CONTEXT SENSITIVE MULTIFAMILY DESIGN TECHNIQUES
Local growth in residential construction since the end of the recession has been led by a strong demand for multifamily developments. A major cause of this growth has been an increase in rental demand from younger households and retirees. Demand for such development is expected to remain strong in the coming years. Recent multifamily construction has been characterized by new building patterns, fewer condo units, and more units in larger buildings, which can greatly impact surrounding neighborhoods if not properly designed.

Legacy 2030 encourages the creation of complete neighborhoods that have a mix of different housing types and land uses. However, new multifamily housing projects in or near single-family neighborhoods are often contested by citizens. Neighbors have seen too many examples of poorly-designed larger residential buildings and will often oppose a new multifamily project. When developing needed multifamily housing, design elements can help diminish the visual impact these projects have on neighborhoods.

The design elements presented in this document can assist developers in improving the relationship multifamily projects have with nearby single-family properties and help them better relate to the street they are located on. Better design may help neighbors accept a proposed development as a beneficial addition to the neighborhood.

**ELEMENTS OF THE NEW MULTIFAMILY**

**Trends:** Economic factors including falling incomes, lagging employment, shifting wealth, and tighter home financing requirements are making it difficult for many Americans to buy a house. In addition, population growth and demographic changes are reshaping the demand for types of homes and their location. Many millennials and downsizing baby boomers want to live in apartments in urban areas and thriving neighborhoods.

**The quest for the urban lifestyle:** New multifamily products are attracting adults of all ages, but their primary target is millenials and empty nesters. Many in these groups are renters by choice, want high-service, high-amenity living, and want to live near like-minded people. The common thread that connects these groups is the desire for a low-maintenance, urban-or at least walkable-experience, enhanced by amenities and technology that creates a communal live-work-play environment.

**Incorporating mixed-uses:** Whether it’s in a city core, at the urban fringe, or in a more suburban location, residents are favoring urban living and mixed-use properties. Both younger and older generations want to locate in walkable communities, close to neighborhood amenities, restaurants, entertainment, shopping, and cultural events. Multifamily developments offering storefront retail, entertainment, and work options are places in which people will pay more to live in.
Accommodating outdoor activities: Residential unit sizes are shrinking, common areas are expanding and are being designed to meet the needs of residents who want to gather socially or do work there.

Most of the new amenities people are seeking are outdoors. Property owners who invest in their outdoor spaces can help improve the character of the community and make the site feel fresh and new.

Affordability: Many renters aspire to live in or close to downtown, but such a lifestyle is often expensive. Many young Americans with large amounts of student debt are discouraged from buying a new home and instead choose to rent recently built luxury units. Millennials are renting longer than prior generations, but many of them are rent burdened, spending more than 50 percent of their income on housing. A new approach is needed that incorporates more energy-efficient building systems, smaller unit sizes, and more public-private partnerships to accelerate affordable housing production. Finding viable solutions to help the private multifamily sector bring down costs so they can lower asking rents will help meet affordable rental housing challenges.
Convenience: The live/work/play concept has become the new American Dream. With flexible working arrangements, blurred boundaries between work and play, and online capabilities, young professionals are finding that they can do everything they want at home or somewhere else in their development. Residents are looking for developments which provide convenient access to all of life’s necessities and comforts.

Multifamily housing demand can’t be met by new construction alone: The existing stock of multifamily housing is aging, with many apartments showing their age. Low vacancy rates have sped up rent growth, making units less affordable.

Renovating, rehabilitating, and preserving existing apartments can provide adequate, affordable rental housing. Existing units can be redesigned to meet evolving needs. Adding amenities that promote working from home, creating larger units for families, increasing storage space for baby boomers, or making accommodations for seniors are examples of such a redesign.

Suburban retrofits: The redevelopment of underutilized suburban retail properties offers unique opportunities for multifamily housing. The retail component is already present on these sites - what is absent is multifamily housing. Recreating neighborhoods and town centers from older, underutilized shopping centers is an evolving trend in our state and region.

Neighborhood compatibility: Developers are primarily focused on the needs of their residents. Renters are focused on their own private space and the amenities they will use. However, neighbors are most invested in the outside of new multifamily buildings. Good design of sites, buildings and landscapes will enhance the character of surrounding neighborhood and lead to greater project acceptance.

Walkability: Walkability is a measure of how pedestrian friendly an area is. Factors affecting walkability include the presence or absence of quality sidewalks, area land use patterns, building accessibility and transparency, the presence of trees and vegetation, and safety. While walking, residents interact with their surroundings feeling more connected to and responsible for their community.
By their nature, multifamily buildings can be large in scale and tend to dominate their surroundings if they are not properly designed. The following design elements can promote more livable communities, create a better relationship between multifamily and its surroundings, and ensure walkability. They may not apply to every situation, since the development size, neighborhood context, or level of density can vary for each multifamily proposal. However, context sensitive design which clearly addresses the street and provides connections to the community can help in making a multifamily project more appealing to surrounding neighbors.

### Compatible Site Layout and Development Patterns

New multifamily projects should be designed to be an integral part of the neighborhood and create a comfortable living environment for residents.

Multifamily developments with buildings that face the street and with direct connections between units and streets feel less secluded and encourage residents to engage with the community.

Designing multifamily buildings with articulated façades or varied building setbacks can help avoid the creation of repetitive, monotonous streetscapes.

Clustering multifamily buildings around a common open space, natural feature, or community amenities establishes a sense of community for residents by providing opportunities for them to gather.

Buildings oriented to a public street with front doors, windows, porches, balconies, entryways, or other entry features along the street helps residents feel connected to the neighborhood.
Building Compatibility, Edges, and Transitions

Well-designed multifamily buildings that are compatible with adjacent neighborhoods, with well treated-edges and good transitions between developments, can help create pedestrian access to other developments, increase walkability, and create visual appeal and continuity between developments.

Urban Sites

Appropriate building setbacks can vary based on the context in which the building exists. Reduced setbacks are often used in urban areas and increased setbacks can be used in proximity to roadways with high noise and traffic.

Replicating existing building setbacks can help multifamily building be integrated into the surrounding neighborhood.

Multifamily structures adjacent to single-family developments can provide a better transition if designed at a scale compatible with single-family structures. The height of taller buildings can be reduced to a more compatible one-story or two-story height when buildings are located across the street or next to single-family properties to assure privacy of adjacent residents.
Building Compatibility, Edges, and Transitions

Suburban Sites

Large multifamily buildings sited too close to an adjoining property can decrease privacy and create a feeling of encroachment onto adjacent single-family developments. A good transition can be made by increasing the setback for larger buildings or by reducing the scale and massing of buildings next to a single-family neighborhood.

Multifamily structures adjacent to single-family developments will provide a better transition if designed with fewer units or with less-intense multifamily types such as townhouses or duplexes adjacent to single family homes.

Larger setbacks may fit in a suburban context better than buildings directly adjacent to the street.
Existing Vegetation, Landscaping

Mature trees enhance the aesthetic character of an area, give scale to new buildings, provide shade, and make a project seem like it has always been part of the neighborhood.

It is possible to retain trees – however, preserving specimens that will survive and perform well in a new environment requires planning, protection during construction, and adequate maintenance. The picture below shows large trees preserved which enhance the character of the area.

Vegetation is essential in increasing privacy within the development and for adjacent properties, particularly in suburban areas.
Pedestrian Circulation and Accessibility

An on-site system of pedestrian walkways can provide direct access and connections to primary building entrances, adjacent sidewalks, and the sidewalk system along perimeter streets. A clearly defined pedestrian path inside a large parking area provides a safe and easy access to and from buildings.
Positive Building and Street Relationships

How a building relates to the sidewalk and street affects the pedestrian experience. Maintaining continuous street-facing facades and lining streets with active uses or defining elements, such as windows and doors, helps to create pedestrian-friendly and visually pleasant places.

A well thought-out multifamily project will consider:

a. Sidewalks and street trees
b. Ground floor treatment, transition from public to private areas
c. On-street parking
d. Off-street parking
e. Architectural elements/details

a. Sidewalks and Street Trees

Sidewalks and landscaped planting strips add comfortable separation between the street and the pedestrian environment.
b. Ground Floor Treatment, Transition from Public to Private Areas

Increased setbacks and building heights at the sidewalk allow for planting areas which can separate ground floor units from the public realm. This landscaping softens the building edge. Front doors facing the sidewalk and street provide an easy pedestrian connection for residents.

Planters can separate first floor units from the sidewalk and provide an elevated, private, usable outdoor space. The height of the planters needs to be carefully considered for pedestrian comfort.
Walls can be used to separate first floor units from the sidewalk and to give privacy to unit entrances. It is important to consider the height of these walls in relationship to the street.

Buildings can be raised to add privacy to first floor units, but portions of them can also be lowered for the same purpose.
Multifamily buildings facing onto a public street designed with balconies, porches, and windows allow visibility of building entries and public spaces. This adds security and visual interest to the streetscape.

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\[\text{c. On-Street Parking}\]

On-street parking can serve as a traffic calming device since it slows traffic flow. This in turn creates a safer environment for pedestrians.

Diagonal or angled parking creates a protective sidewalk buffer for pedestrians and increases on-street parking opportunities.
d. Off-Street Parking

Parking in Urban Areas

One of the things that drives the shape and configuration of urban buildings is underground parking. This type of parking is a valuable alternative to surface parking for medium and high density projects. The challenge is to design underground parking which has a positive relationship with the streetscape. Structured parking can be partially sub-grade or above-grade.

1. Partial sub-grade parking:

Partially sub-grade parking typically extends 4-5 feet above grade, allowing for natural ventilation of underground areas. It also elevates the first floor living area above the street level resulting in increased privacy and allowing for raised stoops or porches, which fit into residential neighborhoods.

If not treated properly, semi-depressed parking can result in the top portion of the building appearing to be separated from the street and the pedestrian environment. A balance is needed between raising the building high enough to allow for natural ventilation, but low enough to create a quality pedestrian environment.
2. Above-grade parking:

The treatment of enclosed above-grade parking can have a positive or negative impact on the pedestrian environment. Having some landscaping in front of ground floor parking helps soften its visual impact. Ventilation openings with simple decorative grillwork work well also.

Ventilation openings designed as integral elements of the façade and supplemented with low edge landscaping or street furniture can create a pleasant pedestrian environment.
The previous examples show treatments that have a positive impact on the pedestrian environment. However, not all treatments of above-grade parking are pedestrian-friendly. The elements below do not contribute to a visually appealing pedestrian environment.

Building elements to try to avoid include:
- Ground level parking exhaust fans blowing onto the sidewalk
- Utility boxes located next to a front door
- Security fencing without landscaping in front of it. A low landscaping hedge in front of such fences can help reduce their visual impact.

These images show a less desirable façade treatment with metal openings and awnings above them trying to soften the visual impact on the streetscape, and blank walls facing the sidewalk. There is no landscaping in front of these buildings to soften their visual impact.
Parking in Suburban Areas

Surface parking in suburban areas should be designed to minimize the visual impact of automobiles on the pedestrian environment.

Locating parking areas to the rear or side of buildings, rather than along street frontages, minimizes the visual prominence of vehicles and creates a more pedestrian-friendly streetscape.

Parking and vehicular access is better located away from street corners to minimize the visual impact of large expanses of asphalt.

Multiple smaller parking areas are preferred over single, large lots to minimize the expansive appearance of such lots. Parking areas work better if bordered with landscaping or structural design elements.
e. Architectural Elements/Details
High-quality design details contribute not only to the long-term value of a project, but to neighborhood character as well.
Exterior Walls
The exterior walls of multifamily buildings can provide visual interest to passerby pedestrians. Ground floor windows, recesses, projections or other architectural details visible from public streets add to the vibrancy of the sidewalk. Blank walls, however, make the surrounding streets less inviting to pedestrians.

Facades with blank walls present an unfriendly building appearance to pedestrians. Opening up ground floors with doors and windows and adding land uses that attract people creates a much friendlier environment.

Building ends with windows, active outdoor spaces, or landscaping provide for additional security and visual interest. Blank street-facing walls, as in the image to the right, provide none of these benefits.
Balconies
Balconies can be used for outdoor living spaces, for shading, and for building design interest. Balconies serve as a link between the interior spaces and the surroundings. Even a tiny balcony can make a room feel larger, airier and more open.

Balconies add visual interest to the façade and provide open space for the dwelling units.

Ground floor balconies fronting directly on the sidewalk at eye level do not provide adequate privacy for residents. Balconies that are elevated above the sidewalk offer more privacy, as shown in the image to the right.
Balconies that are open on three sides often do not provide adequate privacy for residents. Recessed balconies designed as an integral part of the façade provide greater privacy for residents.
Facade Articulation

Facade articulation includes all the horizontal and vertical design elements that help create an interesting streetscape. Ground floor building articulation is critical in creating a great street that welcomes and supports pedestrian activity.

Use of façade articulation, courtyards, small setback variations, and other elements that provide visual variety and make the pedestrian experience more interesting will make a project fit better within the neighborhood.
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