

also seek to engage the daily influx of air passengers who arrive and depart. As businesses move in, their workers generate the need for housing, services, schools, hospitals, retail, etc., providing the genesis for an aerotropolis.

New aerotropolli are being established at an increasing rate around the world, ranging from those that have grown spontaneously due to demand to those that were thoughtfully created using the principles of urban planning and sustainability. Airport managers, working together with city and regional government officials, business leaders, planners and developers can insure airport-area growth is cohesive, and includes the right mix of uses, along with the infrastructure to support it.

Some airport developers are incorporating commuter and light rail transit operations to generate Transit Oriented Development (TOD) opportunities that connect residents and workers to the airport as well as existing metro transportation systems. TOD creates compact, walkable communities centered on high-quality train systems, making it possible for residents to live without complete dependence on automobiles.

In Atlanta, Georgia, many community leaders have rightly identified Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport as ideal to fuel the growth of a highly successful aerotropolis. First, it's the world's busiest airport, both by passenger traffic and by the number of take-offs and landings. However, despite some areas being ripe for development, much of the growth around the airport has been piecemeal, failing to leverage the airport as an economic engine, or to seamlessly connect to the airport or welcome visitors to a world-class city and region. Local residents and workers desperately seek a higher quality of life, better access to transportation options and more livable communities. Complicating the area's development is the fact that three counties and several municipalities including Atlanta, Hapeville, College Park, East Point and Forest Park all have strong, and often competing, interests in regard to airport-area growth.

Seeking to reverse the existing disconnected land use pattern near the airport, the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) has convened local leaders for over a year to discuss existing conditions and potential visions. The ARC recently announced its intention to

form the Atlanta Aerotropolis Alliance, bringing together major area businesses and property owners, elected officials, local chambers of commerce, colleges and universities and other nonprofits to brainstorm how to create a unified urban airport center and to enhance the appearance and safety of the area.

Private sector parties have started to engage to create self-taxing Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) immediately adjacent to the airport. Their goal is to brainstorm and implement gateway signage, cleaner aesthetics, improved safety, more planned development and new jobs.

Thriving aerotropolli demonstrate

that the key to successful development is to garner stakeholder input to identify shared goals and develop a shared vision. From there, public and private partnerships need to be formed to generate both initial capital and long-range planning that will be beneficial to both public and private sectors. With the Atlanta Aerotropolis Alliance in the wings, Atlanta is poised to create an aerotropolis worthy of a world-class airport and a world-class region. ♦

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## Finding the right path through design review

*Municipalities — searching for ways to better shape development — must tailor their approach to the community's size and professional resources.*

KAIZER RANGWALA

**F**ormulaic buildings and generic places are a particularly American blight. They have eroded the physical character of many cities and towns. In some communities, they have spoiled the appetite for growth and development.

What's to be done? Municipalities increasingly recognize the downside of bad development. but many struggle to come up with a better alternative.

Will more regulations and reviews deliver the distinctive, vibrant places that communities want? Not necessarily. We are surrounded by places that are highly regulated yet badly planned and poorly designed.

Crude regulations and protracted review processes can make walkable places difficult to build. Too often, the local zoning code and development review process lean heavily toward reducing the negative effects of land uses, while offering little direction that *enhances* the quality and character of development.

Many cities lack an institutionalized design review process. Applicants and their design teams frequently are outraged by the vagaries of untrained planning commissions or political interference

from elected officials. "Designing from the dais" seldom results in good design.

To steer municipalities toward a more productive approach, in this article I discuss the potency of design review, the varied people involved in the process, and different options and formats that can be used.

### WHEN AND HOW TO USE DESIGN REVIEW

Every development has the potential to preserve and enhance its built and natural environment, stimulate the economy, and improve the quality of public life. Design review can be an efficient, cost-effective way to improve the spatial and functional quality of buildings and of spaces—largely shaped by buildings—that give character to a place.

A typical design review focuses on site and building design issues. In historic districts the design review may include more detailed regulations and/or a set of discretionary elements that control scale and massing, materials and detailing, roof forms, and openings.

In recent years, new urbanists have in many cases used form-based codes to provide direction about the intended character of a place. These codes provide clearer, more specific guidance, quicker approvals, and more predictable results than had been available through conventional zoning codes. However, even the most prescriptive form-based code cannot eliminate the exercise of judgment.

## Common concerns about design review

Design review is not without its dangers. Here are some of the problems to be avoided:

### 1) Overreaching or biased review

The task of the reviewer is not to redesign the project but to enhance the design, based on principles of sound design and professional judgment. Design bias, such as preference for a particular architectural style or material can stifle creativity. Subjective judgement is minimized when the review is focused around the community-supported criteria established in a form-based code and findings of fact.

### 2) Vague Direction

Design review should provide clear and specific direction. Vague phrases like “consistent or compatible” or “in harmony” leave room for subjective interpretation. The town architect, design staff, or head of the design review committee should synthesize and summarize the vague and disparate comments and provide specific and lucid direction at the conclusion of the review, based upon the code standards. Staff can follow up and provide a written synthesis of comments to the applicants.

### 3) Extra time and expense

A common complaint is that design review is an extra step in the approval process that consumes time and money. If done early in the process, following clear standards in a good form-based code, design review can streamline the approval process so that it results in an approval that entitles the applicant to apply directly for a building permit. When approval from multiple bodies is necessary, joint meetings may allow advisory and approval bodies to combine their public review process, saving everyone time and money.

### 4) Conflict of interest

The design review process should be free of financial and political influence. A reviewer who has professional or financial interests in the project being reviewed or in another project by the same applicant compromises the integrity of what should be an independent review. In small cities where conflicts are unavoidable, objective third-party talent from outside the city can bring balanced views and a wider perspective to the committee.



COURTESY OF KANZER RANGWALA

Peer review in Dallas

That’s where design review comes in. The design review process allows cities to ensure compliance, use informed judgment on the aesthetic aspects of a proposal, consider creative interpretations, and respond to nuances and dynamic conditions found within an area. Design review offers early feedback and observations that could lead to an enhanced scheme. It also strengthens the spine of decision makers to say no to poorly designed schemes, while supporting innovative and high-quality designs.

**Timing matters:** Design review is most effective when it’s integrated into the early stages of the development review process. It is both easier and more cost-effective to make changes when the development is not too far along.

Ventura, California, offers a **conceptual review** process to provide early direction on concept sketches, before an applicant develops a complete set of drawings for final approval. A conceptual review reduces risk and expense by exposing weaknesses and providing direction early in the process.

## THE PLAYERS

Design criticism is a delicate matter that is best received from professional peers possessing recognized expertise. In bigger cities, reviews are conducted by a committee of inde-

pendent and multi-disciplinary experts in design and development. A well-rounded assortment of related perspectives is made possible when the review committee includes architects, urban designers, landscape architects, and engineers as well as citizen design advocates.

Most review committees are advisory, providing impartial advice to planning commission, though some have the legal authority to make binding decisions on design matters. **Advisory review** can be more subjective than **binding review**, which must follow more precise standards. Planning offices, local universities, and not-for-profit agencies in some communities have set up urban design studios or engaged a staff designer to assist in spatial aspects of design review.

First in schools and then while working in studios, designers become accustomed to the culture of pin-up design review. The review gives the designer an opportunity to appreciate how different people with differing perspectives perceive designs. Constructive comments can add significant value to the education of the student and work of the professional. Design review offers the same advantage in a public setting.

Rural regions and smaller cities that have a limited pool of expertise rely on trained city staff or retain the services of an architect to comment on proposed buildings.

## DIFFERENT STROKES

Here are examples of the varying organizational methods of design review that governments use:

- In the mid-Hudson region of New York State, Dutchess County has a **development and design coordinator**, a trained urban designer who provides advisory site plan design review and planning services upon request to 30 municipalities.
- In older cities with a historic preservation program, the staff person is often the city architect.
- In Flagstaff, Arizona, the city architect also assists the planning staff with design review of development applications.
- Nashville has an in-house design studio with trained staff that assist with design review.

- Seattle employs a trained staff to review smaller projects, and also has several entities that are responsible for design. The Seattle Design Commission reviews design of public projects. Private development projects are reviewed by seven design review boards that cover different geographic districts.

- In Vancouver, British Columbia, a peer review panel provides urban design advice to planning staff. Similarly, in Dallas a peer review panel provides feedback on projects within tax-increment financing districts and designated planning areas. The city manager or a willing applicant can also request design

review of a project.

Cities can define the scale and significance of projects that require some form of design review. Design review is conducted on behalf of the public and therefore should welcome public involvement. The formality of the podium-and-dais setting and a public hearing format constrains the creative flow of ideas and dialogue. A charrette pin-up setting or desktop review is more conducive to a productive discussion and exchange of ideas.

**FUNDING**

Cities usually charge a fee to recover procedural costs. For review by the

town architect, developers can be required to pay the architect’s fee. This fee is a small fraction of the total development budget; developers are usually happy to pay for the expertise that builds on the skills of their design team.

Over all, design review has many advantages, and the concerns can be easily addressed. ♦

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## Urbanists thrilled that Caltrans endorses NACTO guide

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) will officially adopt the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) *Street Design Guide*, it was reported April 11. Advocates for complete streets responded enthusiastically to the announcement.

“This is HUGE!” wrote John Anderson, an urban designer and developer based in Chico, California. “After 15 years in California I had to check and make sure this was not a leftover April Fools’ Day post. (It is not). This should open the way for more common sense street design in towns and cities all over California.”

The 2013 NACTO guide represents best practices for walkable, urban streets.

California is the third state, after Washington and Massachusetts, to officially endorse the guide, notes *People For Bikes*. Caltrans is the largest state transportation agency in the US.

Dealing with state departments of transportation (DOTs) and traffic engineers, impervious to market forces and difficult to influence politically, has been a long-term problem for urbanists. Street design is just as important for placemaking and livability as compact, mixed-use development patterns. While the strong market for urban place has motivated developers to change, transportation planners and engineers feel no such pressure.

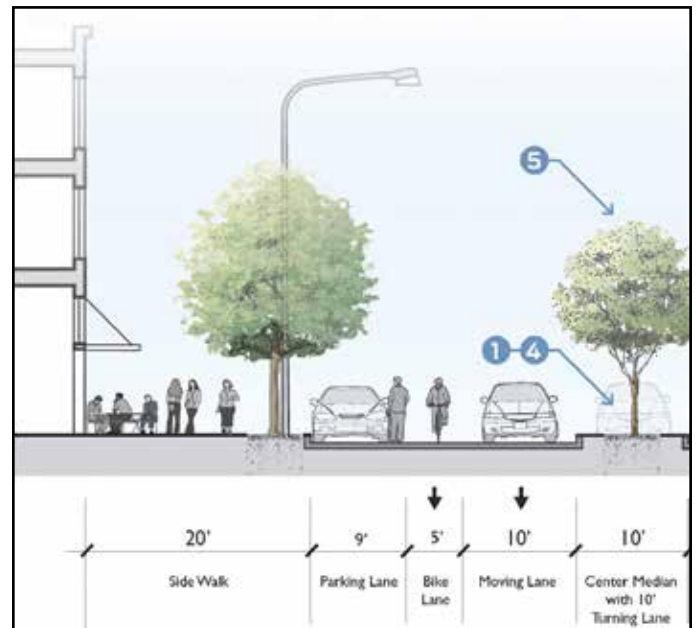
**A TOUGH PIECE OF MEAT**

The transportation engineering profession can be thought of as a very big, very tough piece of meat that urbanists have been pounding on for a couple of decades, trying to soften it up.

Renegade traffic engineers like Walter Kulash, who was profiled on page 1 of *The Wall Street Journal* in the mid-1990s, forcefully argued against automobile-dominated street design. In the early 2000s, the context-sensitive design trend exposed the DOTs to more progressive design, followed by the political success of the Complete Streets movement starting in 2005.

*Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares*, a manual by the Institute of Transportation Engineers and the Congress for the New Urbanism, was a step forward in 2006.

More recently, the success of progressive city DOT leaders, like Janette Sadik-Khan under Mayor Bloomberg in New York



**A street section from the NACTO Street Design Guide**

City, also primed the profession for change.

Yet to date the changes have been confined to the margins of most DOTs.

Now we have the NACTO guide and its acceptance by the influential Caltrans. It appears that the “softening up” may finally lead to real reform.

Caltrans was pushed to act by a blistering report from the State Smart Transportation Initiative in January 2014, which charged that the department is out of step with the best practices in the transportation field. SSTI recommended a series of reforms, including the adoption of the NACTO guide.

Now we will see whether this move results in substantive changes in the way streets are designed and built in the Golden State — and whether other DOTs will follow in California’s footsteps. ♦