District's urban pattern consists of walkable, compact communities. A ring of more than a dozen well-defined neighborhoods lies within two miles of the edge of the National Mall. Beyond this ring lie many more neighborhoods designed with the best features of traditional urbanism—housing near open space and transit, pedestrian-oriented shopping streets, and densities that create active street life. ^{902.3}

The design pattern in the city's outer neighborhoods is less formal than it is in the heart of the city. Their image is defined more by architecture, scale, tree cover, and topography than it is by monumental vistas. The neighborhoods contain a patchwork of building forms and styles spanning various periods in the city's history, from narrow colonial townhouses to modernist towers. There are small traditional shopping districts, auto-oriented centers from the 1940s and 50s, and occasional strip malls and even “big boxes” from more recent years. Many of the neighborhoods were initially shaped by streetcar lines, creating a radial pattern of development that extends far beyond the city limits. ^{902.4}

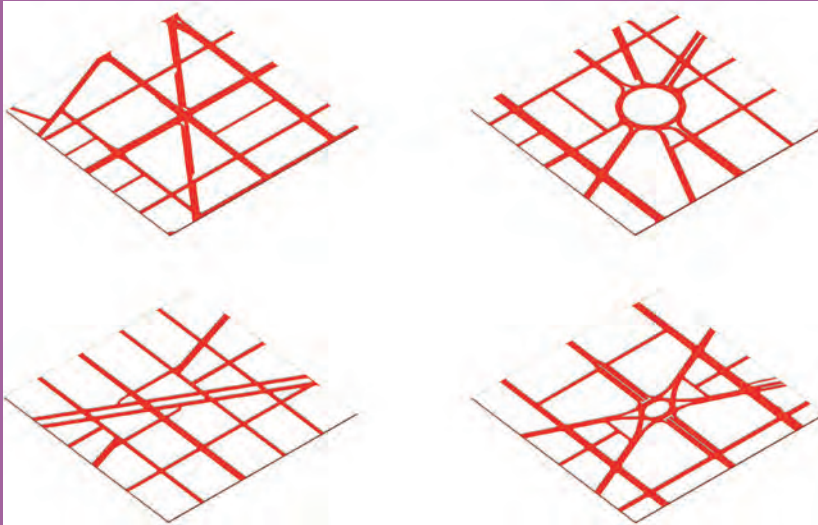
The impacts of past urban design decisions have not all been positive. The urban renewal and freeway building efforts of the 1950s and 60s, in particular, contributed to some of the social and economic divisions that exist in the city today. For instance, “slum clearance” in the Near Southwest destroyed the fine-grained fabric of an entire neighborhood, and dislocated thousands of residents. Future design decisions must help to reconcile some of the inequities that persist in the city, changing the District's image from that of a divided city to one that is much more inclusive. In this regard, the design of Washington's neighborhoods should provide even greater relevance for national identity than the monuments themselves. ^{902.5}

The text below is organized to respond to the following topics, each related to the urban pattern and identity of the city as a whole:

- Protecting the Integrity of Washington's Historic Plans
- Respecting Natural Topography and Landform
- Improving Waterfront Identity and Design
- Strengthening Boulevards and Gateways
- Overcoming Physical Barriers. ^{902.6}

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Figure 9.1:

Typical DC Irregular Spaces 903.3

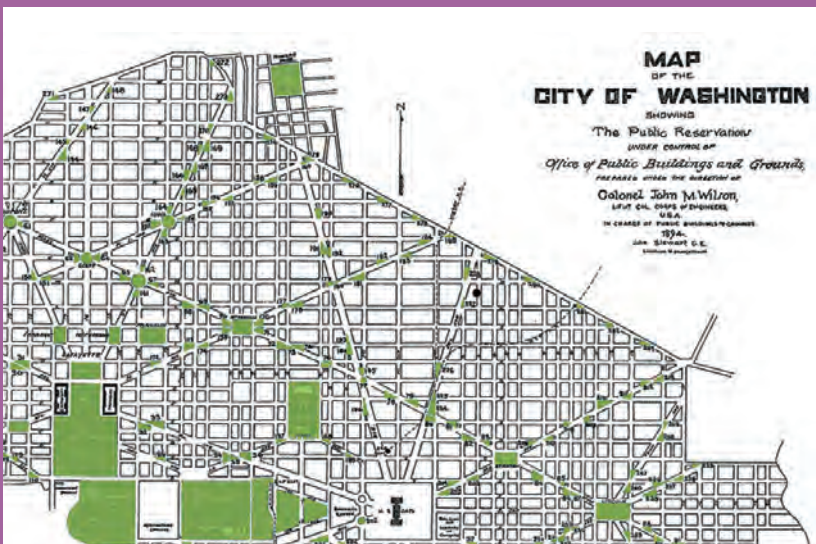
Four examples of the irregular spaces created by the intersections of diagonal avenues with the rectangular street grid. These spaces present design challenges, but they also create opportunities.

UD-1.1 Protecting the Integrity of Washington's Historic Plans 903

Washington's historic plans have proven to be extraordinarily resilient. The L'Enfant Plan has managed to accommodate the arrival of the streetcar, the subway, and most importantly, the automobile. In each case, elements of the original plan were altered and even transformed, but not at the expense of civic identity. The integrity of the District's historic plans has been regulated and protected through the careful oversight of agencies like the National Capital Planning Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts. NCPC's Legacy Plan (1997) and Memorials and Museums Plan (2001), in particular, have emphasized refinement and completion of many of the ideas originally proposed by L'Enfant and the McMillan Commission. 903.1

Protection of historic plans and a commitment to their underlying principles should extend across and beyond the monumental core of the city. Design decisions should reinforce the city's pattern of axial, radial, and diagonal streets, and enhance the public spaces formed where these streets intersect one another (see Figure 9.1). Special places such as Mount Vernon Square and Judiciary Square should be highlighted through landscape improvements and building frontage requirements. 903.2

Figure 9.2:

Plan of L'Enfant Reservations (excerpt only) 903.4

The diagram above (which shows only a portion of the L'Enfant city) indicates historic open space reservations in green.

Many of the District's public squares, circles, triangles, and public "reservations" (see Figure 9.2) are undervalued and lack distinction. The District should work with the National Park Service and others to enhance these reservations as elements of the cityscape and important legacies of the earlier plans. Building placement should reinforce the identity of the city's corridors and avoid obstruction of important vistas. ^{903.5}

Policy UD-1.1.1: National Image

Strengthen and enhance the physical image, character and outstanding physical qualities of the District, its neighborhoods, and its open spaces, in a manner that reflects its role as the national capital. ^{903.6}

Policy UD-1.1.2: Reinforcing the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans

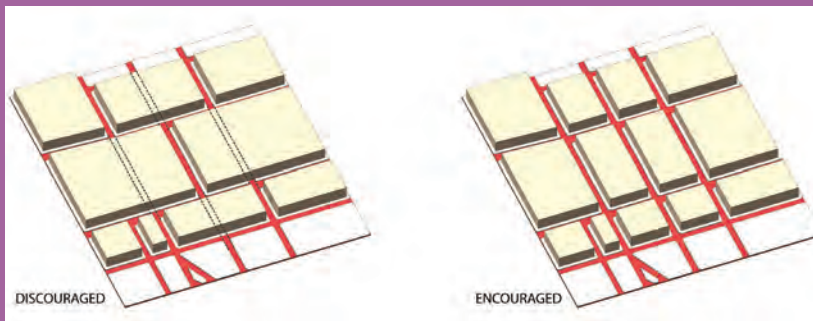
Respect and reinforce the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans to maintain the District's unique, historic and grand character. This policy should be achieved through a variety of urban design measures, including appropriate building placement, view protection, enhancement of L'Enfant Plan reservations (green spaces), limits on street and alley closings (see Figure 9.3), and the siting of new monuments and memorials in locations of visual prominence. Restore as appropriate and where possible, previously closed streets and alleys, and obstructed vistas or viewsheds. ^{903.7}

Policy UD-1.1.3: Siting of Museums, Monuments, and Memorials

Coordinate with federal entities such as the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) and the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) in the planning and siting of major landmarks, including museums, monuments, and memorials, and in the development of plans for federal reservations and other federally-owned civic spaces. ^{903.9}

Figure 9.3:

Discouraging Alley and Street Closings within the L'Enfant Plan Area ^{903.8}



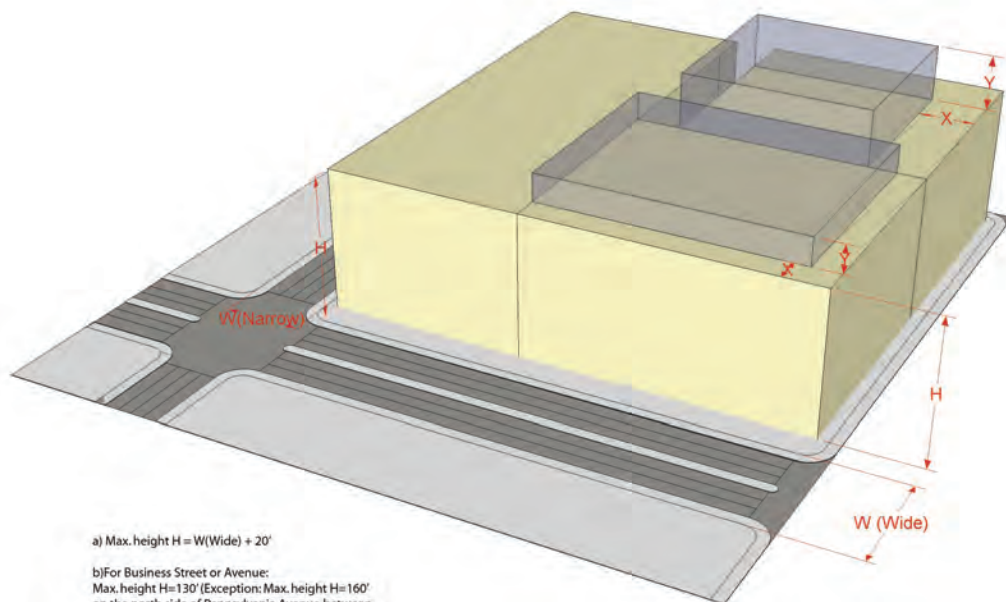
The diagram on the left (discouraged) shows streets and alleys abandoned to create larger building areas. The diagram on the right (encouraged) retains the integrity of the L'Enfant street grid.

Policy UD-1.1.4: Height Act of 1910

Protect the civic and historical character of the city, particularly the “horizontal” urban quality of Central Washington, by limiting building heights in accordance with the Height Act of 1910. Basic principles of the Height Act are shown in Figure 9.4. ^{903.10}

Action UD-1.1.A: Siting of Landmarks

Continue to convene a Commemorative Works Committee to advise and make recommendations to the Mayor and Council on requests to place monuments, memorials, and other commemorative works on District-owned space. Work with NCPC, the CFA, and other federal partners to ensure that the placement of such works on federal properties is consistent with the NCPC Monuments and Memorials Plan. ^{903.11}

Figure 9.4:**Street Sections Indicating Height Act Regulations** ^{903.12}

a) Max. height $H = W(\text{Wide}) + 20'$

b) For Business Street or Avenue:
Max. height $H = 130'$ (Exception: Max. height $H = 160'$
on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue between
1st and 15th Street NW)

c) For Residence Street, Avenue, or highway:
Max. height $H = 90'$, and
for street width $> 65'$ Max. height $H = W(\text{wide}) - 10'$
street width $60' - 65'$ Max. height $H = 60'$
street width $< 60'$ Max. height $H = W(\text{wide})$

d) Spires, towers, domes, minarets, pinnacles, penthouses over elevator
shafts, ventilation shafts, chimneys, smokestacks, and fire sprinkler tanks
shall be set back from the exterior walls distances equal to their respective
heights above the adjacent roof. Max. height $Y = X$

Reference: DC Code 6-601.05

Diagram of street sections indicating Height act regulation
on maximum building height in relation to street widths.

UD-1.2 Respecting Natural Topography and Landform ⁹⁰⁴

The escarpments, ridges, hills, plateaus, rivers, and streams of the District of Columbia are major components of the city's identity. This is particularly true in the neighborhoods located on the hills and ridges beyond the L'Enfant city. The terrain creates a variety of views to, from, and in some instances, between significant resources. Views range from panoramic Fort Reno to the more intimate views of forested parks and stream valleys found in many neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River and in Northwest DC. ^{904.1}

In many American cities, natural form has been destroyed through grading, rerouting of rivers, and clear cutting of forests. Not so in Washington. As Map 9.1 indicates, many of the city's most prominent natural features remain intact today and are an important element of the District's skyline. ^{904.2}

Policy UD-1.2.1: Respecting Natural Features in Development

Respect and perpetuate the natural features of Washington's landscape. In low-density, wooded or hilly areas, new construction should preserve natural features rather than altering them to accommodate development. Density in such areas should be limited and setbacks should be provided as needed to protect natural features such as streams and wetlands. Where appropriate, clustering of development should be considered as a way to protect natural resources. ^{904.3}

Policy UD-1.2.2: Protecting the Topographic "Bowl"

Consistent with the Federal Elements of the Comprehensive Plan, maintain the prominence of the topographic bowl formed by lowland and rim features of the L'Enfant city (see text box). This should include preserving the green setting of the Anacostia hills and maintaining the visual prominence of the Florida Avenue escarpment. ^{904.4}

Policy UD-1.2.3: Ridgeline Protection

Protect prominent ridgelines so as to maintain and enhance the District's physical image and horizontal skyline. ^{904.5}

Policy UD-1.2.4: View Protection

Recognize and protect major views in the city, particularly characteristic views of city landmarks, and views from important vantage points. Recognize the importance of views to the quality of life in the city and the identity of Washington and its neighborhoods. ^{904.6}

Action UD-1.2.A: Review of Zoning Designations

Conduct a review of zoning designations in environmentally sensitive areas, including wetlands, riparian areas and upland areas along stream valleys, steep slopes, and areas of soil instability to identify areas where current

The Topographic Bowl and the City Plan ^{904.7}

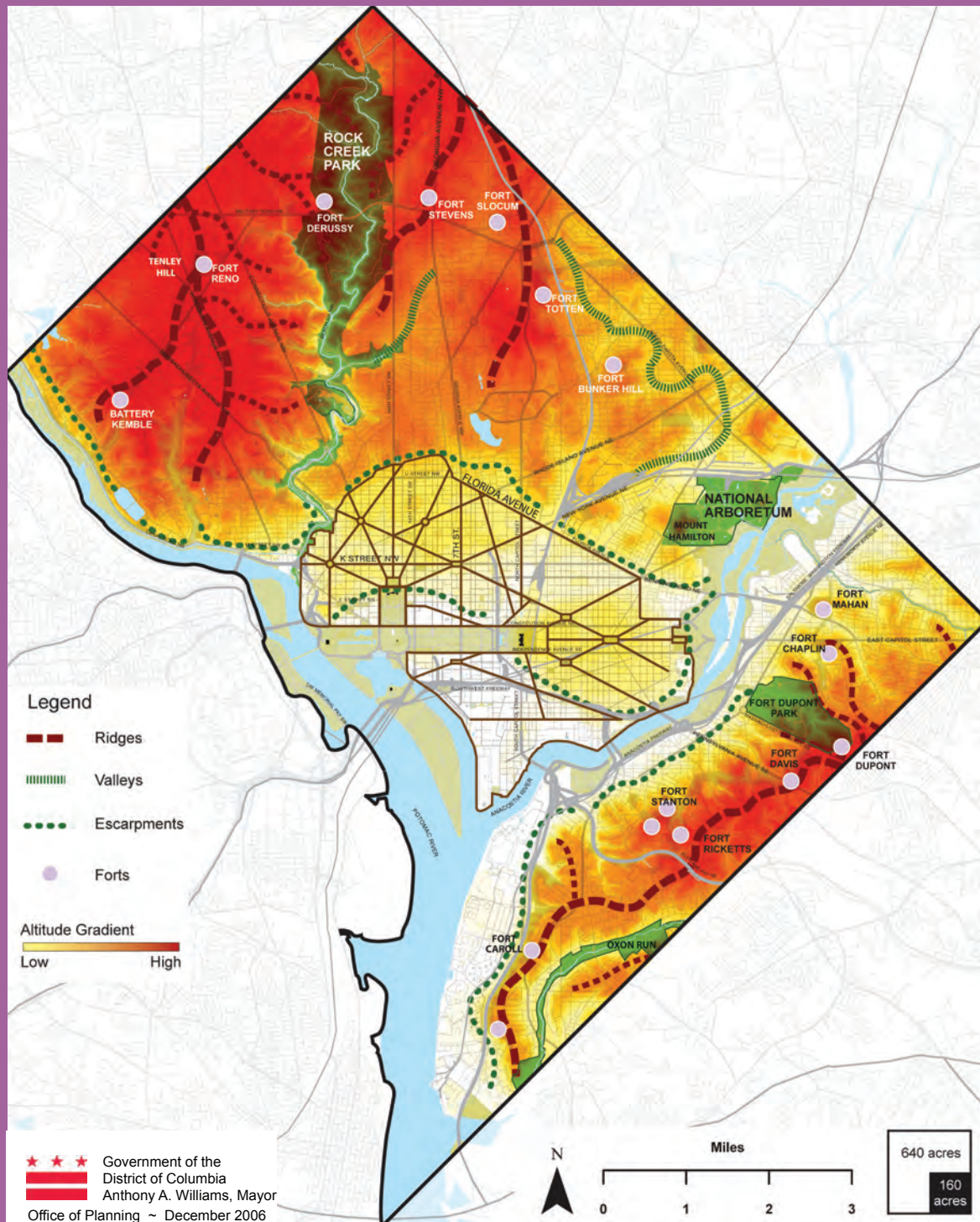
The historic center of Washington occupies a low-lying "bowl" of river flats formed by the junction of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. The bowl is surrounded by a ring of hills, ridges, and upland areas.

The flat topography of the area within the original L'Enfant city lends itself to radial boulevards terminating on monuments or far-reaching vistas. Such geometric road patterns would have been less effective on rolling hills. In outlying areas, where the topography is more varied, important landmarks are often closely related to features of the natural setting. The National Cathedral, for example, is sited on one of the highest ridgelines in the District, affording great visibility of the structure from many points in the city and beyond. Similar promontories exist east of the Anacostia River—on sites such as St. Elizabeths Hospital and along the Fort Circle Parks.

Map 9.1:

Prominent Topographic Features of Washington

904.8



zoning may permit excessive density, given site constraints. Recommend zoning changes and/or overlay designations as necessary to protect these areas. 904.9

Action UD-1.2.B: Creating View Plane Regulations

Conduct a review of desirable views, creating view plane diagrams, affording analysis of desired possibilities, and developing zoning regulations accordingly. 904.10

UD-1.3 Improving Waterfront Identity and Design 905

Although the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers determined its location, Washington is not thought of as a waterfront city in the same way that Chicago is identified with its lake, New York with its harbor, or San Francisco with its Bay. The city's connections to the water have been eroded by the construction of railroads and highways and the reservation of much of the shoreline for military and other federal uses. The Potomac River is graced with many outdoor recreational amenities but is more connected to the National Mall than it is to the city's neighborhoods. The Anacostia River, meanwhile, is almost invisible to the motorists who drive across it and is difficult to access from the neighborhoods it abuts. 905.1

There are certainly successful urban waterfront areas in the District. Georgetown's Washington Harbour is lively and crowded and the Washington Channel is lined with marinas, restaurants, and fish vendors. But these areas represent a fraction of what might be, given the miles of shoreline within District boundaries. 905.2

Today, there is an unprecedented opportunity to refocus DC's future civic identity along its "forgotten" and poorly linked waterfronts. With their expansive view corridors and natural backdrops, the waterfronts along the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers, as well as the Washington Channel, offer unique settings that are especially appropriate for great public spaces. As new parks and public spaces are created, missing links in the waterfront park system can finally be closed, and the river can be reintegrated back into the very neighborhoods it now divides. 905.3

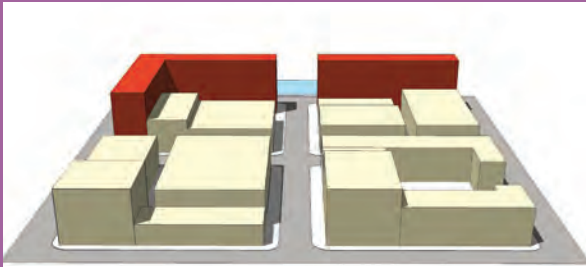
Perhaps the greatest opportunity to bolster Washington's identity as a waterfront city lies in the proposed redevelopment of the Anacostia shoreline. Good urban design is vital to the success of this transformation. New waterfront buildings should be appropriately related to each other, the water's edge, and adjacent neighborhoods. The creation of view corridors and enhancement of existing views to the water are particularly important. Likewise, the development of new and/or enhanced public gathering spaces along each of the city's waterfronts, as well as waterfront parks and plazas, boathouses and fishing piers, is essential. 905.4



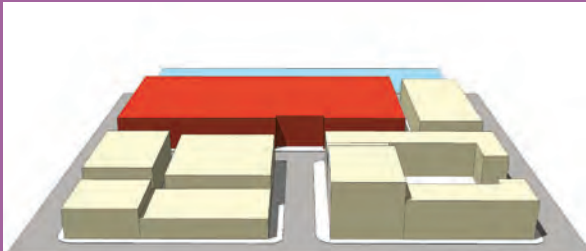
Georgetown's active waterfront includes a publicly accessible promenade, restaurants, and a docking area for boats traveling on the Potomac River.

Figure 9.5:

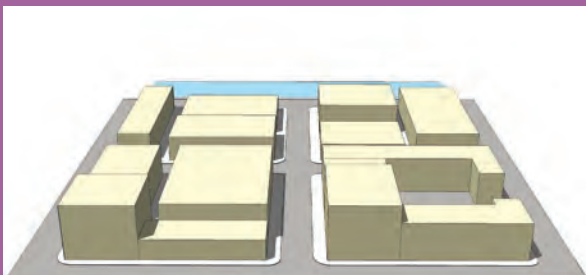
Discouraged and Encouraged Preservation of River View Corridors in Waterfront Development ^{905.9}



DISCOURAGED



DISCOURAGED



ENCOURAGED

Policy UD-1.3.1: DC as a Waterfront City

Strengthen Washington's civic identity as a waterfront city by promoting investment along the Anacostia River, creating new water-related parks, improving public access to and along the shoreline, and improving the physical and visual connections between the waterfront and adjacent neighborhoods. ^{905.5}

Policy UD-1.3.2: Waterfront Public Space and Access

Develop public gathering spaces along the waterfronts, including promenades, viewpoints, boating and swimming facilities, and parks. Such space should be designed to promote continuous public access along the rivers, and to take full advantage of site topography and waterfront views. Design treatments should vary from "hardscape" plazas in urban settings to softer, more passive open spaces that are more natural in character. ^{905.6}

See also the Parks, Recreation and Open Space Element and the Lower Anacostia Waterfront/ Near Southwest Area Element for additional actions and policies related to providing continuous public access to the water's edge and removing barriers to waterfront access.

Policy UD-1.3.3: Excellence in Waterfront Design

Require a high standard of design for all waterfront projects, with an emphasis on shoreline access, integration of historic features and structures, an orientation toward the water, and the creation of new water-oriented public amenities. ^{905.7}

Policy UD-1.3.4: Design Character of Waterfront Sites

Ensure that the design of each waterfront site responds to its unique natural qualities. A range of building forms should be created, responding to the range of physical conditions present. New buildings should be carefully designed to consider their appearance from multiple vantage points, both in the site vicinity and at various points on the horizon. ^{905.8}

Policy UD-1.3.5: River Views

Protect and enhance river views in the design of buildings, bridges, and pedestrian walkways on or near waterfront sites. The scale, density and building form along the city's waterfronts should define the character of these areas as human-scale, pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods and should protect views from important sites. Figure 9.5 (at left) illustrates preservation of river views on waterfront development sites. 905.10

Policy UD-1.3.6: “Activating” Waterfront Spaces

Encourage design approaches, densities, and mixes of land uses that enliven waterfront sites. Architectural and public space design should be conducive to pedestrian activity, provide a sense of safety, create visual interest, and draw people to the water. 905.11

Policy UD-1.3.7: Neighborhood Connectivity

Improve the physical connections between neighborhoods and nearby waterfronts. Where feasible, extend the existing city grid into large waterfront sites to better connect nearby developed areas to the shoreline (see Figure 9.6). 905.12

Policy UD-1.3.8: East of the River Gateways

Improve the visual and urban design qualities of the gateways into East-of-the-River neighborhoods from the Anacostia River crossings, with landscape and transportation improvements along Howard Road, Martin Luther King Jr Avenue, Pennsylvania Avenue, Randle Circle (Minnesota and Massachusetts), Benning Road, and Kenilworth Avenue. 905.14

**Action UD-1.3.A:
Anacostia Waterfront Initiative**

Continue to implement the Framework Plan for the Anacostia River, restoring Washington's identity as a waterfront city and bridging the historic divide between the east and west sides of the river. 905.15

See Section UD-1.5 for a discussion of barriers to shoreline access.

Figure 9.6:**Extending Neighborhood Street Grids to the Waterfront** 905.13

This diagram shows the proposed Plan for the Southeast Federal Center. The city grid should be extended to the waterfront, restoring view corridors and connecting the neighborhood north of M Street to the river's edge.



Tree-lined East Capitol Street gracefully welcomes visitors to the Capitol.



Commercial strip development and large parking lots make Rhode Island Avenue in Northeast DC a less successful avenue.



Memorial Bridge provides a ceremonial gateway to the District.

UD-1.4 Reinforcing Boulevards and Gateways ⁹⁰⁶

Grand streets in the form of avenues and boulevards are another defining element of Washington’s urban form. The avenues originated as part of the L’Enfant design for the city. By overlapping a system of broad, diagonal thoroughfares on a grid of lettered and numbered streets, streets like Pennsylvania Avenue were given immediate importance, creating memorable views and a strong sense of civic identity. Beyond the heart of the city, these avenues extend to the outer neighborhoods, in some cases forming dramatic points of entry into the District of Columbia. Over time, several other streets in the city grid were designed or redesigned to display similar characteristics. ^{906.1}

The District’s avenues and boulevards are also emblematic of its social and economic divides. Some are thriving, while others are marked by boarded up buildings and degraded sidewalks. The most successful are located within the monumental core and west of 14th Street NW, encompassing such streets as Connecticut Avenue and Massachusetts Avenue. The less successful occur mostly in neighborhoods that are in transition, such as Georgia Avenue, Rhode Island Avenue, New York Avenue, Minnesota Avenue, Pennsylvania Avenue SE, South Capitol Street, and portions of North Capitol Street and East Capitol Street, East of the River. Good urban design is essential to reestablishing the city’s avenues and streets as positive elements of city form. ^{906.2}

One of the intrinsic functions of avenues and boulevards is that they provide “gateways” into the District and its neighborhoods. An appropriate sense of transition and arrival should be provided at each gateway. This can be achieved through a combination of landscaping, streetscape amenities, signage, view protection, and building and street design. ^{906.3}

View protection is also another important objective along these streets. This is especially true on streets like North and South Capitol, which have symbolic importance but lack a commensurately grand streetscape. Distinctive street walls and facades, high-quality architecture, and street trees should provide greater focus and frame important vistas along these and other important thoroughfares. ^{906.4}

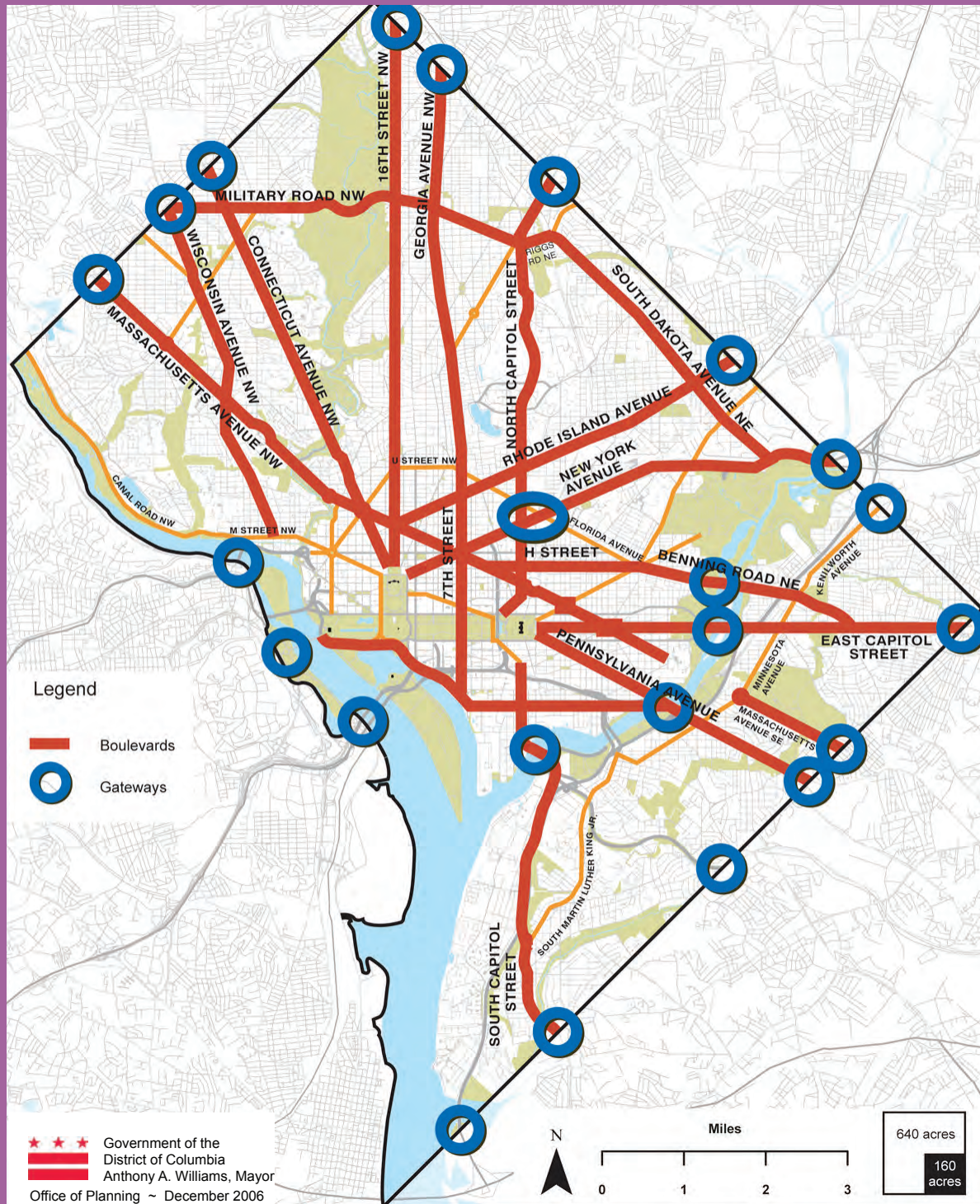
Major avenues/boulevards and gateways are shown in Map 9.2. ^{906.5}

Policy UD-1.4.1: Avenues/Boulevards and Urban Form

Use Washington’s major avenues/boulevards as a way to reinforce the form and identity of the city, connect its neighborhoods, and improve its aesthetic and visual character. Focus improvement efforts on avenues/boulevards in emerging neighborhoods, particularly those that provide important gateways or view corridors within the city. ^{906.6}

Map 9.2:

Major Avenues, Boulevards and Gateways 906.7



Policy UD-1.4.2: City Gateways

Create more distinctive and memorable gateways at points of entry to the city, and points of entry to individual neighborhoods and neighborhood centers. Gateways should provide a sense of transition and arrival, and should be designed to make a strong and positive visual impact. ^{906.8}

Policy UD-1.4.3: Avenue/Boulevard Vistas and View Corridors

Protect views and view corridors along avenues/boulevards, particularly along streets that terminate at important civic monuments or that frame distant landmarks. Vistas along such streets should be accentuated by creating more well-defined street walls, improving landscaping, and requiring the highest architectural quality as development takes place. (see Figure 9.7). ^{906.9}

Policy UD-1.4.4: Multi-Modal Avenue/Boulevard Design

Discourage the use of the city's major avenues and boulevards as "auto-only" roadways. Instead, encourage their use as multi-modal corridors, supporting transit bus lanes, bicycle lanes, and wide sidewalks, as well as conventional vehicle lanes. ^{906.10}

Policy UD-1.4.5: Priority Avenues/Boulevards

Focus the city's avenue/boulevard design improvements on historically important or symbolic streets that suffer from poor aesthetic conditions. Examples include North and South Capitol Streets, Pennsylvania Avenue SE, and Georgia Avenue and the avenues designated by the "Great Streets" program. ^{906.11}

Figure 9.7:**Consistent Streetwall and Street Trees Framing Monumental Views** ^{906.14}

The figure above illustrates the use of street walls and street trees to frame views to important landmarks (see text box describing street walls in Section UD-3.0)

Action UD-1.4.A: Zoning and Views

As part of the revision of the District's zoning regulations, determine the feasibility of overlays or special design controls that would apply to major boulevards and gateway streets. The purpose of such overlays would be to ensure the protection and enhancement of important views and to upgrade the aesthetic quality of key boulevards. ^{906.12}

Action UD-1.4.B: Boundary Streets and Entrances

Explore the feasibility of enhancing points of arrival into the District at the major Maryland/DC gateways through signage, public art, landscaping, restoration of historic boundary markers, road design and pavement changes, special treatment of boundary streets (Southern, Eastern, and Western Avenues), and similar improvements. ^{906.13}

See the Land Use Element for additional actions relating to the city's "Great Streets" program. See the Historic Preservation Element (HP-2.3.3) for more on protecting the special character of the L'Enfant Plan's Streets.

UD-1.5 Overcoming Physical Barriers ⁹⁰⁷

Physical barriers in the city such as highways and rail lines present urban design challenges. Besides their obvious impacts on walkability and aesthetics, they may create psychological and economic divides. Barriers not only include transportation features; they include natural features like rivers and streams, and land use features such as power plants and military bases. ^{907.1}

There are a number of urban design solutions to better connect the city and reduce the effect of physical barriers. These include short-term techniques such as safer highway crossings for pedestrians and well-lighted underpasses and longer-term solutions that eliminate barriers entirely. Examples of the latter include air-rights development over sunken freeways (such as I-395) and the rebuilding of the bridges across the Anacostia River with wider sidewalks and bike lanes. ^{907.2}

Policy UD-1.5.1: Mitigating Freeway Impacts

Reduce the negative effects of freeways on neighborhoods by decreasing blight around freeway overpasses and underpasses, and improving pedestrian and bicycle overpasses. Longer-term solutions that address the design of the freeways themselves also should be explored. Such solutions should consider rebuilding freeways to reduce their "iron curtain" effect and developing the air rights over sunken freeways. ^{907.3}

Policy UD-1.5.2: Major Arterials

Reduce the barrier effects created by major arterials (such as New York Avenue and South Capitol Street) through improved signal timing, traffic calming, mid-crossing medians, and other design improvements that improve aesthetics and enhance safety at pedestrian crossings. ^{907.4}

Policy UD-1.5.3: Reducing Railroad Barriers

Upgrade railroad overpasses and underpasses to maintain the continuity of the street network along rail lines and ensure the comfort and safety of pedestrians and bicyclists. In appropriate settings, such as Downtown Washington, explore longer-term solutions to addressing railroad barriers such as air rights development over the tracks. ^{907.5}

Action UD-1.5.A: Waterfront Barriers

Continue to explore ways to address freeway and highway barriers along the Anacostia waterfront, including the removal of Water Street along the



Freeway underpasses in the District divide neighborhoods and contribute to blight.

Southwest waterfront and the narrowing of I-395 at the Anacostia River. The city should also continue to study options for addressing the visual barrier presented by the Whitehurst Freeway and the physical barrier presented by the waterfront CSX rail line. ^{907.6}

Action UD-1.5.B: Light Rail Design

To the maximum extent possible, ensure that the design of the streetcar line along the east side of the Anacostia River does not create a barrier to waterfront access from East of the Anacostia River neighborhoods. ^{907.7}

See also the Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Element for a discussion of trail policies, and the Lower Anacostia Waterfront/Near Southwest Area Element for a discussion of detailed provisions related to barriers and access to the Anacostia River.

UD-2 Creating Great Places ⁹⁰⁸

This section of the urban design element addresses design issues in three geographic settings:

- Central Washington
- Neighborhoods
- Large sites. ^{908.1}

UD-2.1 Place-Making in Central Washington ⁹⁰⁹

Some of the very qualities that make Central Washington's design so memorable also create its greatest challenges. Distances are unusually long, walking is difficult in many places, and there is a lack of connectivity between the sub-districts of the central city. It is nearly four miles from the West End to the Navy Yard—arguably both are parts of the central business district—yet the two feel like entirely different cities. The District's height limit, while lauded for its human scale, has also resulted in long rows of featureless office buildings with little architectural interest. Moreover, Downtown is not particularly well integrated with the National Mall. To some extent, the Mall divides—rather than unites—the central city, and adds to the perception of a city with multiple downtowns bearing little connection to one another. ^{909.1}

While the goal of creating a more coherent central business district has been in place for awhile, the current rapid pace of development means that the District must take a more proactive role. A stronger urban design framework is needed to attain the goal of a more cohesive and well-designed central city. ^{909.2}

This framework should establish a stronger identity for the emerging business districts on the northeast and southeast edges of Downtown. It should improve streets and public spaces, promote a higher level of architectural quality, and establish appropriate scale and density transitions to protect small-scale residential neighborhoods on the edges of Downtown. It should include strategies to deal with specific site challenges, such as the isolation of the Kennedy Center from surrounding land uses, the poor pedestrian environment at L'Enfant Plaza, and the presence of industrial uses on New Jersey Avenue, SE and Delaware Avenue just blocks from the US Capitol. 909.3

Design decisions for Central Washington should also address the peculiar architectural dynamics created by the 1910 Height Act. Currently, the desire to maximize buildable floor area while adhering to height limits often results in buildings with very little sculptural form. The most innovative and distinctive buildings tend to be public places—museums, libraries, and other structures where maximizing rentable space is not the primary objective. This is consistent with the city's architectural heritage in some respects, but there are still opportunities to improve the design of office, residential, and retail buildings in the central city. 909.4

While the height limit clearly affects building form, it also affects street life in unexpected ways. It results in ground floors that are sunken below grade by as much as several feet to maximize the number of stories that can be accommodated in each building. This in turn creates challenges for street-level retailers, and impacts the experience of walking or shopping downtown. Other challenges include the appearance of vents, mechanical equipment, and other essential rooftop elements that exceed the maximum building height. The design of these elements takes on special importance given their high visibility on an otherwise “flat” downtown skyline. 909.5

As the Historic Preservation Element notes, the presence of numerous historic buildings, historic districts, and important vistas also affects design. Attempts to create false facades mimicking historic styles, or to preserve facades and tear down the buildings behind them, have produced mixed results. As the existing stock of aging office buildings is replaced, greater attention must be given to design quality, street character, and landscape. 909.6

Policy UD-2.1.1: Design Character

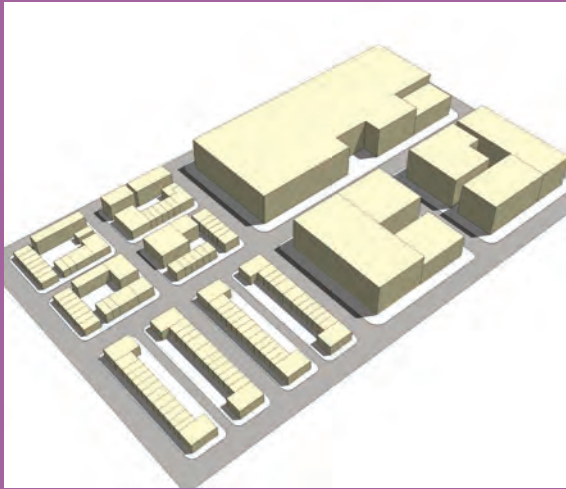
Create a more coherent design character for Central Washington by improving the physical linkages between the monumental core, the business sub-districts on the perimeter of the National Mall, and the expanding mixed use areas to the east and southeast of Downtown. Urban design strategies should focus on making the entire area more walkable, discouraging monolithic architecture, improving signage and streetscape features, and adding new land uses which make the area more lively, interesting, and dynamic. 909.7



Sunken retail space is common in the District, as it allows for additional square footage in buildings that are otherwise limited in size by the Height Act.

Figure 9.8:

Superblock versus Fine-Grained Street and Development Patterns ^{909.9}



The diagram above contrasts the finer “grain” of a low-scale neighborhood with a downtown “superblock” (right, background) and a finer grained downtown block with multiple structures (left, foreground).

Policy UD-2.1.2: Downtown Street and Block Pattern

Maintain a fine-grained pattern of Downtown blocks, streets, and alleys, with intersections and frontages that encourage pedestrian movement and reduce the potential for immense variations in scale and “fortress-like” office buildings. (see Figure 9.8) ^{909.8}

Policy UD-2.1.3: Downtown Edges

Establish and maintain scale and density transitions between Downtown and adjacent lower density neighborhoods. Use variations in height, massing, and architectural quality to ensure that the fine-grained pattern of adjacent neighborhoods is protected. (see Figure 9.9) ^{909.10}

Policy UD-2.1.4: Architectural Excellence

Promote excellence in the design of Downtown buildings and landscapes. Particular attention should be focused on ground floor (street) levels, with greater architectural details used to improve visual image. ^{909.12}

Policy UD-2.1.5: Federal Coordination

Coordinate with the federal government to achieve a consistent urban design vision for Central Washington. As applicable, the District should incorporate design concepts from the National Capital Planning Commission’s Legacy Plan and similar design-oriented plans for the monumental core of the city into its own design plans and strategies. ^{909.13}

Policy UD-2.1.6: Pedestrian Bridges and Tunnels

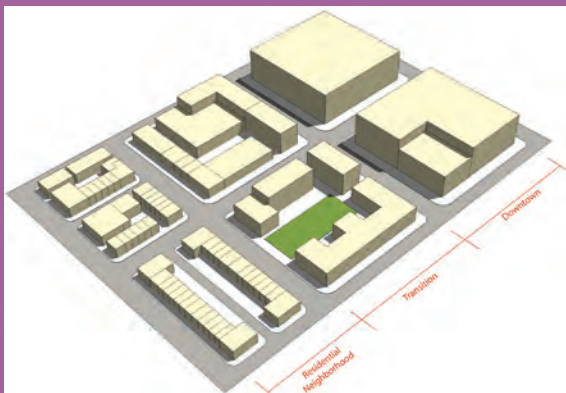
Discourage the construction of second-level Downtown pedestrian bridges that drain activity from the street level. Subterranean tunnels between buildings also should be discouraged, unless they improve access to Metro and are necessary for pedestrian safety. ^{909.14}

Action UD-2.1.A: Retail Ceiling Heights

Convene a Task Force of retailers, developers, architects, and others to evaluate alternative approaches to achieving higher first-floor ceiling heights in new Downtown buildings. ^{909.15}

Figure 9.9:

Desired Scale Transitions at Downtown Edges to Residential Areas ^{909.11}



This diagram illustrates the desired transition for new development from a moderate density neighborhood to the high-density urban core, avoiding abrupt contrasts in scale and mass.

UD-2.2 Designing for Successful Neighborhoods ⁹¹⁰

The “sense of place” in the District’s neighborhoods is a function of their cultural history, physical features, and visual qualities. Those neighborhoods with the strongest identities tend to share certain characteristics, such as walkable “centers”, well-defined edges, attractive streets, and character-defining architecture. This is most apparent in the city’s historic districts but it is also true in non-designated row house neighborhoods and in single-family neighborhoods where particular architectural styles, setbacks, and building forms prevail. Especially in row house neighborhoods, the repetitive use of form, materials, color, and spacing creates a sense of solidarity that transcends each individual structure. ^{910.1}

Not all neighborhoods have a strong sense of identity, however. Some are negatively affected by dilapidated buildings, poorly maintained properties, vacant storefronts, and worse. These problems may be exacerbated by the absence of landscaping and street trees. Infill development and the adaptive reuse of historic buildings in such areas create a real opportunity to establish a stronger identity, and to create neighborhood centers where they are lacking today. ^{910.2}

The prospect of significant future growth in the city’s neighborhoods will require a heightened focus on architectural quality in both well established and emerging areas. In neighborhoods of high architectural quality and strong identity, a greater emphasis on design compatibility and appropriate scale is needed. These factors are also important in neighborhoods of weak identity, but the priority should be on setting a higher design standard and defining a stronger, more positive image. ^{910.3}

Regardless of neighborhood identity, overpowering contrasts in scale, height, and density should be avoided as infill development occurs. High quality materials that are durable and rich in texture and details should be encouraged. Firmly established building forms and landscape elements should be reinforced. These guidelines may seem self-evident, but they have not been consistently followed in the past. Even alterations and additions are not always sympathetic to architectural character, sometimes with jarring results. ^{910.4}

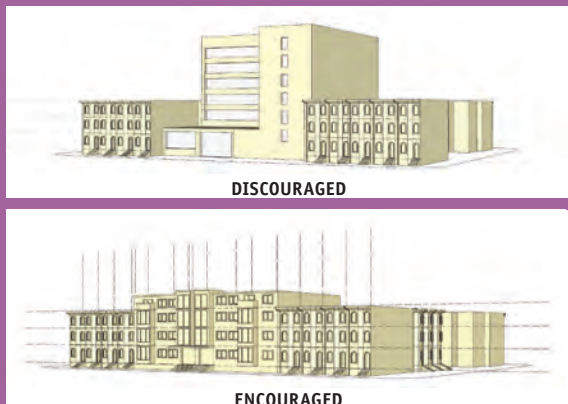
The design of commercial and mixed use development also should be harmonious with its surroundings. This does not mean new buildings must duplicate adjacent buildings; rather it means that new construction should respect basic block characteristics like building alignment, access, proportion of openings (windows and doors), exterior architectural details (cornices, parapets, etc), and heights. Signage, awnings, and other exterior elements should be designed as an integral part of each structure and should avoid negative effects on the visual environment. Buildings should also



Development along Chinatown’s 7th Street shows how contemporary designs can be integrated into historic settings.

Figure 9.10:

Complimentary Massing for New Development in Historic Districts and Areas of Strong Architectural Character ^{910.8}



The top illustration shows inappropriate massing within the context of a historic district. The bottom illustration shows appropriate massing.

provide for the comfort, safety, and enjoyment of their users, avoiding excessively windy conditions and providing sunlight or shade as is appropriate on each site. ^{910.5}

Policy UD-2.2.1: Neighborhood Character and Identity

Strengthen the defining visual qualities of Washington's neighborhoods. This should be achieved in part by relating the scale of infill development, alterations, renovations, and additions to existing neighborhood context. ^{910.6}

Policy UD-2.2.2: Areas of Strong Architectural Character

Preserve the architectural continuity and design integrity of historic districts and other areas of strong architectural character. New development within such areas does not need to replicate prevailing architectural styles exactly but should be complementary in form, height, and bulk (see Figure 9.10). ^{910.7}

See the Historic Preservation Element for additional policies and actions related to historic districts.

Policy UD-2.2.3: Neighborhood Centers

Undertake strategic and coordinated efforts to create neighborhood centers, civic buildings, and shopping places that reinforce community identity (see Figure 9.11). ^{910.9}

Policy UD-2.2.4: Transitions in Building Intensity

Establish gradual transitions between large-scale and small-scale development. The relationship between taller, more visually prominent buildings and lower, smaller buildings (such as single family or row houses) can be made more pleasing when the transition is gradual rather than abrupt. The relationship can be further improved by designing larger buildings to reduce their apparent size and recessing the upper floors of the building to relate to the lower scale of the surrounding neighborhood. ^{910.11}

Figure 9.11:

Neighborhood Center Concept ^{910.10}



The area at 14th and Park NW is re-emerging as a strong neighborhood center for Columbia Heights.

Policy UD-2.2.5: Creating Attractive Facades

Create visual interest through well-designed building facades, storefront windows, and attractive signage and lighting. Avoid monolithic or box-like

building forms, or long blank walls which detract from the human quality of the street. (see Figure 9.12) ^{910.12}

Policy UD-2.2.6: Maintaining Facade Lines

Generally maintain the established facade lines of neighborhood streets by aligning the front walls of new construction with the prevailing facades of adjacent buildings. Avoid violating this pattern by placing new construction in front of the historic facade line, or by placing buildings at odd angles to the street, unless the streetscape is already characterized by such variations. Where existing facades are characterized by recurring placement of windows and doors, new construction should complement the established rhythm. ^{910.14}

Policy UD-2.2.7: Infill Development

Regardless of neighborhood identity, avoid overpowering contrasts of scale, height and density as infill development occurs. ^{910.15}

Policy UD-2.2.8: Large Site Development

Ensure that new developments on parcels that are larger than the prevailing neighborhood lot size are carefully integrated with adjacent sites. Structures on such parcels should be broken into smaller, more varied forms, particularly where the prevailing street frontage is characterized by small, older buildings with varying facades. (see Figure 9.13). ^{910.16}

Policy UD-2.2.9: Protection of Neighborhood Open Space

Ensure that infill development respects and improves the integrity of neighborhood open spaces and public areas. Buildings should be designed to avoid the loss of sunlight and reduced usability of neighborhood parks and plazas. ^{910.18}

Policy UD-2.2.10: Surface Parking

Encourage the use of shade trees and landscaping or screening of surface parking areas. Parking should be designed so that it is not the dominant element of the street, and should be located behind development rather than in front of it (see Figure 9.14). ^{910.19}

Figure 9.12:

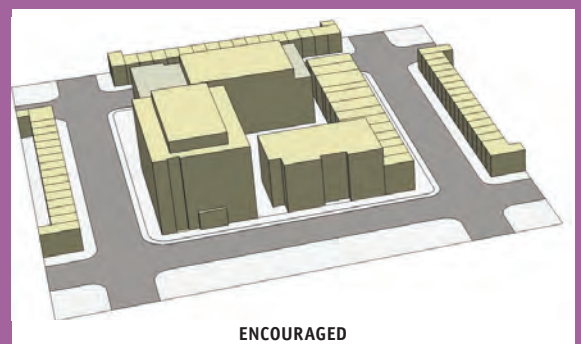
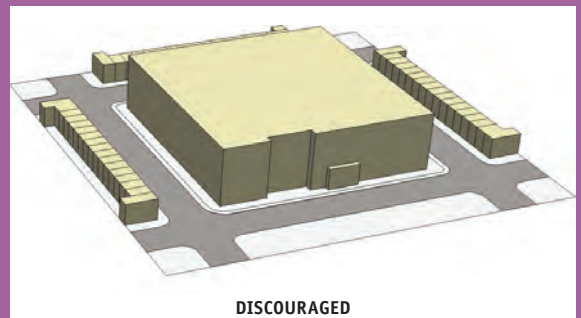
Facade Articulation ^{910.13}



Facade articulation on new residential development along 13th Street NW

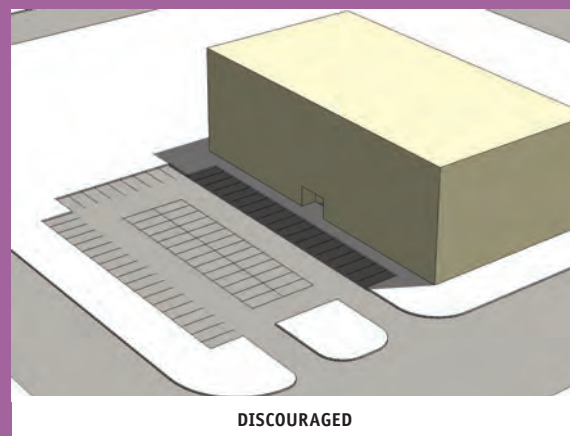
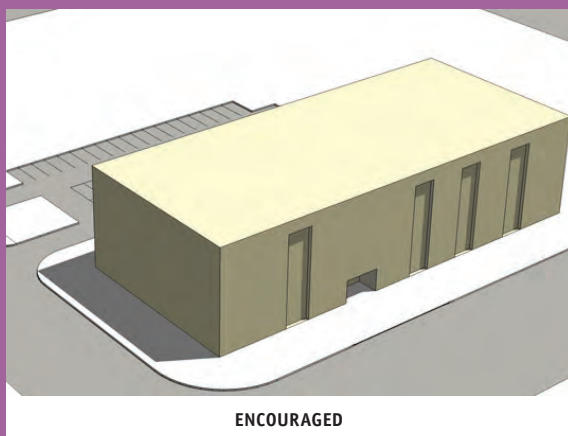
Figure 9.13:

Breaking Up Massing of Development on Lots Larger than Prevailing Neighborhood Lot Size ^{910.17}



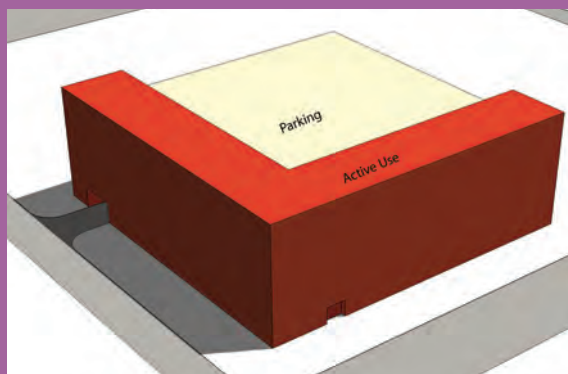
The design on the bottom is generally preferable to the design on the top. Breaking large structures into smaller, more varied forms can reduce harsh contrasts and improve compatibility.

Figure 9.14:

Parking Lot Location Behind Buildings Rather than in Front 910.20

9

Figure 9.15:

Concealing Parking Garages with Active “Liner” Uses 910.22

The parking structure has been “concealed” behind the building, with active uses along the street frontage.

Policy UD-2.2.11: Parking Structures

Encourage creative solutions for designing structured parking to minimize its visual prominence. Where feasible, the street side of parking structures should be lined with active and visually attractive uses to lessen their impact on the streetscape (see Fig 9.15). 910.21

Policy UD-2.2.12: Strip Shopping Centers

Ensure that zoning and parking standards discourage strip commercial shopping centers and auto-oriented building designs within designated neighborhood centers. 910.23

Policy UD-2.2.13: Urban Design Priorities

Focus the District’s urban design assistance efforts on neighborhoods where the original design character has been damaged by disinvestment, blight, and poor architecture. 910.24

Action UD-2.2.A: Scale Transition Study

Complete a “Scale Transition Study” which evaluates options for improving design compatibility between more dense and less dense areas. The study should respond to the varying situations where higher density development is (or will be) situated adjacent to lower density, predominantly residential neighborhoods. It should include design guidelines and provisions for buffers (including open space), stepping down of building heights, and

solutions that reflect the different lot dimensions, block faces, and street and alley widths found in different parts of the city. ^{910.25}

Action UD-2.2.B: Using Zoning to Achieve Design Goals

Explore zoning and other regulatory techniques to promote excellence in the design of new buildings and public spaces. Zoning should include incentives or requirements for facade features, window placement, courtyards, buffering, and other exterior architectural elements that improve the compatibility of structures, including roof structures, with their surroundings while promoting high architectural quality. ^{910.26}

Action UD-2.2.C: Conservation Districts

Explore the use of “Conservation Districts” to protect neighborhood character in older communities which may not meet the criteria for historic districts but which nonetheless have important character-defining architectural features. ^{910.27}

See the Historic Preservation and Land Use Elements for related policies.

UD-2.3 The Design of New Neighborhoods ⁹¹¹

The potential redevelopment of a dozen or so “large sites” around the city provides particularly important urban design opportunities (see the Land Use Element for a map of large sites). The large sites provide some of the city’s best opportunities for distinctive architecture as well as the application of green design and low impact development principles. While these sites are largely discussed for their housing and economic development potential, their reuse can achieve parallel urban design objectives. They can and should improve neighborhood connectivity, create new open space, and define a stronger identity for adjacent areas. Large sites represent an unparalleled opportunity to knit the city together, address historic inequities, and position the District at the forefront of comprehensive planning; in short, they represent a major component of our inclusive city. ^{911.1}

Policy UD-2.3.1: Reintegrating Large Sites

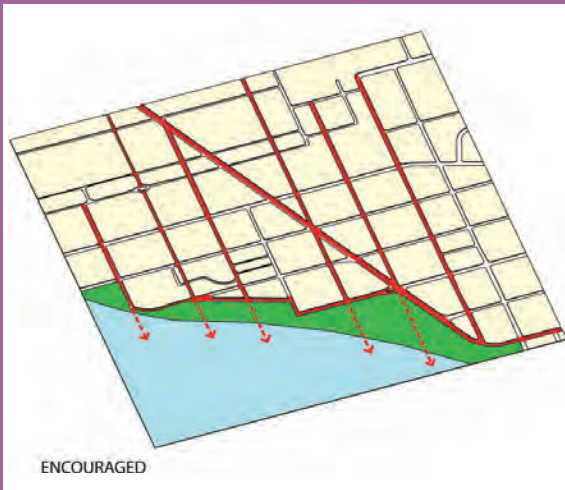
Reintegrate large self-contained sites back into the city pattern. Plans for each site should establish urban design goals and principles which guide their subsequent redevelopment. ^{911.2}

Urban Design Coordination at the Southeast Federal Center ^{911.3}

One recent urban design success story is the Southeast Federal Center (SEFC). The process of engagement between the District and the federal government on this site resulted in a plan that provides for mixed-use development, improved waterfront access, and the extension of the city street grid into a formerly secured area. Development has successfully proceeded by addressing security and liability concerns, and reusing a large portion of the site for federal office uses (USDOT). The balance of the site will be redeveloped according to mutually agreed upon planning and urban design principles.

The SEFC itself was planned in the context of a larger framework, the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative (AWI). The AWI recognized the impact that this area’s transformation could have on revitalizing the Near Southeast neighborhood and achieving broader waterfront revitalization goals.

Figure 9.16:
Large Site Planning Principles ^{911.5}



The street diagram at top is generally less preferable than the one below, as it blocks the flow of pedestrian traffic to the waterfront and creates large, potentially inaccessible “superblocks.”

Policy UD-2.3.2: Large Site Scale and Block Patterns

Establish a development scale on large sites that is in keeping with surrounding areas. “Superblocks” (e.g., oversized tracts of land with no through-streets) should generally be avoided in favor of a finer-grained street grid that is more compatible with the texture of Washington’s neighborhoods. This also allows for more appropriately scaled development and avoids large internalized complexes or oversized structures (see Figure 9.16). ^{911.4}

Policy UD-2.3.3: Design Context for Planning Large Sites

Ensure that urban design plans for large sites consider not only the site itself, but the broader context presented by surrounding neighborhoods. Recognize that the development of large sites has ripple effects that extend beyond their borders, including effects on the design of transportation systems and public facilities nearby. ^{911.6}

Policy UD-2.3.4: Design Trade-offs on Large Sites

Balance economic development and urban design goals on large sites. In some cases, it may be appropriate to develop a site in a manner that does not capitalize on its full economic value in order to achieve an important urban design objective, such as creation of new waterfront open space or preservation of a historic landmark. ^{911.7}

Policy UD-2.3.5: Incorporating Existing Assets in Large Site Design

Incorporate existing assets such as historic buildings, significant natural landscapes, and panoramic vistas in the design of redeveloped large sites. For sites that were originally planned as integrated complexes of multiple buildings, historic groupings of structures should be conserved where possible. ^{911.8}

Action UD-2.3.A: Design Guidelines for Large Sites

Develop design guidelines for large sites prior to their development. Such guidelines should address building appearance and streetscape, signage and utilities, parking design, landscaping, buffering, protection of historic

resources, “blending” of development with surrounding neighborhoods, and design principles that promote environmental sustainability. ^{911.9}

Action UD-2.3.B: Form-Based Zoning Codes

Explore the use of form-based zoning codes on selected large sites as a way of establishing desired urban design characteristics without rigidly prescribing allowable uses. ^{911.10}

UD-3 Improving the Public Realm ⁹¹²

The District’s “public realm” includes its streets, sidewalks, parks, plazas, civic buildings, and other public spaces. Such spaces represent half of the District of Columbia’s land area, with street rights-of-way alone accounting for over 10,000 acres. The design of public space provides some of the best opportunities for the District to improve aesthetics and image. More often than not, it is the quality of public space that defines the great cities and neighborhoods of the world. ^{912.1}

This section of the Urban Design Element focuses on three objectives:

- Improving the appearance and vitality of street and sidewalk space
- Balancing security and aesthetic considerations in public realm design
- Encouraging superior public building and infrastructure design. ^{912.2}

UD-3.1 Urban Design Hits the Street ⁹¹³

Washington has a traditional urban street pattern, defined by small blocks and an interconnected grid, a hierarchy of major and minor streets, alleys in many neighborhoods, and a pattern of buildings that relates strongly to streets and sidewalks. This pattern creates animated street life in much of the city. Walkable streets make the city more accessible, inclusive, and environmentally friendly. They also promote public health and fitness. ^{913.1}

The design of street space affects pedestrian safety and comfort. Changes to street and sidewalk width, parking configuration, crosswalks, intersections, and signals can improve the pedestrian environment. Well-defined edges and limited openings create a sense of enclosure which can make a street more animated and comfortable (see the text box below on street walls). Street trees, street furniture (benches, trash receptacles, lighting, etc.), well-designed buildings, and active ground floor uses also contribute to the experience of walking, cycling, and driving, down a street or thoroughfare. Planning for streets and sidewalks must recognize the value of such spaces as public amenities, especially in high-density neighborhoods that lack access to parks, open space, and yards. ^{913.2}

The management of the space between the curb and the street wall should be guided by a number of objectives. As noted in the Environmental

Street trees, street furniture (benches, trash receptacles, lighting, etc.), well-designed buildings, and active ground floor uses also contribute to the experience of walking, cycling, and driving, down a street

Street Walls 913.3

“Street walls” refer to the facades of the various buildings that face a street. They shape the level of visual interest on each block, and create a sense of enclosure for travelers. High-quality architecture and landscaping can enhance the visual impact of the street wall and increase its economic value.

Washington has a range of block and building types, creating a variety of street wall qualities. For example, streetwalls in rowhouse neighborhoods are defined by many narrow, repetitive buildings with multiple ground-floor entrances. The transformation of the U Street corridor shows how adaptable this form can be, and how well it can accommodate mixed uses and infill development.

In contrast, K Street and other parts of Downtown Washington are characterized by very large buildings, with only a few facades per block. The resulting street walls are less forgiving. In these types of settings, it is critical that the lower floors provide more architectural detail and varied street level uses to improve visual interest. Policies that encourage a higher standard of storefront design, and richer, more durable building materials can have a tremendous effect on street wall success.

9



U Street's rowhouses and varied street level uses make the street animated and comfortable for residents and visitors...



...while K Street's large buildings and lack of appropriately-sized street trees do not.

Protection Element, these include expanded street tree planting and the use of “low impact development” methods to reduce stormwater runoff. ^{913.4}

“Activating” the street is another important objective—especially on neighborhood shopping streets. In many cities renowned for successful street life, there is an active relationship between interior and outdoor spaces. Lively sidewalk cafes, outdoor restaurant seating, and vendor shopping on the street can create a sense of commercial energy that is lacking on many streets in the District today. Streets can also be activated through complementary ground floor uses (such as retail rather than offices) and a high level of transparency and window space (see Figure 9.17). Similarly, residential streets can be animated through the use of porches, terraces, bay windows, stoops, and other architectural projections. ^{913.5}

The need for streetscape improvements varies from one neighborhood to the next. Some neighborhoods have greater needs because they have greater density, greater traffic volumes, or larger numbers of children, seniors, and others with special mobility needs. Other neighborhoods may have serious deficiencies in the street environment that contribute to physical decline. Improving the streetscape can send a powerful message to residents, encourage private investment, and allay further economic and social deterioration. Likewise, the level of streetscape maintenance is one of the most important indicators of neighborhood upkeep. Maintenance across the city should be more consistent in the future, with all neighborhoods receiving the same high level of attention. ^{913.7}

Policy UD-3.1.1: Improving Streetscape Design

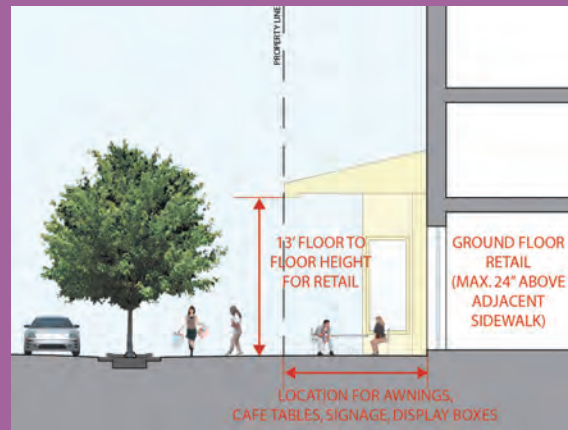
Improve the appearance and identity of the District’s streets through the design of street lights, paved surfaces, landscaped areas, bus shelters, street “furniture”, and adjacent building facades. ^{913.8}

Policy UD-3.1.2: Management of Sidewalk Space

Preserve the characteristically wide sidewalks of Washington’s commercial districts. Sidewalk space should be managed in a way that promotes pedestrian safety, efficiency, comfort, and provides adequate space for tree boxes. Sidewalks should enhance the visual character of streets, with landscaping and buffer planting used to reduce the impacts of vehicle traffic. ^{913.9}

Figure 9.17:

Desirable Ground Floor Retail Configuration ^{913.6}



The diagram above shows key elements of a successful shopping street—ground floor retail, street trees, and sidewalks that are sufficiently wide for pedestrians and outdoor seating.



Chinatown's active ground floor uses, attractive sidewalks and use of interesting architectural detail enhances the street environment.



A public plaza in Mount Pleasant provides a welcoming space for community activities

Policy UD-3.1.3: Streetscape Design and Street Function

Use variations in lighting and landscaping to highlight and clarify the function of different streets. The design features of streets should make the city's circulation system easier to navigate and understand for residents and visitors. 913.10

Policy UD-3.1.4: Street Lighting

Provide street lighting that improves public safety while also contributing to neighborhood character and image. 913.11

Policy UD-3.1.5: Streetscape and Mobility

Ensure that the design of public space facilitates connections between different modes of travel, including walking, public transit, bicycling, and driving. Transit Bus shelters, benches, bicycle parking, safe pedestrian connections, and clear way-finding signage should be provided to facilitate multi-modal travel. 913.12

Policy UD-3.1.6: Enhanced Streetwalls

Promote a higher standard of storefront design and architectural detail along the District's commercial streets. Along walkable shopping streets, create street walls with relatively continuous facades built to the front lot line in order to provide a sense of enclosure and improve pedestrian comfort. 913.13

Policy UD-3.1.7: Improving the Street Environment

Create attractive and interesting commercial streetscapes by promoting ground level retail and desirable street activities, making walking more comfortable and convenient, ensuring that sidewalks are wide enough to accommodate pedestrian traffic, minimizing curb cuts and driveways, and avoiding windowless facades and gaps in the street wall. 913.14

Policy UD-3.1.8: Neighborhood Public Space

Provide urban squares, public plazas, and similar areas that stimulate vibrant pedestrian street life and provide a focus for community activities. Encourage the "activation" of such spaces through the design of adjacent structures; for example, through the location of shop entrances, window displays, awnings, and outdoor dining areas. 913.15

Policy UD-3.1.9: Street Closures

Strongly discourage the closure of streets for private ownership or use. Any request for street closure should be reviewed in terms of the resulting impacts on vehicular and pedestrian circulation, access to private property, emergency access and fire protection, view obstruction, loss of open space, building scale, and other factors. 913.16

See the Transportation and Land Use Elements for additional policies on street closures.

Policy UD-3.1.10: Sidewalk Cafes

Discourage the enclosure of sidewalk cafes in a manner that effectively transforms them into indoor floor space. The design of sidewalk cafes should be compatible with the architectural qualities of the adjoining buildings, should complement the street environment, and should not impede pedestrian movement. 913.17

Policy UD-3.1.11: Private Sector Streetscape Improvements

As appropriate and necessary, require streetscape improvements by the private sector in conjunction with development or renovation of adjacent properties. 913.18

Policy UD-3.1.12: Programming of Outdoor Space

Encourage the programming of outdoor space with events and activities (such as performances, arts, and farmers markets) that stimulate streetlife and active use. 913.19

Policy UD-3.1.13: Signage

Encourage high standards of signage throughout the District, particularly for signs that designate landmarks, historic districts, and other areas of civic importance. 913.20

See the Environmental Protection Element for policies on street tree planting.

Action UD-3.1.A: DDOT Design and Engineering Manual

Update the DDOT Design and Engineering Manual (the “Red Book”) to ensure that it more effectively promotes the goal of creating a safe, attractive, and pedestrian-friendly street environment. 913.21

Action UD-3.1.B: Streetscape Improvement Programs

Maintain capital funding to upgrade the visual quality of District streets through programs such as Restore DC (Main Streets), Great Streets, and the DDOT Urban Forestry program. 913.22

Action UD-3.1.C: DDOT Public Space Permits

Ensure that all public space permits, including but not limited to permits for dumpsters, electric wiring, tree removal, excavation, parking, fences, retaining walls, signs and banners, sidewalk cafés, curb cuts, and special displays, are not inconsistent with the Comprehensive Plan and contribute to the policies laid out above for the use of street space. 913.23



Signage along the U Street Heritage Trail tells the story of this historic neighborhood.

Action UD-3.1.D: Paving of Front Yards

Consider amendments to zoning regulations and public space guidelines which would limit the paving of front yard areas for parking and other purposes. ^{913.24}

Action UD-3.1.E: Street Vending

Review the street vending and sidewalk café regulations to ensure that they are responsive to the goals of creating lively and animated neighborhood streets but also adequately protect public safety and movement. ^{913.25}

Action UD-3.1.F: Sign Regulations

Revise the sign regulations to improve the appearance and design of signs, and ensure that signs contribute to overall identity and sense of place while also expressing the unique identities of individual businesses. ^{913.26}

UD-3.2 Balancing Security and Civic Life ⁹¹⁴

Security has always been a factor in the design and development of Washington, DC, particularly around government and military facilities. The influence of security on the landscape has taken on new significance in the last five years, however. Some of the anti-terrorism measures implemented since 2001 have adversely affected the visual quality of the city. For example, the barriers around the city's monuments and closure of key streets around the US Capitol convey a harsh and militaristic image that detracts from the beauty of the city's most important structures. ^{914.1}

The reality is that security-conscious design is here to stay. The challenge facing the city now is to accommodate security needs without conveying the image of a city under siege. The National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), General Services Administration, National Park Service, and other federal agencies have been advocating for design solutions that balance security and aesthetic needs; the Pennsylvania Avenue plaza north of the White House is a good example. Additional measures to integrate security measures more sensitively into the permanent design of streets and open spaces will be put in place by the federal government during the coming years. ^{914.2}

Security needs also affect the design of many government buildings, and even the allowable mix of uses inside those buildings. Depending on their security designations, certain federal facilities are subject to very large setback requirements, limits on ground floor retail uses and public access, and restrictions on building openings and entrances. In some settings, these restrictions are at odds with the goal of creating pedestrian-friendly streets and animated public spaces. ^{914.3}

Through coordinated planning and design, the District and NCPC are pursuing methods to plan buildings, streets, and other aspects of the public realm in a manner that responds to homeland security needs without

impacting the vitality of street life. This may mean that uses with higher security requirements are located on federal enclaves like the Naval Security Station and Bolling Air Force Base, while those with lower security requirements may remain downtown. ^{914.4}

The city's goals for crime prevention also have an important link to urban design. New development should be consciously designed to focus "eyes on the street" and avoid creating places conducive to criminal activity. This has been one of the major goals of the federal HOPE VI program and the city's New Communities Initiative. The elimination of confusing internal street patterns and dead ends, upgrading of pedestrian walkways, use of appropriate landscaping, and creation of appealing, well-lighted public spaces can all work to effectively enhance public safety. ^{914.5}

Policy UD-3.2.1: Federal Collaboration

Collaborate with the federal government to plan for security and safety throughout the District without diminishing urban design quality and livability. Security needs should be considered from the beginning of the design process to ensure less intrusive and less disruptive solutions. ^{914.6}

Policy UD-3.2.2: Location of High-Security Uses

Avoid the siting of projects with high security requirements in a manner that conflicts with the city's urban design goals. Consider locating high-security projects in campus type settings to avoid the negative impacts that might result from their location in areas with active street life. ^{914.7}

Policy UD-3.2.3: Site Planning and Design Measures to Increase Security

Encourage architectural design and site planning methods that minimize perimeter security requirements and have a reduced impact on the public realm. Such measures include separating entryways, controlling access, "hardening" of shared walls, and the selection of more resilient building materials. ^{914.8}

Policy UD-3.2.4: Security Through Streetscape Design

Develop and apply attractive, context-sensitive security measures in the design of streets, plazas, and public spaces. These measures should use an appropriate mix of bollards, planters, landscaped walls, vegetation, and street furniture rather than barriers and other approaches that detract from aesthetic quality. ^{914.9}

Policy UD-3.2.5: Reducing Crime Through Design

Ensure that the design of the built environment minimizes the potential for criminal activity. Examples of preventive measures include adequate lighting, maintaining clear lines of sight and visual access, and avoiding dead-end streets. ^{914.10}



Makeshift security measures such as jersey barriers adversely affect District streets and sidewalks.



A more attractive solution has been implemented at the Museum of the American Indian, where security and aesthetic needs are successfully balanced.

The design of civic structures should reinforce the District's image as a forward-looking city that respects historic context while embracing change and innovation. Each library renovation, fire station addition, school modernization, recreation center construction project, and the like should be viewed as an opportunity to create a great civic building and character-defining public space.

Action UD-3.2.A: Security-Related Design Guidelines

Work collaboratively with the National Capital Planning Commission and other federal agencies to develop design measures which accommodate security needs without disallowing ground level retail and other public space amenities. Such measures should include solutions to meet parking and service access needs for ground level retail, and less obtrusive methods of “hardening” buildings and public space. ^{914.11}

Action UD-3.2.B: Neighborhood Surveys

Conduct regular surveys of crime “hot spots” to identify where urban design issues such as inadequate lighting and poor circulation may be contributing to high crime rates. Implement measures to address these issues through the redesign of streets and public space. ^{914.12}

Action UD-3.2.C: Design Review for Crime Prevention

Develop design standards for new neighborhoods, new communities, large tracts, and other major developments which reinforce crime prevention and security objectives. ^{914.13}

See the Land Use and Transportation Elements for additional policies on street closures for security.

UD-3.3 The Design of Public Buildings and Infrastructure ⁹¹⁵

The District should lead the way to good urban design in the way it designs and builds its own public facilities. The design of civic structures should reinforce the District's image as a forward-looking city that respects historic context while embracing change and innovation. Each library renovation, fire station addition, school modernization, recreation center construction project, and the like should be viewed as an opportunity to create a great civic building and character-defining public space. ^{915.1}

Over the next 20 years, transportation infrastructure will provide some of the city's most important urban design opportunities. The District is already home to one of the world's great train stations (Union Station), and the Metrorail system itself is an acclaimed piece of transportation architecture. The addition of streetcars, bus rapid transit systems, and their associated stations and stopping points will shape the identity of several neighborhoods in the next two decades. Similarly, the rebuilding of the Anacostia River crossings provides an opportunity for new bridges that become symbolic gateways and skyline icons, rather than the concrete viaducts that exist today. ^{915.2}

Policy UD-3.3.1: Capital Improvements and Urban Design

Use new capital improvement projects as opportunities to establish a positive image in neighborhoods which currently have poor design identity and negative visual character. ^{915.3}

Policy UD-3.3.2: Design Excellence in Public Buildings

Require design excellence for all public buildings and public space, with government leading by example to create a more attractive environment in the city and its neighborhoods. Important civic places, such as schools and libraries, should be individually designed to foster community identity and neighborhood character. ^{915.4}

Policy UD-3.3.3: Design of New Public Transit

Treat the design of mass transit systems **as an important form of public architecture. Transit shelters, waiting platforms, signage, off-board fare collection,** including the proposed streetcar and bus rapid transit systems, **as an important form of public architecture.** Bus shelters, waiting platforms, signage, on-street bicycle facilities, pedestrian connections, and other improvements should contribute to citywide urban design goals. ^{915.5}

Policy UD-3.3.4: Metro Station Entrances

Promote design improvements and public art at **transit** Metro station entrances **and transit stops,** providing a stronger sense of arrival and orientation for travelers. ^{915.6}

Policy UD-3.3.5: Design of Bridges and Infrastructure

Promote high quality design and engineering in all infrastructure projects, including bridges and other public works projects. ^{915.7}

UD-4 Making Great Design Matter ⁹¹⁶

The final section of the Urban Design Element includes program recommendations relating to urban design. The focus is on the expanded use of design guidelines and design review procedures to improve architectural quality in the city. ^{916.1}

Currently, the level of design review varies from one part of the District to the next. In the heart of the city, new projects undergo extraordinary scrutiny—the design of monuments, museums, and federal buildings is even the subject of Congressional debate. The US Commission of Fine Arts is charged with reviewing the design of all public buildings, and private buildings adjacent to public buildings and grounds of major importance. Since the passage of the Shipstead-Luce Act in 1930, the CFA has had the authority to review construction which fronts or abuts the grounds of the US Capitol and White House, the Downtown portion of Pennsylvania Avenue, the Southwest waterfront, and most of the National Park Service lands. The National Capital Planning Commission, likewise, evaluates the design of projects affecting the federal interest and may require modifications to improve architectural character and quality. NCPC reviews District of Columbia public projects (such as schools) and all



Architectural excellence at the ARC (Town Hall Education Arts & Recreation Campus) on Mississippi Avenue SE.

The Historic Preservation Office and/or the Historic Preservation Review Board review thousands of permits for exterior alterations, additions, and new construction each year. The result is a high level of design integrity, which in turn has contributed to the value and economic importance of Washington’s

projects on federal lands, and provides “in-lieu of zoning” review for public projects in the city center. ^{916.2}

The District of Columbia government’s design review programs have traditionally been oriented to historic districts. Illustrative design guidelines have been prepared for historic districts, addressing windows, doors, roofs, foundations, walls, porches, steps, landscaping, and many other aspects of building and site design. As described in the Historic Preservation Element, the Historic Preservation Office and/or the Historic Preservation Review Board review thousands of permit applications for exterior alterations, additions, and new construction each year. The result is a high level of design integrity, which in turn has contributed to the value and economic importance of Washington’s historic districts. ^{916.3}

In much of the city, however, design review requirements are minimal. Many projects are approved with a simple building permit, without an appraisal of their design impacts. The design of larger projects is routinely considered by the Zoning Commission, but in many cases without formal guidelines. Similarly, the city’s 37 Advisory Neighborhood Commissions weigh in on the design of many large-scale projects and public space permits, often suggesting changes that are incorporated by applicants. However, the process is ad hoc and the level of input varies from one ANC to the next. A more systematic and balanced approach to design review across the city would be helpful. ^{916.4}

While the following policies do not recommend mandatory design review in all parts of the city, they do suggest a higher level of review than is occurring today. This is especially important in parts of the city where a large amount of infill development may take place in the next 20 years, including neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River. Increases in public outreach, education, and design assistance will be needed as design review initiatives expand. Staff resources will also need to increase, to avoid delays in permit processing and ensure programs are properly administered and enforced. All policies should be implemented following consultation with affected communities. ^{916.5}

Policy UD-4.1.1: Design Guidelines

Develop illustrated design guidelines for selected residential areas and commercial districts addressing such architectural aspects as facade design, building texture and materials, lighting, detail, signage, and building to street relationship. Design guidelines should allow for flexibility and

creativity, and in most cases should be performance-oriented rather than based on rigid standards. ^{916.6}

Policy UD-4.1.2: Design Review

Support expanded design review programs in the District, with a priority on areas not currently protected by historic district designation. ^{916.7}

Policy UD-4.1.3: Design Assistance

Encourage the use of technical assistance programs to educate and inform the public about design guidelines and to promote higher quality design. ^{916.8}

Policy UD-4.1.4: Creating A Design Culture

Create an enhanced design culture in Washington through educational programs, museum exhibitions, design competitions, and school curricula. Pursue collaborations with the National Building Museum, the American Institute of Architects, and other professional design organizations to promote a broader public discourse on major urban design issues. ^{916.9}

Policy UD-4.1.5: Small Area Plans

Integrate urban design considerations into small area plans. Consider the use of illustrative design guidelines and place-specific urban design standards as part of these plans. ^{916.10}

Action UD-4.1.A: DC Urban Design Agenda

Prepare an “Urban Design Agenda” for the District of Columbia that articulates and illustrates citywide design principles for the city and its neighborhoods. ^{916.11}

Action UD-4.1.B: Expanding Design Review

Conduct an exploratory study on the expansion of design review requirements to areas beyond the city’s historic districts. The study should examine alternative approaches to carrying out design review requirements, including the use of advisory design review boards, and expansion of planning staff to carry out administrative reviews. ^{916.12}

Action UD-4.1.C: Review of Zoning Requirements

Adjust the processes and requirements for planned unit developments, site plans in the R-5-A zone districts, and large tract reviews in order to strengthen design amenities and promote higher design quality. ^{916.13}

