



Urban design policies, adopted and enforced by cities to enhance the compatibility and appeal of an area's buildings, streets, open spaces, and transportation infrastructure, benefit both the community and developers by bringing together the public and private sectors to give form to a city's vision of itself. A well-designed city, or district within a city, draws residents and visitors into public spaces, building community and supporting businesses and economic development.

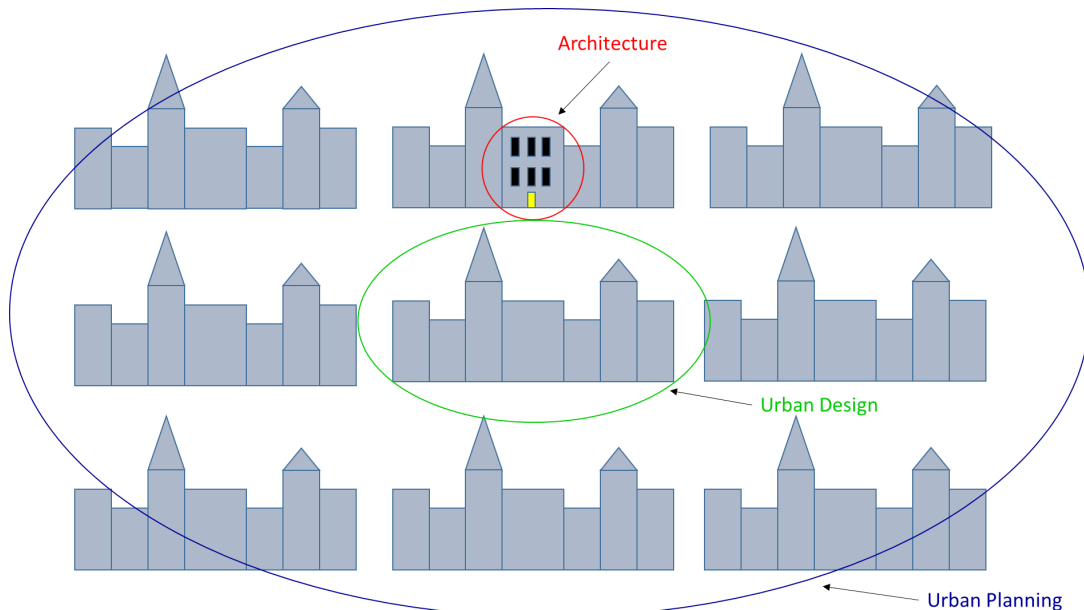
Some cities enforce widely recognized design principles, such as setbacks and massing, while others use design to reinforce a place's particular character, such as Boston's regulation of signage to reflect that city's history. Many cities recognize the value of good design, but their degree of commitment and capacity for planning and regulation, as well as the level of community concern and participation, vary greatly. Boston has established a blue-ribbon review commission to achieve its design goals for projects that meet certain size thresholds. Northampton has established special districts that require adherence to an outlined urban design policy. Cambridge demands high level design from projects requesting certain zoning relief. As Worcester redevelops its downtown, what level of urban design principles should the city embrace and enforce on new construction and renovation projects? What process should Worcester adopt to ensure that urban design considerations are an essential and affordable element of economic development?

What is Urban Design?

Urban design works to shape the experience of a city or place by connecting individual public and private elements together to create an overall encounter and impression. Urban design focuses on how individual properties (through access, massing, materials, fenestration, etc.) and streetscape (through road widths, alternative transportation modes, sidewalk design, materials, lighting, signage, plantings, etc.) contribute to an overall public experience. The goal of urban design is to create an intentional rationality to a

place so that it can be easily navigated both visually and physically. Urban design is sometimes conjoined with architecture and urban planning. In contrast, the three disciplines focus on different scales and elements, with architecture primarily focused on the use and aesthetics of an individual property, urban design focused on the experience of a larger street or block, and urban planning focused on the mix of uses, densities, and transportation options of a neighborhood or city (See Chart 1).

Chart 1:

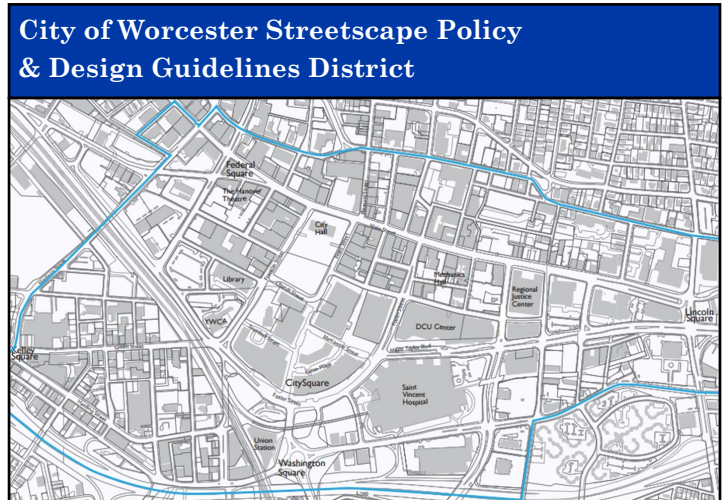


Worcester by Design

While Worcester does not have a regulatory framework for urban design, its urban design policy is outlined in two documents: *City of Worcester Streetscape Policy* and *City of Worcester Urban Design Guidelines*. These policies, approved by City Council in 2012, demonstrate the City’s growing interest in raising design standards, specifically in the Downtown and Canal District, but have had limited impact due to a lack of enforcement mechanisms.

The *Streetscape Policy* applies only in the Streetscape Policy District (SPD), which includes the Downtown and Canal District. It applies to any construction in the public right of way, whether the construction is done by a public or private entity, and outlines the type and use of materials to be used within the SPD. Since most street and sidewalk construction in the SPD is within the public right of way, and already under the City’s Department of Public Works and Parks (DPWP), the policy has a very limited effect on the private sector and does not represent a significant increase in areas subject to design control. The policy acts more as a set of DPWP guidelines as the department plans projects within the designated areas. The policy, as noted within the document itself, is not a “Complete Streets” policy, which would hold the DPWP and other entities working in the public right of way to more comprehensive and stringent standards. A Complete Streets policy ensures street and sidewalk designs that provide safe access for all users, e.g., pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and public transportation. The current policy states that it is a pilot for a larger citywide streetscape initiative.

Like the Streetscape Policy, Worcester’s *Urban Design Guidelines* only apply to certain projects within the Downtown and Canal District Design Guidelines District. It includes a list of widely accepted guidelines that have the goal of enhancing a visitor’s experience of the area. It recommends the proper alignment of a building front to the street and sidewalk, intentional design of building façades to make an area pedestrian-friendly, and height and density ratios to ensure the



Source: *City of Worcester Streetscape Policy & Urban Design Guidelines*, November 2012

appropriate street wall height to the width of the right-of-way. Applied to all projects within the District, it would be a significant step toward the City’s aim of “consistently [applying] a clear, professional policy informed by the most up-to-date thinking on urban design and development” that is, as the document states, essential to the long-term success of the District.

The guidelines, however, are not codified within Worcester’s ordinances. The guidelines are mandatory for projects that receive funding from the City but can be waived at the City’s discretion, as long as such waiver is in writing. The City’s Executive Office of Economic Development (EOED) determines how and to what extent a project must conform to the guidelines. The guidelines are vague, allowing for flexibility and creativity, but the lack of specificity enables developers to ignore or minimize the City’s input. Additionally, EOED does not have a professional urban design staff, so there is little capacity for a public review that is comprehensive and informed both by professional standards as well as the City’s long term goals for a particular area and for the city as a whole.

The Primary Elements of Worcester’s Urban Design Guidelines
Establish Clear Build-to Lines: Buildings should be placed toward the front of a parcel to reinforce the street edge.
Incorporate Stepbacks to Define Street Walls: Building facades should step back from the street as they rise, to eliminate the “canyon effect” caused by tall buildings and to minimize wind impact on sidewalk.
Engage Prominent Elements: Prominent locations, such as intersections or view corridors, should be given special architectural treatment to draw attention and establish place.
Promote Façade Articulation and Composition: Facades should be legible and break down the scale of the building through both horizontal and vertical design elements.
Enhance the Ground Level Façade: Street-level facades should incorporate both visual and physical access points, by incorporating active uses like retail and restaurants and through the use of doorways, glass, signage, and lighting.
Encourage Architectural Expression: Buildings should embrace innovative and unique designs, through choice of building materials (e.g., masonry, metal, glass), and unique approaches to window and door treatments.
Minimize Surface Parking and Service Locations: Parking should be invisible, either underground or interior to a lot, while structured garages should have facades that relate to the context of surrounding buildings.

Urban Design in Massachusetts Municipalities

Urban design controls remain relatively rare among Massachusetts municipalities. No community has a city-wide, universal urban design regulatory component. Instead, communities in Massachusetts generally fall into one of three categories, as illustrated by the cities of Boston, Cambridge, and Northampton.

- Design review based on project size or impact (Boston)
- Design review based on location (Northampton)
- Design review based on need for zoning relief (Cambridge)

City of Boston

The Boston Civic Design Commission (BCDC), established in 1986 by Article 28 of the Boston Zoning Code, ensures that development projects adhere to the City of Boston's urban design aesthetic. Article 28 states that the premise for the BCDC was that "...the citizens of Boston have a responsibility to participate in shaping the public realm...and to undertake the complex balancing of the rights of private expression with the cultural values expressed in Boston's existing public realm." The Commission consists of eleven members, six of whom must be architects, landscape architects, or urban designers, and at least one of whom must have expertise in historic preservation or architectural history. It is staffed by one person but supported by the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA, formerly the Boston Redevelopment Authority) Urban Design group—a department consisting of nearly 15 staff. The BCDC reviews and recommends design considerations for any project greater than 100,000 square feet or that affects the public realm due to its historic nature, its proximity to a historically significant area, or its potential impact on the visual quality of an area. The Commission also reviews any district design guidelines proposed by the BPDA. The Commission's role, however, is advisory. The Commission submits its recommendations to the BPDA and the Mayor, who retain the ability to disregard the recommendations, subject only to a written explanation of the decision. The BCDC's recommendation is based on "...the basis of established urban design principles and practices" and, if appropriate and applicable, design criteria established by the BPDA. Between 2010 and 2016, the BCDC approved 383 projects, demonstrating its significant role in development in Boston.

City of Northampton

The City of Northampton, as authorized under Chapter 143, §3A, of the Massachusetts General Laws, created two "architecturally controlled districts" in

October 1999—the Central Business and West Street Architecture Districts—in order to "...preserve and enhance the pedestrian-scale character, culture, economy and welfare of downtown Northampton by preserving historic and architecturally valuable buildings and features, and by encouraging compatible building design." Chapter 156 of the City's ordinances establishes a Central Business Architecture Committee, which reviews all building and demolition permit applications within the District, subject to a series of exemptions outlined in §5C (e.g., interior work, features not visible from a public way, maintenance, landscaping, ramps, signage, temporary works, etc.). The Planning Board serves a similar role in the West Street District. Violations of the ordinance are punishable by "criminal and noncriminal penalties and injunctive relief," with each day a condition remains in violation considered a separate violation.

Northampton's Central Business Architecture Committee is informed in its deliberations by a Design Guidelines Manual, which includes best practices in urban design as well as reference to the historic preservation requirements. It has one staff member and generally reviews less than 10 projects a year—usually one new building or major addition and a handful of façade changes or smaller additions.

City of Cambridge

The City of Cambridge has a long commitment to urban design, and, like Boston, employs a dedicated urban design staff person in its Community Development Department (CDD). The City leads by example, holding itself to urban design standards in public projects and exercising extensive planning and review for such public infrastructure as parks, plazas, playgrounds, police stations, libraries, water purification plants, and street reconstruction.

Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40A, Section 9, allows cities to require "more than base zoning in exchange for public benefit." Cambridge requires projects seeking special permits to adhere to urban design standards codified in Article 19 of the City's zoning ordinances. In essence, Cambridge allows developers to exceed local zoning restrictions in exchange for compliance with best practices in urban design.

While the Planning Board is the official design review body for projects seeking special permits, the City's urban design staff typically review a project several times in its initial stages before it is submitted for Planning Board review. In order to seek Planning Board approval, the applicant must prepare an "Urban Design Objectives Narrative" that describes how the proposal addresses seven urban design objectives set forth in Article 19.30 of the Zoning Ordinance. These objectives include appropriate building height, active

and transparent uses on the ground floors, mitigation of negative impacts on adjacent sites, minimized impact on public infrastructure such as roads and water and sewer systems, reinforcement of historical land use patterns, incorporation of new housing opportunities, and enhancement and expansion of open space. Every project does not need to conform to every objective; the Planning Board determines which standards are appropriate to individual projects in order to find that “on balance the objectives of the city are being served.” Thus, while special permit design review grants a great deal of control to city staff and the Planning Board, there is flexibility in the enforcement of the ordinance. In Fiscal Year 2016, Cambridge processed 14 projects subject to Article 19.

The Bureau’s View

Worcester’s *Streetscape Policy and Urban Design Guidelines* illustrate the City’s awareness of and interest in promoting a strong urban design. A well designed streetscape policy demands consistent and complementary use of materials and designs in a district or neighborhood. An urban design policy that ties private investment into this public vision creates a sense of place, drawing residents, businesses, and visitors. A defined identity has helped Worcester’s Shrewsbury Street and Canal District to become destinations not only for Worcester residents but for visitors and new businesses.

Yet Worcester’s urban design effort is not buttressed by a regulatory framework and therefore implementation is weak. Boston, Cambridge, and Northampton offer three different structures for

Massachusetts municipalities looking to achieve urban design goals. Like these three cities, Worcester has identified clear and concise guidelines to ensure that public and private investments enhance the City’s urban vision. The next step is to establish an enforcement mechanism, albeit a mechanism tempered by recognition that some elements might prove costly and serve as an impediment to new growth or investment. The system should be flexible so that costly or difficult to implement criteria can be waived or the value of the project increased through density bonuses or other zoning allowances. A clear policy, with clear expectations, will minimize this outcome by encouraging developers to design buildings that meet the City’s objectives, rather than react to changes requested during the board review process. The Planning Board can provide urban design review in the near-term, supported by an urban design professional working within the City’s Planning and Regulatory Services Division.

As Worcester enjoys renewed interest and ongoing investment, it must ensure that today’s development projects do not diminish tomorrow’s potential. The wrong project in the wrong location can inhibit new growth and check the vitality the City is working hard to cultivate. The right project in the right location can create multiplier effects that drive economic progress without the need for public involvement. Good urban design adds value to individual projects, neighborhoods, and the City as a whole. Worcester should embrace the tools available to ensure that both public and private actors are working together to accomplish the community’s long-term vision.

Sources and Additional Information

- *City of Worcester Streetscape Policy and Urban Design Guidelines*, <http://www.worcesterma.gov/development/initiatives-master-plans/streetscape-guidelines-policy>
- *Boston Civic Design Commission*, <http://www.bostonplans.org/planning/urban-design/boston-civic-design-commission>
- *Boston Zoning Code Article 28*, https://library.municode.com/ma/boston/codes/redevelopment_authority?nodeId=ART28BOCIDECO
- *City of Northampton Code of Ordinances - Chapter 156*, <http://ecode360.com/13265304>
- *City of Cambridge Zoning Ordinance - Article 19*, https://www.cambridgema.gov/~media/Files/CDD/ZoningDevel/Ordinance/zo_article19_1382.ashx
- *MGL C. 40A Section 9*, <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleVII/Chapter40A/Section9>
- *MGL C. 143 Section 3A*, <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXX/Chapter143>

Bureau Brief

Worcester Regional Research Bureau, Inc.
500 Salisbury Street
Worcester, MA 01609
508-799-7169
www.wrrb.org



The Research Bureau