Promoting Pedestrian-Friendly Design in Downtown Redevelopment

This article examines how cities regulate downtown urban design and the effect of these approaches in shaping the built environment. The lack of urban design controls for building placement, elevation and other features can open the door for new development to be designed to accommodate the automobile at the expense of pedestrians. Downtown Greensboro, NC, a city that allows wide latitude in downtown design, has witnessed the development of downtown projects that diverge significantly from a pedestrian-oriented typology, resulting in downtown blocks that seem more appropriate for the suburbs than a dense, "walkable" downtown. The article looks at several cities to demonstrate how design standards and guidelines have raised the bar for downtown development - affecting the design of not only buildings but also streetscape improvements and public spaces. The article surveys downtown design standards in Denver, Austin, Durham, and Chapel Hill, and compares recent downtown projects in Greensboro with the goals of these standards. The author finds that development regulations in downtown Greensboro are too open-ended to ensure the built environment of the future puts "pedestrians first." New public buildings have not enhanced the pedestrian experience in downtown Greensboro to date.

Philip Hervey

INTRODUCTION

This article examines how cities regulate downtown urban design and the effect of these approaches in shaping the built environment. The lack of urban design controls for building placement, elevation and other features can open the door for new development to be designed to accommodate the automobile at the expense of pedestrians. Downtown Greensboro, NC, a city that allows wide latitude in downtown design, has witnessed the development of downtown projects that diverge significantly from a pedestrian-oriented typology, resulting in downtown blocks that seem more appropriate for the suburbs than a dense, "walkable" downtown. Examples from Greensboro, NC, include an office building set off the street by 200 feet and surrounded on three sides by parking lots, a new building with no windows at the sidewalk level, and a park with small benches oriented toward a surface parking lot. On the other hand, many cities across the United States consider downtown design as warranting careful scrutiny in order to preserve the pedestrian character of downtown streets. The article looks at several of these cities to show how design standards and guidelines have raised the bar for downtown development - affecting the design of not only buildings but also streetscape improvements and public spaces.

Philip Hervey received a Master of Regional Planning from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2000. This article expands on his master's thesis, Design Guidelines for Revitalizing Downtown Durham, switching the focus to downtown Greensboro, NC.
DOWNTOWN GREENSBORO

Historic and Emerging Development Patterns

Greensboro has experienced significant changes over the past 30 to 40 years; the most dramatic from the implementation of urban renewal projects. These efforts included the removal of buildings, the reconfiguration of downtown streets, and the addition of parking in decks and surface parking lots throughout the Central Business District.

Today, Elm Street stands out as the most preserved area in the city core. On Elm St., many two-story and significantly taller buildings, including the 20-story Jefferson-Pilot building, abut the sidewalk, forming a continuous street wall for several blocks. Farther away from the Elm Street corridor to the east and west, downtown quickly becomes more auto-oriented, as the street wall disintegrates due to the infusion of large parking lots that have opened gaps in between buildings or consume all or a large portion of city blocks (see Figure 1).

Fringe downtown areas now are attracting new development. Major projects under way downtown include condominiums on Church Street, two blocks east of Elm Street, and a large building for the YMCA on the western edge of the Central Business District. Several buildings on Elm Street have been renovated in just the last year. A project that appears to be gathering momentum, with a nonprofit organization called Action Greensboro taking the lead, calls for the addition of a major downtown park and concert hall set amid mid-rise office buildings. The project would remove several small-scale buildings that provide storefront retail space.

A question that remains is whether new development — buildings as well as plazas, streetscape improvements and other projects in the public realm — will enhance people’s experience of the built environment. In particular, will new development build on the traditional pattern that resulted in Elm Street? Or, alternatively, will the design of new projects be automobile-oriented — suburban — and impede

Figure 1. Aerial shows dense character of Elm Street and the preponderance of parking in the outer areas of Greensboro’s Central Business District.
or discourage pedestrian activity? These are questions of urban design.

**Urban Design: A New Concern?**

Improving people’s experience of downtown has emerged as an issue in a new planning initiative in downtown Greensboro. Action Greensboro has developed a center city development plan identifying areas for major initiatives, including a minor league ballpark and a concert hall/plaza on Elm Street (mentioned above). The plan seeks, among other objectives, “to create connected and pedestrian-friendly streets, transit, and parking.” (Action Greensboro, 2002)

Development regulations for the Central Business District, however, provide the city limited influence over the design of new projects in the city core. The city has not adopted design guidelines for downtown development, leaving the zoning ordinance as the primary tool for regulating design. Yet this is a weak tool because each city’s Central Business District zoning regulations require downtown projects to meet few if any building or site standards (see Table 1).

The lack of design standards means the city cannot assure that new development meets design objectives such as creating or preserving pedestrian-friendly streets. One common objective for promoting walkable streets is the creation of “outdoor rooms,” requiring buildings to be built at or near the sidewalk forming the walls of the room. New traditional neighborhood development zoning districts reveal how zoning can be used to bring buildings to the street, as often TND districts establish “build-to” lines to ensure buildings are close to the street. Greensboro’s Traditional Neighborhood zoning, for example, requires that buildings be no more than five feet from the curb – a restrictive standard compared with the city’s Central Business District regulations.

One could argue that Greensboro’s setback standards for the Central Business District are effectively discouraging designs that place a building at the edge of the sidewalk, especially on narrower streets. The City’s required setbacks for the Central Business District are 35 feet for minor thoroughfares and 45 feet for major thoroughfares, measured from the street centerline (a zero foot minimum setback applies if the street is sufficiently wide). The standard means that buildings on narrower streets must be pushed back to meet the setback requirement. Buildings built off the sidewalk do not reflect the downtown’s historic building pattern. Indeed, the buildings that line Elm Street – including the Woolworth’s on South Elm.

<table>
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<th>Street Type</th>
<th>Minimum Street Setback</th>
<th>Maximum Street Setback</th>
<th>Minimum Interior Setbacks</th>
<th>Maximum Height</th>
<th>Parking Requirements</th>
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<tr>
<td>Major thoroughfare</td>
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<td></td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Exempt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Central Business District Zoning Standards: Greensboro

![Figure 2. Aerial of Wrangler Building site.](image)
the scene of the historic 1960 sit-in by the “Greensboro Four” — may be too close to the street to meet the City’s setback requirement. Because of the depth of the setback standards, several recent downtown buildings proposed to be built up to the sidewalk required variances from the City before the development could proceed. (Averett, 2002)

On the other hand, an example of a building that easily met Greensboro’s setback standards is the Wrangler Headquarters on North Elm Street (see Figure 2). The building, which has an Elm Street address, is situated roughly 200 feet from Elm Street, with parking areas in front and to the sides — a design that is more reminiscent of a suburban office park than downtown. The placement of the building off the street was “a matter of choice,” according to the City’s Subdivision Plans office. (Person, 2002)

REGULATING URBAN DESIGN

Urban design is intended to bring order, clarity and a pleasing harmony to the public realm of towns and cities. The public realm is best defined as the network of public spaces — streets, squares, plazas, parks and sidewalks — that comprise the connective tissue of spaces that citizens share in their daily lives. It is these public spaces that most clearly define a city.

-City of Raleigh Urban Design Guidelines (April 2002)

Cities are turning to the development review process, in particular by adopting downtown-specific zoning standards and design guidelines, to gain influence over downtown urban design. Cities eager to attract development to the downtown core may be reluctant to adopt more stringent requirements to preserve nebulous objectives such as “pedestrian scale” or “character.” Yet without effective design standards, new development may be less than ideal. Instead of storefronts and attractive public spaces, downtown sidewalks could become a pedestrian no-man’s land lined with any number of barriers: surface parking, dumpster pads, faceless building façades and drive-through establishments. An example showing the challenges a city can face in controlling urban design in the absence of zoning standards or design guidelines is the YMCA project in downtown Durham.

Urban Design Dilemma: The YMCA in Downtown Durham

Prior to the adoption of new Downtown Design Overlay Districts in 2002, the City had little influence over urban design for projects proposed in the Central Business District outside the Downtown Loop — a series of one-way streets that wrap around the historic downtown core. For the Central Business District, the City’s zoning ordinance specified no standards for even the most basic design issues, such as height and building placement. The zoning requirements were not necessarily a barrier to pedestrian-scale development as projects did not have to meet parking requirements or deep setback standards. However, the standards did little to promote a preferred building pattern; design options are an open slate.

An example of the design quandary is the YMCA building at Morgan and Foster Streets. Today the building is situated close to Morgan Street, with parking behind the building, hidden from the main street. An alternative scenario could have just as easily happened: a large parking lot on Morgan Street with the building toward the rear of the site (a striking contrast to its rather large neighbor across Foster Street), the Durham Centre office tower, and parking garage. Because of special circumstances, not development regulations, the YMCA in the end had redesigned the project building in a manner that was somewhat compatible with goals of the City’s Comprehensive Plan.

In 1996, with Durham operating under the old zoning ordinance, the YMCA broke ground on a new 49,000-square-foot athletic center and a 13,000-square-foot day care center, a development that represented about $9 million in new downtown investment. The project also filled in a portion of a large surface parking lot. The site is in an important area — between the downtown core and a rundown area chosen for construction of Durham Central Park. One of the most significant issues for planners was the YMCA’s initial plan to place the parking lot in front of the structures — in effect leaving a surface parking lot on Morgan Street.
THE DURHAM CENTRE

Everyone finds it annoying to search around a building ... looking for the proper entrance. When you know just where the entrance is, you don’t have to bother thinking about it. It’s automatic – you walk in, thinking about whatever’s on your mind, looking at whatever catches your eye – you are not forced to pay attention to the environment simply to get around. Yet the entrance to many buildings is hard to find; they are not “automatic” in this sense.


From a distance the 14-story Durham Centre stands out as one of the tallest structures that form the skyline of downtown Durham, N.C. The office tower at 300 West Morgan Street is the most prominent building on the northern edge of the city’s Central Business District; nearby low-rise buildings include a hot dog business, a McDonald’s and a tire franchise. Yet, from the vantage point of the Morgan Street sidewalk in front of the Durham Centre it is almost as if the building is not even there.

This is because the 220,000-square-foot building is situated not on the street but three stories above the sidewalk, atop a 780-space garage – an extreme example of a building entrance that, as Christopher Alexander writes, is not “automatic.”

Consider the effect of elevating the office building above the street for pedestrians looking to get from Morgan Street to the front door. From the street, locating the front door to the office tower first requires finding the opening in the garage’s masonry facade over which a dark blue sign says “330 W. Morgan St. building entrance.” From there one is faced with a choice – either climb three flights of stairs or ride the elevator to the top of the deck. The “front” door leading into the building’s lobby is there, as well as a large plaza.

While a hard-to-find building entrance may be problematic, a 1999 plan for downtown Durham highlights other concerns about elements of the Durham Centre design; in particular the effect of the parking garage that extends the length of a full city block. The Downtown Durham Master Plan includes a photo of the development as an example of “poorly designed ground-floor levels and imposing size” of a parking structure, concluding that the garage “provides little street-level interest for pedestrians” (Durham Office of Economic and Employment Development, 1999).
Figure 3. A sign next to the sidewalk in front of the YMCA building directs people to the rear entrance.

The City wanted to discourage this suburban-style design on this downtown lot that fronts a major street and is just across the street from the Durham Centre parking garage and tower.

The City may have had little influence over the site plan had the property been already zoned Central Business District, which, as noted above, contains no setbacks, height or building bulk standards. The YMCA project, though, required rezoning. The organization also wanted the City to close Seminary Street – which is at the rear of the site – so it could develop in the right of way. The City refused to close Seminary, but agreed to the rezoning. Prior to the vote the YMCA had indicated it would revise the site plan when it returned for site plan approval (Cruse, 2000). The new site plan placed the building on the corner of Foster and Morgan streets. Durham also gave the organization some right-of-way from Seminary Street, but the City obtained some of the development site to provide extra sidewalk width along Foster, enhancing a pedestrian connection with the proposed Central Park to the rear of the YMCA.

As a result, the YMCA – not a surface parking lot – now anchors a corner of a major downtown intersection and the access to Central Park to and from downtown was improved. However, the building entry is oriented toward the rear, not the main street. Morgan Street. A sign next to the sidewalk on Morgan Street directs people to the entrance at the rear (see Figure 3); large letters spelling “Exit” are on a glass door that opens onto Morgan.

The leverage the City had due to the required rezoning for the site provided the City additional influence over the site design that it otherwise would not have. Without the special needs of the YMCA, the City may not have been able to negotiate for a site plan City officials preferred. In short, the development regulations were not sufficient to ensure the development met the city’s goals for downtown urban design.

Urban Design Tool: Zoning

Zoning can be a powerful regulatory device
for shaping the design of a downtown project. Zoning authority provides urban-design controls by enabling a city to dictate the bulk and height of a building, how it fits on a lot, and the uses allowed in the structure. The standards have a profound influence on the experience of an urban area, enabling cities to protect light and air circulation in a dense urban environment. Whether buildings are nestled to the sidewalk, as opposed to set back from the street with parking in front, affects the quality of the urban experience for pedestrians. Robin S. Cook Jr., in his book Zoning for Downtown Urban Design, writes that urban design is related to four important urban concerns: visual quality, functional qualities (movement of people and vehicles), environmental qualities (sun, air circulation and shade), and urban experience. Urban experience, Cook says, is produced by the diversity of uses, the diversity of architecture and other visual stimuli, the amenities, open spaces or active and passive recreation, and the interaction of diverse people with each other in these complex surroundings. Complexity, surprise, diversity and activity are the essence of cities. The converse of this is exclusivity of function, which should be avoided (p. 13).

Zoning typically is applied horizontally, dividing sections of a city into distinct zones, establishing permitted uses and specifying requirements for setbacks, lot width and parking spaces. Zoning also can be used at a finer level of detail to encourage or discourage certain uses at the building level. (Durham City-County Planning Department, 2002) Durham’s Downtown Strategy, released in June 2002, discusses the potential of “vertical zoning” to encourage a vertical mix of uses by specifying the uses permitted depending on the building level. Zoning could require pedestrian-oriented uses at the street level, including shops, restaurants and other uses that attract the interest of those passing by. Examples of uses that are more appropriate for upper floors include law offices, apartment lobbies, brokerage offices and other spaces that involve little human activity.

Another zoning concept available to cities is “narrow use zoning,” used as a means to encourage certain uses depending on the area. For example, Durham’s Downtown Strategy recommends limiting uses in street-level space in the Downtown Plan’s proposed entertainment corridor to restaurants, bars, small retail establishments and other businesses that likely operate into the evening hours.

Zoning also enables cities to use incentives, such as density bonuses or transfer of development rights, to influence urban design. Cook states that incentive zoning is the “cornerstone of urban-design control.” He says that the city’s control over density—the right to develop at a given intensity—provides cities with a “carrot” for negotiating with developers. One potential public benefit is requiring the developer to foot the cost of improvements to a public or semipublic area at the site, or contribute to a fund paying for off-site improvements. Also, the city has additional influence over the design of structures and how they fit in the context of the adjacent area.

Urban Design Tool: Design Guidelines

Design guidelines enable cities to exert additional influence over design by serving as a mechanism that extends the level of design review beyond setbacks, height restrictions and other basic requirements of a development ordinance. Design guidelines can address a city’s urban design objectives for not only buildings, but also the design of parking structures and lots, public spaces and streetscape projects—factors that affect the design of public as well as private projects. Ilene Watson (2001) elaborates on how design guidelines compare with zoning:

Design guidelines provide a more detailed image than the broad goals of the comprehensive plan, yet they allow greater flexibility and creativity in addressing design issues than is typically found in a zoning bylaw. It is critical that any design guideline be clear enough to be understood by the public—not just by professional architects or planners. ... Creating clear and understandable guidelines is also important for ensuring that they are legally defensible.
Guidelines can be written to encourage or require that projects meet various city objectives for the downtown built environment. For example, when Denver adopted an urban design review program for a historic section of its downtown, one of the city’s objectives was the preservation and enhancement of the pedestrian-friendly character of streets. Many of Denver’s guidelines were written to achieve this objective, including the requirement that buildings to be nestled against the sidewalk, as well as next to existing buildings, to preserve continuity of the “street wall” (City and County of Denver 1998). This is an important design consideration as studies show that in order for a downtown environment to function well for pedestrians, it must be compact (Cook).

Guidelines are more flexible than the standards dictated by zoning. Flexibility does not necessarily mean optional, as cities in the development review process can require developers to demonstrate why certain guidelines are not addressed. An important issue to resolve is the degree of specificity in the guidelines (Watson).

This is the dilemma between prescriptive guidelines which are regulatory and rigid, and descriptive guidelines which are focused on providing input into the design process and flexibility. Descriptive guidelines allow more creativity and are adaptable to the conditions of the site, but can be so open to interpretation that it can be difficult to refuse a development that shows only a minimal response to design issues. This type of guideline often indicates that a certain response to a design issue is “encouraged” or “discouraged.” ... Prescriptive guidelines are less open to interpretation but can inhibit exploring various design options, and sometimes may even prohibit a good, creative design solution.”

**Implementing Downtown Design Standards**

It is a given that political considerations would affect how far a city would be able to go to incorporate new design standards in the review process. Moving from a non-regulatory environment to a restrictive system, such as the process used in Denver’s Lower Downtown (LoDo) district, would be taking a big leap.

Denver has several layers of development review affecting how projects take shape in LoDo. Anyone proposing to develop real property in LoDo must consult the B7 Zone District Ordinance, the Denver Comprehensive Plan, the Neighborhood Plan, the Streetscape Plan, Ordinance 109, the Landmark Preservation Commission’s Design Guidelines for Lower Denver Landmarks and Landmark Districts and supplementary guidelines to that document (City and County of Denver, 2000).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overlay District</th>
<th>Maximum Building Height*</th>
<th>Residential Density Maximum/Minimum (units per acre)</th>
<th>Setbacks Maximum/Minimum (from back of curb)</th>
<th>Floor Area Ratio</th>
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<tr>
<td>DDO-1</td>
<td>300 feet or 20 stories, whichever is less</td>
<td>100 units / 12 units</td>
<td>20 feet / 12 feet**</td>
<td>Minimum: 2.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>DDO-2</td>
<td>80 feet or 6 stories, whichever is less</td>
<td>16 units / 8 units</td>
<td>20 feet / 12 feet**</td>
<td>Minimum: 1 Maximum: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDO-3</td>
<td>45 feet or 3 stories, whichever is less</td>
<td>16 units / 8 units</td>
<td>20 feet / 12 feet**</td>
<td>Minimum: 1 Maximum: 2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Development Review Board may approve building heights 10 percent above maximum. The Board of Adjustment may grant additional height or hear appeals as to DRB decisions regarding height.
**Above 20 feet, buildings may be built to property line; columns may be placed in the portion of any sidewalk located on private property to support any building above the 20-foot height.

Table 2. Downtown Design Overlay District Standards
Potentially less imposing options are illustrated in the recommendations for Austin's (Texas) program, which the Austin City Council adopted by resolution on May 18, 2000 (City of Austin Downtown Report, January 2002). The city identified several approaches for implementing the Downtown Austin Design Guidelines for new buildings, streetscape, parking decks, public spaces and other projects:

- Codify some of the guidelines in the city’s development ordinances. An example is requiring in the development ordinance that retail space at street level be incorporated in parking structures in the downtown area.
- Establish some of the guidelines as city policy or departmental policy (such as planning or public works).
- Adopt the guidelines to apply them to the city’s own civil or building projects.
- Incorporate the guidelines in matrices to evaluate public/private projects that seek public funding.
- Develop a system to provide opportunities for feedback, review and revision to see that the guidelines are working as hoped.
- Place the Austin Design Commission in an advisory role to review significant downtown projects for design guideline conformance.

In North Carolina, development review processes in Durham and Chapel Hill illustrate two approaches for implementing downtown design standards in the review stages.

Durham, N.C.

In the summer of 2002, Durham adopted new Downtown Design Overlay Districts in areas adjacent to the Downtown Loop in an effort to achieve design objectives in the Downtown Plan, such as active street frontage and pedestrian scale. Standards for the overlay districts (see Table 2) supercede those of the underlying zoning districts.

The overlay districts taper the development intensity for areas further away from the Central Business District core, and closer to the surrounding neighborhoods. Overall the standards are stringent relative to the Central Business District. The setbacks provide space for sidewalks and while preventing buildings from being set back far off the street. The minimum floor area ratio of 2.5 in the DDO-1 requires buildings to be of a substantial size, preventing low-scale development like a hot dog stand on Foster Street north of the Durham Centre.

Despite the increased regulations, the process is designed to be more streamlined because major projects are reviewed in a standard site plan review process overseen by the Development Review

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1.2.4 Massing, Height, Scale & Rhythm

Goal:
Design buildings that are appropriately scaled for their function and with respect to their context.

Guidelines:

a. Building height should generally relate to and align with neighboring structures. Design one-story buildings with sufficient height to relate in scale to the surrounding structures.

b. Tall buildings are encouraged where they may provide visual interest, frame view corridors, or relate to larger scaled structures.

c. Where building height or massing vary greatly from the surroundings, compatibility may be achieved through fenestration and bay patterns and street level details.

d. Design buildings with an architectural and urban scale compatible with neighboring developments.

e. Incorporate upper story setbacks to reduce the apparent building mass, preserve the street level scale, and allow for sun access to adjacent buildings and public spaces.

f. Build upon the rhythms and proportions established by adjacent buildings while employing a palette of rhythms to avoid monotonous repetition.

g. Incorporate the vertical and horizontal lines of adjacent buildings, where appropriate.

h. Buildings should relate to the human scale through the use of architectural elements, proportion, materials, and surface articulation.

i. Maintain consistent massing and perceived building height at the street level, regardless of the overall bulk or height of the building.

j. Avoid large unarticulated monolithic buildings. Break down the apparent scale of buildings exceeding 50 feet in length by the articulation of separate volumes into a coherent, hierarchical architectural composition.

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Figure 4. Durham Design Manual example
Board instead of the major special use permit process. The review process consists of a Downtown Design Review Team that reviews development in the overlay districts for compliance with the design guidelines. The review team includes representatives from City staff, an appointee by the City Manager and two citizen appointees. Its recommendations are included in the planning staff report to the Development Review Board, which handles site plan approvals.

The Design Guidelines address buildings, public space and streetscape. The guidelines are organized by topic, such as “site” design, a related design issue or goal, followed by the applicable guidelines or standards. The manual states, “guidelines are suggested flexible ways to meet the stated goal, while standards are direct, concrete requirements for meeting that goal.” (City and County of Durham, 2002) Figure 4 illustrates the approach.

One of the first test cases will be a proposal to build twin 27-story concrete and brick condominium buildings, replacing the dilapidated and vacant Heart of Durham Hotel (Curliss, 2002). The site is within the Downtown Design Overlay-1. The design of the 310-foot buildings, which would house 456 units, consists of concrete balconies and possibly prefabricated brick panels. The City Council approved the rezoning despite some misgivings. Mayor Bill Bell was quoted as saying of the rezoning vote: “I had a lot of trepidation. I don’t want it to be a Cabrini Green...If that happens, I will have made a mistake.”

Chapel Hill, N.C.

The Town of Chapel Hill’s regulations and policies emphasize the street-edge in downtown development, enhancing pedestrians’ experience of the built environment.

Development Ordinance Standards

For properties in the downtown Town Center zoning districts, the Chapel Hill Development Ordinance establishes height and development intensity standards (floor area ratios). Minimum setbacks are set at zero, allowing buildings to be up against the sidewalk. Table 3 summarizes the Town Center-2 district, which covers most of the downtown commercial core.

A standard that could be at odds with pedestrian-friendly design is the minimum parking requirement, which for most nonresidential uses is 1 space per 400 square feet of floor area. The residential requirement is 1 space per dwelling unit. While meeting this standard could require substantial off-street parking, other Town standards serve to minimize the impact of parking on the street edge. For the Town Center zoning districts, if a setback is provided between the building and the street, the setback cannot be used for parking. However, parking can be placed to the side of the building; depending on the size of the lot, the parking could create a significant gap in the street wall. This issue may be less of a concern in a downtown where

<table>
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<th>Floor Area Ratio</th>
<th>Minimum Lot Width</th>
<th>Street, Interior, Solar Setbacks</th>
<th>Parking Requirement</th>
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1 The primary height limit is measured at the property lines; the secondary height limit standard is calculated as follows: for each foot into the interior, the building height can be increased by 1 foot up to the secondary height limit. For example, 10 feet in the interior of a lot, a building could be as tall as 54 feet.
2 The permitted intensity can be higher if a proposed development meets bonus thresholds for affordable housing and/or mixed-use targets. The bonus for mixed-use development, which applies only to the Town Center, applies if at least 50 percent but not more than 75 percent of the floor area is contained in dwelling units, and the remainder is devoted to nonresidential uses.
3 For nonresidential projects that qualify for the bonus described above, the secondary limit is increased to 90 feet.
4 For general business uses, offices, banks and other similar uses. The residential parking requirement is one space per dwelling unit.

Table 3. Town Center-2 Height Restrictions, Intensity Regulations and Parking Requirements
lots ripe for redevelopment are relatively small. For cities such as Greensboro that have large parking lots and other “redevelopable” downtown tracts, this could be a significant issue because of the potential for large “side” surface parking lots.

Other options for meeting the parking requirement include making payments to the Town Parking Fund at $3,600 per required space, providing parking off-site within 1,200 feet of the building entrance, and submitting a Transportation Management Plan stating how alternative modes of transportation will be encouraged. Several recent projects have made use of the TMP option, which could include providing parking or a payment to the parking fund. Examples include providing bicycles for tenants at an apartment building, and installing showers and bicycle storage areas.

Note that the Development Ordinance has no maximum setback that would require buildings to be at or near the sidewalk, but economic considerations obviate the need for that in downtown Chapel Hill. Much of the existing street-level shops and restaurants on the town’s busiest downtown street, Franklin Street, occupy storefronts that line the sidewalk; few businesses on Franklin provide on-site parking. A reason is that downtown businesses can feed off the significant pedestrian traffic generated by the presence of the adjacent University of North Carolina campus, popular transit routes, the base of downtown office workers, and Town-owned parking. The Town has recognized the importance of infill development where parking has eroded the pedestrian scale of the street; the Downtown Small Area Plan, for example, identifies “development opportunity” areas where the Town’s goal is to encourage new development that creates street-level activity. A key area is West Rosemary Street, a parallel street to Franklin one block to the north; this area contains large University-owned surface parking lots, small-scale buildings, and buildings with on-site parking.

Special Use Permit Requirement

The Town of Chapel Hill under certain conditions
has increased input on the design of proposed downtown projects of a certain size. The Town requires nonresidential projects with 20,000 square feet or more floor space to obtain a Special Use Permit. Flexibility afforded by this review process enabled a major mixed-use project at a prominent downtown intersection to be built to the property lines, anchoring a corner once occupied by a gas station. In approving the Special Use Permit for the building, which houses the Top of the Hill restaurant (see Figure 5), the Council agreed to waive the Parking Fund payments, enabling the development to proceed without any off-street parking.

The Special Use Permit process includes review of the plans by the Community Design Commission, which can influence the project design. The process also requires a finding that the proposed development is in conformance with the Comprehensive Plan. For projects proposed in the Town Center, the Town checks for compliance with the Downtown Chapel Hill Small Area Plan, a component of the Comprehensive Plan.

The Downtown Small Area Plan has a supplemental 11-page Downtown Design Guidelines section as well as other design-related goals and objectives. The Design Guidelines are flexible, stating that development “should” meet certain objectives (Town of Chapel Hill, 2000). The major guidelines include:

- No more than two stories in height at the property line;
- Include alcoves and special treatments at entries;
- Storefront type windows adjacent to the sidewalk;
- Build at the property line; and,
- Use natural materials on the exteriors.

In cases where a project has less than 20,000 square feet of floor area, therefore not requiring a Special Use Permit, the Town lacks the procedural leverage to consider the Downtown Design Guidelines in the project design. For larger projects the guidelines can have an effect. The Franklin Hotel to be built on West Franklin Street is a good example of a case where the Design Guidelines played a factor in the ultimate outcome. During the public hearing on the Special Use Permit request, the architect contended the design met all of the major guidelines, including the building’s two-story height at the street (Town of Chapel Hill, 2001). The guidelines may have helped reduce the scale of the project as the Town’s Development Ordinance standards for the Town Center allow buildings to be as tall as four stories at the property line.

DEVELOPING AN URBAN DESIGN PROGRAM

Orienting buildings to public streets will encourage walking by providing easy pedestrian connections, by bringing activities and visually interesting features closer to the street and by providing safety through watchful eyes.

– Peter Calthorpe, The Next American Metropolis

This article contends that the adoption of design standards for development in downtown Greensboro – new zoning regulations coupled with design guidelines – could play a vital role shaping the built environment as new projects take over parking lots and other under-utilized downtown sites. While an urban design program could take many forms, some design standards should be considered as fundamental elements that must be included in a set of downtown design guidelines or new zoning standards.

A sampling of downtown design guidelines and zoning standards in three U.S. cities – included here in order to consider approaches outside North Carolina – provides an idea of what could be considered as fundamental issues to be addressed in regulating downtown design. Table 4 summarizes the design issues addressed in review processes adopted or proposed for downtown districts in Denver, Pittsburgh and Austin, Texas. To some degree, the cities each address these urban design elements: windows, building entries, “build-to” lines, height, and building step-backs for upper floors. Like Durham, each city also adopted the approach of tailoring design guidelines to specific districts within a downtown.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Austin</th>
<th>Denver (LoDo)</th>
<th>Pittsburgh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Buildings/General</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor-Area Ratio (FAR)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build to the Street/Sidewalk</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height Limits</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height Minimums</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Stepbacks Above Certain Level</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed-Use Preferred</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed-Use Target (Percentage) for Block</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency Requirement (Windows)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Guidelines for Specific Areas</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulate Entries</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of Scales</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Entries for Large Buildings</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide Cover for Pedestrians on Sidewalk</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidelines on Building Materials</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buildings Require Base, Middle, and Top</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage Public Art in Projects</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parking</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below-Grade Preferred</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen Parking from Street</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed-Use Parking Structure Standards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Quality Materials</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vertically Oriented Architecture</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plazas/Parks</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locate in High-Use Areas</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microclimate Design (Breezes, Sun, Shade)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seating Standards</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locate Food Service in or Near Space</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure Good Pedestrian Access from Street</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide Visual Complexity in Design</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Streetscape</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual Developed with Illustrated Streetscape Standards</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Install Street Trees</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide Barriers Between Pedestrian, Street</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedestrian Lighting</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paving</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Furniture</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Comparison of Design Issues Addressed in Design Guidelines and Zoning in Downtown Austin, Denver and Pittsburgh
The table also demonstrates that cities are extending the influence of design controls beyond issues such as architectural features or site orientation of a building; these cities also include standards for designing parking lots and garages, plazas and parks, and streetscape elements, including lighting, trees, signs and benches.

**How Do Projects in Greensboro Stack Up?**

Returning to Greensboro, how well do recent downtown projects adhere to other cities' downtown design standards? The following four projects are cited here as they reveal the variety of project design that has taken place in Greensboro and Durham following the heyday of urban renewal.

- **Greensboro News & Record newspaper complex** has just one entrance accessible from the public sidewalk, on Market Street.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design Issue</th>
<th>Design Guidelines Related to Design Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News &amp; Record</td>
<td>1. Transparency specifications for including windows in street-level and upper-level portions of buildings (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Orientation and articulation of the public entrance (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Height/FAR minimums (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Build to property lines where feasible (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood Center</td>
<td>1. Build to property lines where feasible (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Parking screening standards (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Height/FAR minimum (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Zoning requirement that street-level space contain pedestrian-oriented use (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Orientation and articulation of the public entrance (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greensboro's downtown library</td>
<td>1. Build to sidewalk edge (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Orient entrance to the street (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Include architectural features providing pedestrian protection from the elements (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrangler Building</td>
<td>1. Build to sidewalk edge (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Screen parking from street (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Orient entrance to the street (+/-)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(+/-) Appears to meet intent of guideline, (-) Does not meet intent of guideline.

**Table 5: How Key Downtown Design Standards Relate to Projects in Greensboro**

Surface parking lots are located on street corners, some portions behind a perimeter chain link fence that stretches along the public sidewalk. The site itself could be considered underdeveloped for a Central Business District location; in addition to the parking lots, a one-story building occupies a large portion of the site across the street from a new multi-modal transportation center.

- **Early Childhood Center** (late 1990s) is a one-story building set off the corner of Eugene Street and Friendly Avenue with a suburban-style free-standing sign placed next to the parking lot on Eugene Street. Just one door — with no door handle on the outside — opens onto the sidewalk. To reach the building's main entrance, which is oriented toward the parking lot, from the public sidewalk, a pedestrian would have to walk around a landscaped area into...
the driveway and through a pull-up area for vehicles.

- **Greensboro Public Library** (1998), built to the edge of Church Street two blocks north of the newspaper complex. The design of the city’s 100,000-square-foot two-story library building meets several of the common design guidelines adopted by other cities discussed in this article. These features include an arcaded street-level façade that provides protection from the weather, and an articulated main building entrance.

- **The Wrangler building** (1994), despite its North Elm Street address written over its front entrance, sits back roughly 200 feet from the corner of North Elm and Bellemeade Streets. The building’s surface parking lot fronts two streets, within which signs are posted warning people that the parking is for Wrangler employees and visitors only.

Table 5 describes how design elements for each project relate with building design guidelines adopted in other cities. With the possible exception of the Greensboro Public Library, the application of a typical set of design guidelines on these projects likely would have required redesigns to address issues such as building placement and orientation and design of the building entrance.

The table, which lists only a few key features and related standards, suggests that the application of typical urban design standards would have required significant alteration to building design and the site plan. Compliance with the standards is no simple task. For example, simply moving the Wrangler building to Elm Street would still leave a large portion of the site covered by surface parking. Putting the parking in a well-designed deck would appear to be a better solution; however, this would entail significantly higher projects costs for a building of this size.

Greensboro does not have to look far for potential design standards that would promote pedestrian-friendly development in the Central Business District. The City’s Traditional Neighborhood District has been introduced in Southside, a neotraditional development under construction just south of railroad tracks from the downtown core. The zoning district includes Design Guidelines for promoting “human scale” design, including:

- Buildings that avoid long, monotonous.
uninterrupted walls or roof planes.

• Commercial structures that incorporate awnings or arcades, which may project over the sidewalk into the street right-of-way with city approval;

• Ground floor retail, service, restaurant, and other commercial uses with display windows on a minimum of fifty percent of the first floor front to provide views into the interior of buildings;

• Entrances and storefronts facing the street. (City of Greensboro, 2002)

Though tailored for “new urbanist” projects, these standards are not necessarily inappropriate for the CBD, as other cities – as this article has shown – have adopted similar urban design standards for their downtown cores.

CONCLUSION

In recent months, workers have been erecting a large YMCA facility at the corner of Spring Street and Market Street in downtown Greensboro, across Market Street from a Firestone tire dealer and a Hardee’s Restaurant. With each passing week the building took shape, filling much of a city block that is wrapped on three sides by one-way streets. During the early stages of construction passersby could look through the building’s incomplete exterior walls and watch the work going on inside.

As the building neared completion workers filled in the gaps in the façade. The second story now features bands of windows that wrap around much of the building. The street level, where people would be walking by, features one main entrance but no windows – essentially a blank façade. To some degree, a design that seals the building from the street makes sense given the fast-moving traffic on the one-way streets outside and the suburban character across Market Street where the Hardee’s and Firestone buildings are situated in surface parking lots. Important issues clearly extend beyond the site plan and building design - including street width and the provision of on-street parking, street trees and benches.

The cumulative effect of buildings that are closed off to the street, providing little street-level interest from the vantage point of the sidewalk, means these downtown blocks as they become developed will still be far removed from achieving the character of Greensboro’s Elm Street. These areas will fail to achieve a “walkable” city form other cities are striving for in adopting design guidelines for their downtowns.

In Pittsburgh, the city’s over-arching goal of its urban design program is “pedestrians first.” (City of Pittsburgh, 1998a) In other words, develop for people, not automobiles. It is easy to picture an urban environment that fits Pittsburgh’s ideal: Buildings, not parking lots, fronting streets; storefront windows, not solid walls, along the sidewalk; accessible plazas with adequate seating, sun, shade, and air circulation; buildings of a scale that enhances, not overwhelms, the street environment.

Development regulations in downtown Greensboro are too open-ended to ensure the built environment of the future puts “pedestrians first.” In fact, the recent projects reviewed in this article suggest that new buildings may not enhance the pedestrian experience in each downtown. The implications are significant: A downtown that is inviting to pedestrians is a downtown that creates a lively and diverse atmosphere that can draw people away from the auto-oriented suburbs.

REFERENCES


Durham City/County Planning Department. *Historic Districts and Landmarks Overlay*.

Durham City/County Planning. *Interim Transit Oriented Development-Compact Neighborhood Overlay District*


NOTES

Projects in the Historic District within the Loop require a Certificate of Appropriateness as per Historic District requirements. The Downtown Design Overlay District was not added to this area.