

Guiding Infill Development in Winnipeg

Looking to Seattle's Design Review Program for Answers



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Abstract

The City of Seattle's Design Review Program is among the most sophisticated and comprehensive in North America. It exemplifies a community-based, participatory approach to design, which provides a forum for citizens and developers to work together towards achieving a better urban environment. The Design Review



The Tribeca - one of many infill projects developed through the Design Review Process in Seattle

Program, which consists of both design review boards and design guidelines is intended to shape how new development can contribute positively to Seattle's neighborhoods, focusing on compatibility, site planning, street life and the pedestrian experience. This case study will highlight the lessons learned from Seattle's Design Review

Program, and discuss the potential opportunities and barriers faced by the City of Winnipeg in adopting similar design guidance strategies.

Background and Context

The City of Seattle has emerged as a North American leader in sustainable urban development. Considerable attention to growth management, environmentalism, urban design and citizen activism has played a major role in the city's overall success. More recently, the focus of planning debates has been on the city's suburbs and urban villages and to a significant extent, the design agenda has shifted to consider neighbourhood character and the problems associated with the intensification of development. The city's Design Review Program, first introduced in 1993, was developed as a forum for citizens, developers and the City to review and guide the design of qualifying infill projects, ensuring that the city's neighbourhoods and urban villages maintained their character and amenities.



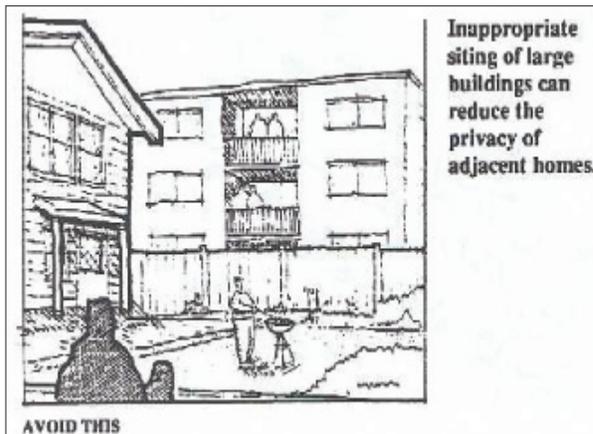
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While Seattle was one of the first, a large and growing number of jurisdictions now employ infill guidance strategies in order to ensure the compatibility of new development in established communities. While the city of Winnipeg offers considerable policy support for mature urban neighbourhoods, infill housing and quality urban design within *Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision*, little policy action has materialized. Looking to Seattle – one of the best in the business – could yield significant dividends should Winnipeg consider the adoption of a strategy for guiding new development in existing neighbourhoods.

Facts of the Case

Seattle's Design Review Program

As part of the Master Use Permit application process, the City of Seattle's Design Review Program requires that new commercial and multifamily infill development exceeding a certain size threshold in certain land use zones undergo a review of their siting, design characteristics and appropriateness. In order to accomplish this task, Seattle's Design Review Program consists of two primary strategies – design review boards and design guidelines. The city's seven design review boards – staffed by citizen volunteers – are each comprised of a developer, an architect, an at-large community member, a local business owner, and a residential member. The board is primarily responsible for guiding the design review process and forging development which is compatible with the existing neighbourhood context and amenable for the developer. In order to provide a greater degree of predictability to developers, designers and the general public, as well as ensuring consistency in the design review decision-making process, the *Design Review: Guidelines for Multi-family and Commercial Buildings* document was used, which was later supplemented by *Design Review: Guidelines for Downtown Development* as well as 18 neighbourhood specific guidelines. Generally, the design guidelines consider the following aspects of design: site planning, height, bulk and scale, architectural elements and materials, pedestrian environment, and landscaping. The Seattle Municipal Code requires the Design Review Boards to use these guidelines as the basis for their recommendations and decisions.



One of many examples found in Seattle's *Design Review: Guidelines for Multifamily and Commercial Buildings* document

The Design Review Process

Step One: Pre-Submittal Conference

Developer meets with a land use planner to discuss the project site, context, and general development program. Developer also receives a copy of the applicable design guidelines.

Step Two: Early Design Guidance

At this evening meeting, the applicant presents information about the project and how it relates to the surrounding area. Citizens are notified about the meeting and invited to offer their comments and concerns about the proposed siting and design of the development.

Step Three: Project Design/ Responding to the Priority Guidelines

The applicant and architect continue to develop the project design, taking into account comments from the early design guidance meeting and design guidelines.

Step Four: Applicant Applies for Master Use Permit

Once the MUP application has been accepted, a formal two week public comment period begins.

Step Five: Design Review Board Recommendation Meeting

Design Review Board reconvenes to consider the proposed design at an evening meeting open to the public.

Another important feature of the Design Review Program is the ability of design review boards to recommend departures from specific Land Use Code requirements, if doing so would result in a project better meeting the intent of the design guidelines. This includes departures such as, lot coverage, setbacks, landscaping and open space. However, in this instance, many of the items that are most controversial with neighborhood residents, such as residential density, amount of required parking, general structure height, and downtown view corridor standards, are on a list of items for which departures cannot be granted. In 2005, a total of 214 departures were granted for the 101 constructed Design Review Projects.

Policy Basis

Prior to the inception of Seattle's Design Review Program in 1993, many community members felt that new buildings were negatively affected the livability of their neighborhoods and that the permitting process did not adequately address their concerns about this impact. Developers, faced by neighborhood opposition, in turn felt that their legitimate rights to develop according to the land use code were being hampered. This created conflict between the neighborhoods and developers. Consequently, many projects ended up as SEPA (State Environmental Protection Act) appeals before the City's Hearing Examiner, and then City Council, and ultimately the courts. The Design Review Program was viewed as a forum where developers and neighborhoods could discuss these issues in a less formal environment at an earlier stage of the project.

Policy support for growth management and residential intensification also played an important role in the need for design review in Seattle. In 1990, the State of Washington passed a Growth Management Act (GMA) to curb urban sprawl and better manage infrastructure, housing and employment growth in the Seattle region. At the same time, the City of Seattle began work on its first comprehensive plan, entitled Comprehensive Plan: Towards a Sustainable Seattle. Adopted in June of 1994, the plan was based on three primary values: stewardship of the environment, promotion of economic opportunity and an equitable distribution of costs and benefits. The centerpiece of the comprehensive plan was an urban village strategy, which intended to direct 80 percent of new growth into five urban centres, four hub urban villages, 17 residential urban villages and 26 neighbourhood anchors. Consequently, the Design Review Program was viewed as a tool which could be used to allow residential intensification and new development in established communities, while at the same time enhancing neighbourhood character and ensuring compatibility.

Design Review Program Objectives

Encourage **better design** and site planning that enhances the character of the city and ensures that new development fits sensitively into neighborhoods

Provide **flexibility** in the application of development standards

Improve **communication and participation** among developers, neighbors, and the City early in the design and siting of new development.



Lessons Learned

A Forum for Public Participation

Seattle's Design Review Program has adopted a "partnership" approach to citizen participation in the development process, encouraging cooperation among architects, developers and community members. The Program encourages dialogue and negotiation early in the development process, which has ultimately fostered healthier relations between stakeholders and a better understanding by the community of the challenges and difficulties faced by the developer. Each side is now more amenable to the needs and wants of the other and to the compromises that allow projects to move forward. This has helped the developer achieve necessary concessions and allowed community members a genuine opportunity to participate in the development process and contribute to compatible design within their neighbourhood.

Improved Process

Prior to the development of Seattle's Design Review Program, more than 25 percent of projects were appealed to the hearing examiner or City Council. The process was clearly ineffective as local residents were aggravated by poorly designed or out-of-scale multifamily and commercial buildings which were cropping up within their neighborhoods, while developers and designers were frustrated by the lack of flexibility in the city's zoning standards. The goal of the resulting Design Review Program was to meld these two principal areas of concern: encourage better design and responsiveness to a site's context, and allow for flexibility. One of the key features of the Design Review Program is that it allows for "design departures" in the application of zoning standards, providing enhanced flexibility for developers. These departures are not simply the trade-off built into the program to make developers happy, but are genuinely seen as a necessary component in the collaborative process of achieving quality design, as envisioned by the original framers of the design review process. Since the implementation of Seattle's Design Review Program, appeals have dropped considerably. Over the last few years, less than three percent of projects have been appealed.

Enhanced Compatibility

Perhaps the most vital success of Seattle's Design Review Program is the improved level of compatibility between new infill projects and the neighbourhoods in which they're built in. The design review process has accommodated flexibility in the application of development standards to better meet neighborhood objectives and provide for effective mitigation of a proposed project's impact and influence on a neighborhood. In general, Design modifications made to projects based on Design Review Board recommendations have resulted in a better neighborhood fit.

Improved Design

Since the implementation of Seattle's Design Review Program, it has been argued that the design consciousness of all stakeholders has been elevated. Architects and designers have learned from participating in the program's open forums to pay more attention to good design fundamentals and be especially cognizant of crucial urban design issues at both the street level and within the greater urban fabric. In addition, local residents have become more involved in the design process, making use of the design guideline documents and assuming an active role in Design Review Board meetings within their neighbourhoods.



Design Guidance in Winnipeg

The Need for a Strategy

While development activity within Winnipeg's mature urban neighbourhoods pales in comparison to that of Seattle, residents have frequently opposed new development on vacant and underutilized sites within their community, resulting in a lengthy review and public hearing process before approval or in some cases quashed projects. Neighborhood resistance and the potential for costly delays and blocked projects, makes many developers reluctant to pursue infill development opportunities in the city. Neighborhood residents may be concerned about new development and increased density for a variety of reasons, including concerns about parking, increased traffic on residential streets and loss of resale property value. In addition, some residents are motivated by past bad experiences with new development, which failed to fit existing neighborhood patterns and character. New buildings which are out of scale with the existing neighbourhood context can cause particular alarm.

Barriers and Opportunities

Downtown Urban Design Guidelines and Design Review: First introduced in 2005, the City of Winnipeg makes use of downtown urban design guidelines and design review in order to ensure the thoughtful integration of development proposals into their local context. While the guidelines and design review are limited to the downtown area, the city's familiarity with design guidelines and design review makes the adoption of city-wide infill guidelines more achievable and realistic.

Developer Resistance: A key barrier to the development of infill guidelines and design review is resistance from the development community. Infill guidelines and design review are often viewed as impediments to the development process, resulting in unnecessarily lengthy processes with negligible benefits. In reality, it has been demonstrated time and time again that design review and other processes that involve the community and other relevant stakeholders early in the process saves both time and money in the long run. As indicated in Seattle, collaboration between developers and the community has resulted in fewer appeals and design that is more responsive to context and more feasible for the developers. In Winnipeg, convincing the development community that infill guidelines and design review are beneficial is of particular importance.

Lack of Motivation: In addition to resistance from the development community, a lack of motivation on the part of the City of Winnipeg presents another key barrier to the development of infill guidelines and design review. Despite complaints about the development review process, there does not appear to be much appetite in Winnipeg for improved process.

Downtown Winnipeg Design Review

Step One: Early Consultation

The applicant is encouraged to meet with the Planning, Property and Development Department (PP&D) and/or the Urban Design Advisory Committee (UDAC)

Step Two: Application

The applicant is required to submit a development application prior to formal review

Step Three: Design Review

The applicant must meet with PP&D and/or UDAC to gain design approval based on the design guidelines

Step Four: Recommendation and Approval

PP&D staff recommend approval or approval with conditions to the Director, who has the final approving authority



Lack of Rules/Guidelines: Prior to 2005, downtown development was subject to a design review process without adequate design guidelines. This was a recipe for, if not disaster, then certainly for mistrust between developers and others involved in the design review process at that time. This has fostered a lack of faith in design review in Winnipeg. An infill guidance strategy in Winnipeg must make use of infill guidelines in order to clarify the expectations for new infill development in the city.

Neighbourhood-Developer Conflict: A favourable environment for infill housing in recent years has fuelled interest in Winnipeg's mature urban neighbourhoods. Renewed interest in infill has resulted in an increase in resistance from existing residents, concerned about traffic, parking and new development that is not compatible with the existing neighbourhood context. Neighbourhood resistance often results in a lengthy review and public hearing process before approval or in some cases quashed projects. Introducing infill guidelines and design review where the community is engaged early in the process would certainly reduce neighbourhood resistance and project delays.

The Need for Collaboration: One of the key factors in ensuring the successfulness of infill guidelines and design review in Winnipeg, or any other jurisdiction for that matter, is ensuring that a cross-section of stakeholders are involved in the development of the guidelines and design review process. An ivory tower approach in which guidelines and review processes are designed by an individual stakeholder (e.g. planner) is doomed to fail. A collaborative approach involving planners, developers, politicians, designers and citizens would be most effective and sustainable.

Looking Ahead

In Winnipeg, there is certainly a need for a design guidance strategy to clarify what aspects of the community's existing character are valued by the community, determine the community's expectations for new development and to ensure that new development is compatible with the existing neighbourhood context. Ultimately, a design guidance strategy could aid developers in designing infill projects, citizens and planners in assessing proposals and council in making decisions regarding the suitability of an infill proposal.

About the Planners

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For years, design review in downtown Winnipeg suffered from a "you have to play the game, but we're not going to tell you the rules of the game" syndrome. The development community quickly learned that there was a different game in town - a game developers are quite good at.

Resources

An overview of the City of Seattle's Design Review Program is available at: http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/Planning/Design_Review_Program/Overview/

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