



**City of Chicago**  
Lori E. Lightfoot, Mayor

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# Design Excellence

# Neighborhood Design Guidelines

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121 N. La Salle St.  
Chicago, IL 60602

**Chicago Plan Commission**  
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# Forward

The concept of “design excellence” represents the City of Chicago’s commitment to a high-quality built environment that celebrates and enhances the City’s unique architectural and urban design legacy. This responsibility extends from downtown and throughout local neighborhoods.

The Chicago Department of Planning and Development engaged a Design Excellence Working Group to answer the question:

***How do we engender a culture that values design excellence in everyday life?***

From this question, several thematic principles emerged that collectively aspire to achieve design excellence for Chicago residents, businesses, and other local stakeholders.

The principles include commitments to:

- » **Equity & Inclusion**  
Achieving fair treatment, targeted support, and prosperity for all residents
- » **Innovation**  
Implementing creative approaches to design and problem-solving
- » **Sense of Place**  
Celebrating and strengthening the culture of our communities
- » **Sustainability**  
Committing to environmental, cultural, and financial longevity
- » **Communication**  
Fostering design appreciation and responding to community needs



# Table of Contents

- NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN GUIDELINES ..... 8**
  - A Commitment to Excellence ..... 8
  - Application and Implementation ..... 10
- SUSTAINABILITY ..... 14**
  - Site Selection ..... 14
  - Adaptability ..... 15
  - Design Expression ..... 16
  - Sustainable Design ..... 17
  - Best Practices ..... 17
- PROGRAM ..... 20**
  - Use Mix ..... 20
  - Context ..... 21
- SITE DESIGN ..... 24**
  - Orientation and Access ..... 24
  - Open Space ..... 25
  - Parking and Service ..... 26

- PUBLIC REALM ..... 30**
  - Public Right-of-Way ..... 30
  - Landscape ..... 31
  - Accessibility and Safety ..... 32
- MASSING ..... 36**
  - Height ..... 36
  - Access to Light and Air ..... 37
  - Street Wall ..... 38
- FAÇADE ..... 42**
  - Windows and Doors ..... 42
  - Materials ..... 43
  - Ground Floor ..... 44
  - Signage and Security ..... 45
- ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... 46**
  - Design Excellence Working Group ..... 46
  - DPD Work Group ..... 47

# Introduction

# Neighborhood Design Guidelines

## A COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

Developed under Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot by the Department of Planning and Development (DPD), the Neighborhood Design Guidelines provide specific recommendations to enhance the planning, review, and impact of development along the city's commercial corridors.

As a complement to other City design resources and regulations, the guidelines are adaptable to the unique context of individual neighborhoods, corridors, and blocks.

The guidelines are organized across six categories:

- » **Sustainability**  
Design that has positive long-term environmental, sociocultural, and human health impacts
- » **Program**  
Targeted uses that complement a development's surrounding context
- » **Site Design**  
Building orientation, layout, open space, parking, and service
- » **Public Realm**  
Improvements within and near the public right-of-way adjacent to the development site
- » **Massing**  
Bulk, height, and form of a development
- » **Façade**  
Architectural expression of a building's exterior, including entrances and windows

Other City design resources and regulations that may apply to new development projects include the Zoning Ordinance, Landscape Ordinance, and the Complete Street Guide, among others.



## APPLICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

The Neighborhood Design Guidelines are intended to be used for all public and private projects located along Chicago's commercial corridors. Projects that require the City's review and oversight should substantially correspond to their parameters, especially Planned Developments, Lakefront Protection Ordinance projects, and projects that receive City grants, funding, or other incentives.

In addition to facilitating formal City review processes and promoting successful project completions, the Neighborhood Design Guidelines are intended to promote design excellence, community pride, and enhancing the sense of place in local neighborhoods.

The Neighborhood Design Guidelines provide baseline guidance and reference for property owners, developers, designers, community groups, public agencies, and individuals. Construction projects must still adhere to any applicable City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or federal requirements, standards, and policies.

The Department of Planning and Development intends to gather feedback from property owners, developers, designers, and community members to continue to refine the guidelines' scope and content. Comments may be directed to [DPD@cityofchicago.org](mailto:DPD@cityofchicago.org).



# Sustainability

Chicago has been a global leader in urban sustainability, which has emphasized the importance of designing and constructing healthier and more sustainable environments that use fewer resources, are more durable and efficient to maintain and operate, promote equity, and protect the environment and human health. The next generation of development must advance this continual improvement in a comprehensive and place-based way. Projects are expected to seek opportunities at all phases of development to optimize sustainability, resilience, environmental health, and human well-being. Note that these goals are addressed throughout the guidelines, not only in this section.

# Sustainability

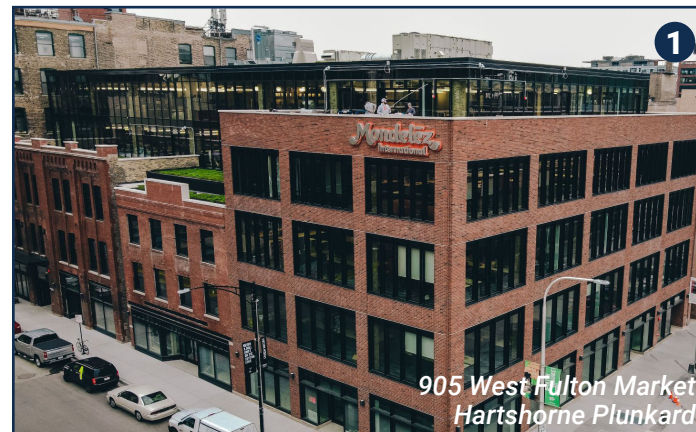
## Site Selection

Choosing a site is a major factor for the sustainability and resilience of a particular development and neighborhood as a whole. It is important to provide sustainable development while also being mindful about how to do so using existing resources.

- 1 Consider opportunities for re-purposing existing buildings, rather than building new. This strategy often results in interesting design solutions, bolstering the neighborhood character and preserving historic structures.
- 2 When new construction is necessary, prioritize infill and transit-oriented sites to promote density, urban activity, and efficient mobility.



*Revive Architecture LLC  
Windy City RE  
Former Triangle Motors automobile showroom*



*905 West Fulton Market  
Hartshorne Plunkard  
Adaptive reuse integrates two original building facades into the new mixed use development.*



*Milwaukee Beldon Transit Oriented Development  
Wheeler Kearns Architects, Tom Rossiter Photography  
Transit proximity increases density, decreases parking, and promotes walkability, vibrancy, and street activity.*

## Adaptability

Buildings contain considerable embodied energy accumulated through the production, transport, and installation of building materials. Demolishing and replacing a building to accommodate a new use, while an extremely popular strategy, releases this embodied energy, detracting from a neighborhood's long-term sustainability.

- 1 Design buildings with a flexible approach to infrastructure delivery and interior systems (e.g. furniture, ceiling systems, and partitions), allowing the building to support multiple uses and users over time. For example, parking garages should be designed with ceiling heights, level floor plates, and other elements to allow for future conversion to other uses when parking demand decreases.



*Marz Brewing  
Via Architects + Diseñadores  
High ceiling heights allowed this vault to be repurposed for a temperature controlled room for barrel aging.*



*Northwestern University, The Garage  
Gensler  
Flat floors and floor-to-floor heights allowed this parking garage to be repurposed as an incubator space.*



**Design Expression**

Sustainable design elements can be celebrated through architectural expression, landscape features, and interpretive strategies.

- 1 Celebrate sustainable landscape design through native plantings, stormwater features, and urban agriculture.
- 2 When education or public engagement are central to the development program, create opportunities to highlight sustainable development features visibly and experientially through design expression.



*Mercy Housing, Margot and Harold Schiff Residences  
Murphy/Jahn Architects, Terry Guen Design Associates*

*Sustainable landscape with adaptive, drought-tolerant plants, which reduce irrigation and manage stormwater*



*Gary Comer Youth Center Green Roof  
Hoerr Schaudt Landscape, John Ronan Architects  
Scott Shigley Photography*

*In addition to ecological benefits, educational garden can teach students to grow their own organic produce.*



*Farm on Ogden  
Booth Hansen, Drone Media Chicago Photography*

*Urban agriculture activities indoors and outdoors made visible along the street*

# Sustainable Design Best Practices

Chicago's Sustainable Development Policy has advanced sustainable and resilient design throughout the city. It includes a variety of categories and choices of methods to meet the requirements.

While certain projects receiving City assistance are required to comply with this policy, all projects should consider and address each of these categories at each step of the design and development process.

Please refer to the Sustainable Development Policy for guidance on each of the topics listed here.

- » Health
- » Energy
- » Stormwater
- » Landscapes
- » Green Roofs
- » Water
- » Transportation
- » Solid Waste
- » Work Force
- » Wildlife

# Program

Program suggests how a community will interact with, occupy, and use space. Indoor and outdoor programming should reinforce one another to improve the day-to-day life of both residents and the wider community.

# Program

## Use Mix

The uses within a development should complement those on the surrounding block and neighborhood, either by clustering predominant uses or filling gaps in the existing use mix. Uses within a single building can also be mixed to further contribute to neighborhood vitality.

- 1 Along significant neighborhood corridors, developments should contribute to a mix of uses on the block (e.g. housing, food service, retail, community services, open space, etc.).
- 2 Along commercial corridors, the ground floor of buildings should contain active uses such as retail, food service, and social spaces. Providing residential space on upper floors to create mixed-use buildings is also a good way to promote an active street throughout the day and week.



A mix of commercial, hotel, and office uses brought needed neighborhood amenities as well as customers.



Active ground floor, easy resident access to upper floors, and hidden parking make complementary uses work.



Retail isn't the only way to create active uses - this library fronts the street with affordable housing above.

## Context

The selection, organization, and expression of building and open space uses should contribute to the overall neighborhood program composition by promoting desirable uses and reducing the impact of undesirable uses.

- 1 Proposed uses should reflect and enhance existing desirable neighborhood uses and previous plan recommendations. This may include either introducing a needed use (e.g. grocery store or open space) that does not yet exist in the area or clustering like uses together (e.g. retail or food service) to bolster existing program.
- 2 Identify opportunities to provide spaces to support the larger community's needs and a diverse range of users. An example that would serve fledgling entrepreneurs would be to provide a small, flexible space for a "pop-up" retail, food, or events.



Adding a bar and event space created social activities and nightlife in a commercial corridor lacking those amenities.



Small, inexpensive storefronts have created new business opportunities for local entrepreneurs.



Cafe, incubator, and office space create opportunities for entrepreneurship within historically marginalized areas.

# Site Design

Site design describes the organization of buildings, open space, parking, and other related site uses. Good site design respects existing site features and responds to surrounding conditions such as adjacent properties, streets, and local climate.

# Site Design

## Orientation and Access

Sites should provide clear access points for various users, prioritizing pedestrian access and locating vehicular access in the rear of the site whenever possible.

- 1 Where possible, orient buildings so that the longest side with glazing faces south to take advantage of energy and lighting efficiency.
- 2 Consider adjacent land uses and views when orienting buildings. Positive views to adjacent features should be preserved while visually buffering detracting adjacent uses.
- 3 Primary pedestrian site access should be prioritized from the main street frontage. On corner sites, access should respond to both streets wherever possible. Public-facing uses should be accessed from major streets, while private uses (e.g. residential entries) should be accessed from side streets.
- 4 Pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular conflicts should be minimized or eliminated, with vehicular site access provided via alleys whenever possible. In addition, parking and loading access should be combined to minimize driveways and allow adequate room for other site programming such as open space.
- 5 On large sites, encourage physical and visible porosity by breaking up development and encouraging through-site pedestrian routes.



*A single-loaded corridor along the adjacent railroad shields residents from noise and provides views of the courtyard.*



*Setting back building entrances at corner sites address both the primary street and the side street.*



*Separating pedestrian and vehicular entrances with quality planting helps demarcate space and avoid conflicts.*

## Open Space

Open space is critical to the enjoyment of Chicago's neighborhoods and comes in many forms - from private yards to public parks. Whether open space is public or private, it should serve its users well by providing pleasant and usable space for recreation, gathering, and outdoor enjoyment.

- 1 Even when not required, open spaces that are accessible and inviting to the public should be created whenever possible.
- 2 Open space should be located to leverage interior building uses and blend interior and exterior spaces where active ground-level program such as retail, community space, or food service can expand the indoor uses outdoors in pleasant weather.
- 3 Open spaces should include elements such as inviting places to sit, plantings, protection from inclement elements, access to sunlight, quality lighting, and art.
- 4 Provide visual buffers between on-site open spaces and adjacent incompatible land uses and/or views.



*Enlarged entry plazas can be inviting both to building users and the broader public.*



*Well-placed open spaces take advantage of building glazing to blur the line between interior and exterior.*

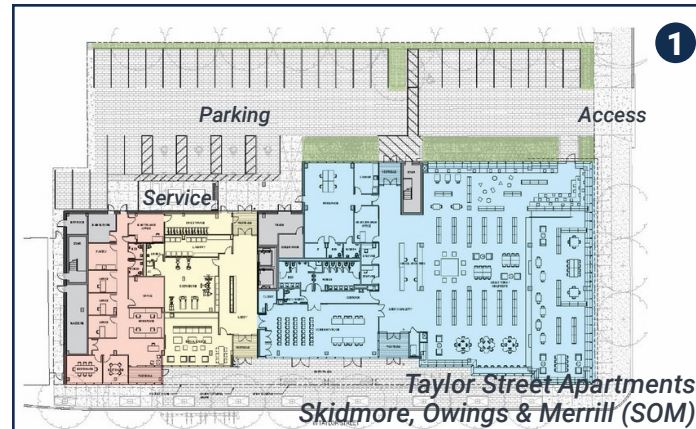


*The creation of outdoor "rooms" through planting and paving design provide a variety of places to site and gather.*

**Parking and Service**

Parking and service areas, such as utility, trash, and delivery areas, are necessary to the operations of a building and need to be thoughtfully integrated into the overall site design without detracting from programmatic spaces.

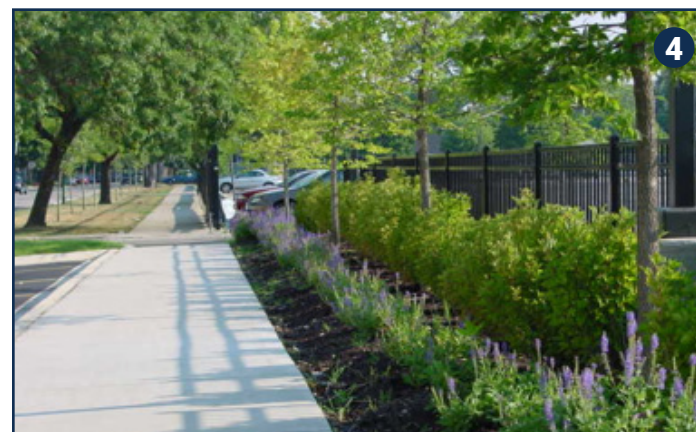
- 1 Parking and service (e.g. mechanical systems, trash, and loading areas) should be located at the rear of the site whenever possible and should be accessed via alleys or side streets when possible.
- 2 New public alleys should be provided (dedicated) on larger sites. Sites with multiple distinct buildings should centrally locate shared parking with minimal driveway entrances.
- 3 Structured parking and service should be screened from public view. Screening for surface parking and services should, at minimum, meet the requirements of the Landscape Ordinance. Wrapping parking and service uses with more active building uses, especially at the ground floor, is usually preferred.
- 4 Where concealing parking and loading with active building program is not appropriate, utilize landscape buffers and vegetative screening.



*Taylor Street Apartments  
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM)*  
Parking and service in the rear, accessed via a side street, prevents conflicts and preserves the street wall.



*University of Chicago - Dexter Mixed-use Building  
Ross Barney Architects*  
Wrapping structured parking with program (e.g. offices) shields unpleasant views and expands usable space.



*Multi-layered landscape buffer provides visual screening from parking and promotes a more pleasant streetscape*

# Public Realm

The impact of new development does not stop at the property line. Improvements to the adjacent public realm as outlined below should be addressed whenever possible with the goal of promoting safe, comfortable, functional, and vibrant neighborhoods.

# Public Realm

## Public Right-of-Way

Improvements to the public right-of-way may be necessary to accommodate changes in mobility needs, improve safety, and contribute to the identity of a development.

- 1 Any modifications to the public right-of-way must be approved by the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) and should follow their guidelines and regulations. Several City resources are available to help identify strategies to improve streetscape sustainability and promote active transportation modes through the creation of complete streets.
- 2 Where existing sidewalks are too narrow to adequately support site uses (e.g. restaurant outdoor seating), identify ways to set the building back from the property line and expand pedestrian pavement within the site boundary, especially for projects that span a large portion of a block. Be mindful of impacts to the block's street wall in the process.
- 3 When designing existing or additional public realm space, consider options for activation and programming to promote vibrancy in the neighborhood.



**Broadway Streetscape Uptown**  
Transystems and Altamanu  
*Complete street system with generous pedestrian space, plantings, site furniture, and public art*



**Maria's Bar**  
Silvestro Design Operations  
*Expanded public realm space for outdoor seating under building canopy, sheltered from the elements*



**Lakeview Parklet**  
Latent Design  
*Expanded public space into a parking stall (i.e. parklet) provides outdoor seating where sidewalks are narrow*

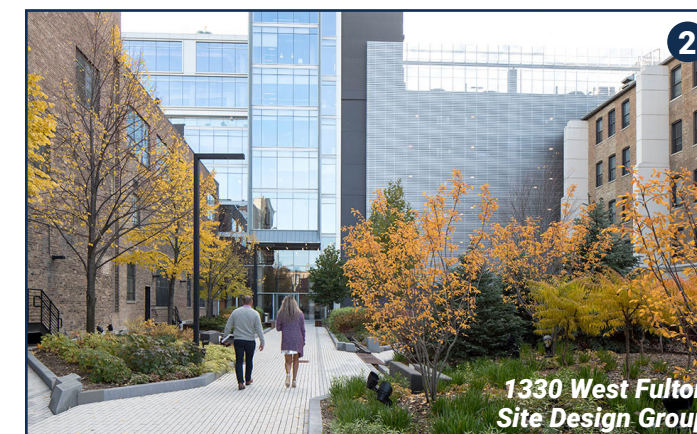
## Landscape

Comprehensive and well maintained landscape areas contribute to the sense of place and experience of the neighborhood. Vegetation, including trees, planting beds, and raised planters soften the hard edges of buildings and walkways while providing a cooling effect through shade and reduced solar gain. High-quality and coordinated landscape elements such as seating, lighting, and other site furnishings contribute to the sense of place and improve human comfort.

- 1 Plant a diverse selection of street trees within the parkway according to the Landscape Ordinance. Provide generous soil volumes for planting areas to allow for expanded root growth and improved tree health.
- 2 Where space allows, soften building edges with front yard plantings. Consider native plant palettes that go beyond lawns and hedges to include flowering shrubs, perennials, and groundcovers to provide multi-seasonal interest and habitat for migrating birds and pollinators.
- 3 Install pedestrian amenities such as seating, lighting, wind blocks, overhead canopies, and receptacles where there is high pedestrian traffic or active gathering areas. These elements should be located either within site boundaries or within the parkway and should not impede pedestrian travel.



**C.H. Robinson Midwest Headquarters**  
SOM and Site Design Group  
*Generous parkway plantings promote a more pleasant pedestrian environment.*



**1330 West Fulton**  
Site Design Group  
*Native planting design for the building's entry courtyard create a welcoming transition from the street.*



**The Wave**  
dSPACE Studio  
*Sculptural amenities not only provide seating, but also invite people to use the elements creatively.*



**Accessibility and Safety**

Making public-facing spaces accessible to people of all abilities and identities is critical to promoting an equitable, safe, and comfortable neighborhood. In addition to accessibility requirements, include the following considerations as well.

- 1 Design welcoming and equitable entrances, such as integrating accessible routes artfully into main entries. Take care to use surface materials that are both accessible (e.g. navigable and durable materials, high contrast at thresholds, etc.) as well as thoughtfully woven into the overall design from the beginning.
- 2 Allow for an open visual field within the public realm for both safety and accessibility. Avoid posts or other physical elements within pedestrian passageways such as plazas or sidewalks. Avoid walls, panels, or dense eye-level vegetation that obstruct view from other areas of the site, street, or building.



*Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative  
Landon Bone Baker Architects and Site Design Group  
Ramps to the accessible entrance integrated into the landscape and lead to the main entry to the building*



*University of Chicago 58th Street Streetscape  
Site Design Group  
Elimination of vertical separation at the ground plane and open, framed view along the path for ease of navigation*

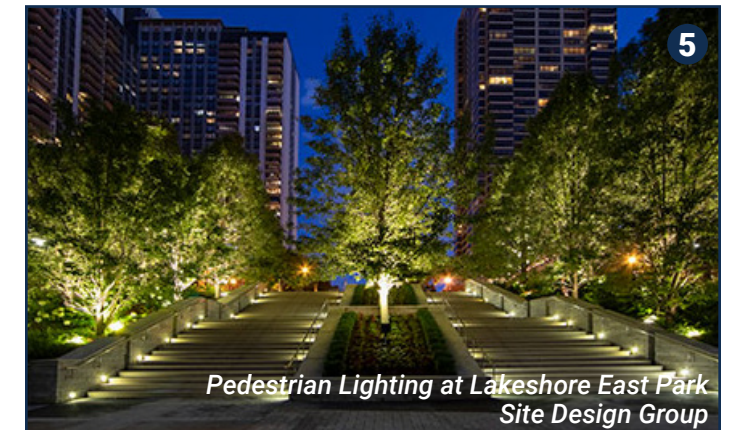


*Green Line Performing Arts Center  
Morris Architects Planners, Hall+Merrick Photography  
Accessible building entrance on the ground level with ability to connect indoor and outdoor space seamlessly*

- 3 Protect the public realm and open spaces from sound pollution, which requires locating venting and noisy equipment away from occupied outdoor spaces.
- 4 In areas with high pedestrian activity and potential conflicts with program in the public realm (e.g. outdoor seating), take care to refrain from impeding pedestrian movement. Door swings and other obstacles should be avoided in the pedestrian way. Opportunities to clearly delineate the walkway may include carefully placed planters, furniture, and light fencing. Take care not to block visual access to the space.
- 5 Feelings of comfort and safety are unique to each neighborhood and should be considered within that specific context. Identify what types of elements are required or discouraged to promote the wellbeing of neighbors occupying and moving through the public realm.



*Promontory Restaurant  
Range Design + Architecture  
Planter box separates pedestrians and outdoor dining to keep the narrow walkway clear*



*Pedestrian Lighting at Lakeshore East Park  
Site Design Group  
Lighting illuminates pathways, reduces dark niches, and contributes artful design to the public realm.*



*Fiesta Boricua Mural, Humboldt Park  
Gamaliel Ramirez  
Integrating community-driven art into the public realm demonstrates the space is cared for and watched over.*

# Massing

Massing refers to the height, bulk, and apparent density of a building. While baseline density standards are set by the underlying zoning, the guidelines presented here serve to promote consistency with the adjacent context by reinforcing desirable urban features from the neighborhood.

# Massing

## Height

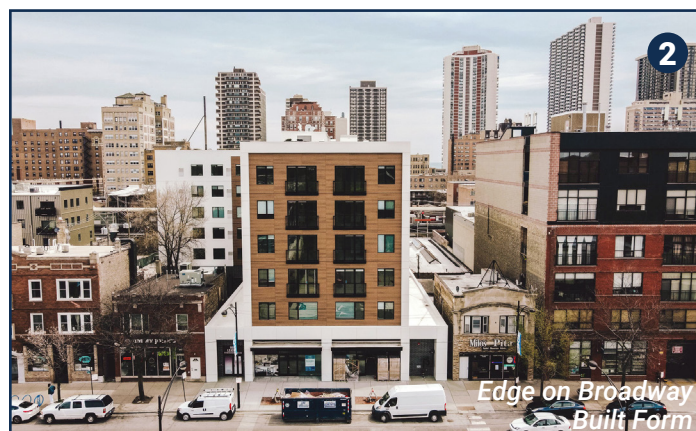
Building height is often the first concern for neighbors of new development. While zoning addresses overall height limits, the guidelines presented here provide recommendations for ensuring new development responds to surrounding conditions and existing buildings.

- 1 Determine street-facing building height based on adjacent and surrounding building heights to provide variety and visual interest within a unified street character.
- 2 Where a building is taller than surrounding developments, building height should transition by stepping down to better relate to adjacent buildings.



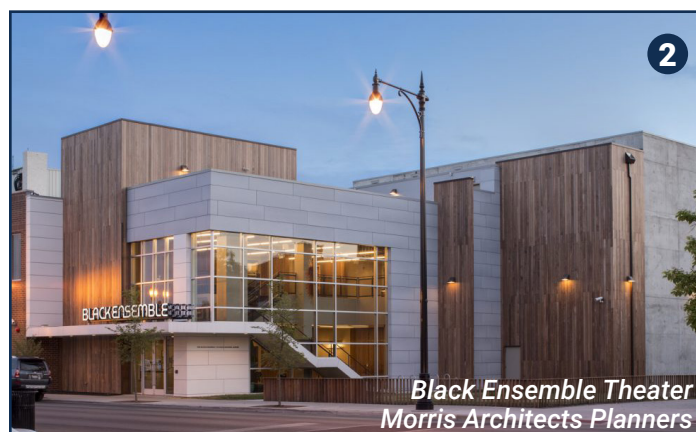
**Ace Hotel**  
GREC Architects and Commune Design, Tom Harris

The hotel is massed to read as three buildings, one incorporates an historic brick face.



**Edge on Broadway**  
Built Form

The tallest portion of the building steps down on each side to respond to the neighboring two story buildings.



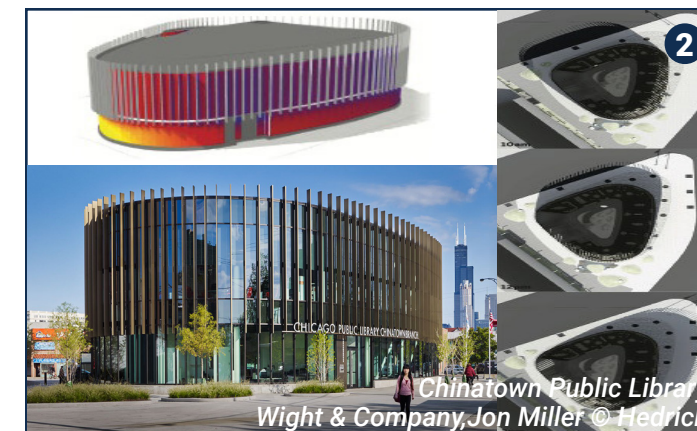
**Black Ensemble Theater**  
Morris Architects Planners

Building height varies to invite pedestrian access.

## Access to Light and Air

Access to light and air are important for wellness, dignity, and energy efficiency, especially for residential and office uses. Building massing should be arranged to support maximizing light and air for building occupants and neighbors.

- 1 Conduct shadow studies of massing options to determine if proposed structures will create significant changes to surrounding spaces and examine alternatives if they are negatively impacted.
- 2 When creating massing options, investigate several variations that maximize natural light and determine if elements of these can be integrated into the final design.
- 3 Identify opportunities for outdoor space, including porches, balconies, and roof decks, that are designed in a way that is consistent with surrounding buildings and sensitive to the public realm, such as on top of a stepback.



**Chinatown Public Library**  
Wight & Company, Jon Miller © Hedrich

Sun and Shadow Studies



**Solstice on the Park**  
Studio Gang

Massing design maximizes sunlight throughout the year.



**600 W. Chicago**  
Von Weise Associates, Steve Hall

Roof deck covered lounge space for residents to enjoy away from the public realm

**Street Wall**

The rhythm of building faces along an urban corridor is known as the street wall. Continuity of the street wall helps to define the public realm, while large openings in the street wall caused by vacant parcels, deep site setbacks, or single-story buildings can detract from neighborhood character.

- 1 Where a street wall exists, its continuity must be reinforced with the new development or other active use, such as a vibrant plaza. Inactive gaps between buildings interrupt the street wall.
- 2 Buildings located at major intersections should reinforce the architectural definition of the corners of the block by building to the corner. Strategies for strengthening the corner can include adding an architectural feature, special façade treatment, primary building entrance, or other variation in massing.



*Wicker Park Commercial Corridor*  
Low first floor retail vacancy creates vibrant, walkable commercial corridors.



*Parlor Pizza Bar Outdoor Plaza*  
CBD Architects  
Outdoor seating for restaurant helps maintain active uses along the street wall featuring planters and string lighting.



*Enlace Office*  
Canopy Architecture & Design  
Operable glass panels provide natural light and integrate with the brick to offer a defining feature at the corner.

- 3 For buildings three stories and above, provide clear differentiation between the base, middle, and top of buildings to promote legibility and interest in the building's form from the street. Use this structure to promote continuity with the surrounding buildings, public realm, and open spaces at each level, with the highest degree of continuity at the base.
- 4 When creating buildings taller than three floors, especially if taller than surrounding buildings, set back the face of upper floors several feet behind lower floors. This encourages human-scaled design by responding to adjacent building height, street width, and pedestrian experience. Leverage these tower setbacks to optimize views and natural light.



*Casa Norte*  
Landon Bone Baker Architects  
Building mass steps back into three different tiers that are connected through the elevator shaft.



*Little Italy Branch Library and Taylor Street Apartments*  
SOM and Tom Harris  
Dynamic building with a pedestrian-oriented base and housing that pushes back for privacy and light



*Chicago & Main TOD*  
GREG Architects  
Bulk of building sets back along the lower density and traffic street for enhanced pedestrian experience

# Façade

Façades are the exterior “faces” of a building. Primary façades along active streets should contribute to a vibrant streetscape, create visual interest, accentuate entrances, and reflect internal uses. Secondary façades require less visual interest but should still respect and contribute to the neighborhood character.

# Façade

## Windows and Doors

Building openings (i.e. windows and doors) serve as the interface between the exterior and interior of a building, creating architectural rhythm and expression.

- 1 Clearly identify building entrances as seen from the street using elements such as architectural details, awnings, or canopy structures.
- 2 Arrange window openings to promote design interest and employ strategies such as pattern, shape, color, material, and depth to reinforce the style of the building and how it responds to the surrounding context.
- 3 On ground floor frontages, introduce transparency and visual interest to contribute to the street's vitality. For retail, ground floor frontages should be primarily clear, non-reflective windows that allow views of indoor commercial space or product display.
- 4 For spaces inviting the public indoors (e.g. retail, restaurants, community uses, etc.), identify opportunities to increase permeability between the sidewalk and the indoors. This may include strategies such as doors that can stay open in nice weather and making indoor activities visible from outside.



*Storefront has a well integrated awning and playful graphics along the transparent glass façade.*



*Geometrically interesting window details provide depth and visual interest along the street wall.*



*Glass garage doors allow for transparency and easy access into art and community spaces.*

## Materials

High-quality building materials promote pride of place and respond to neighborhood character. Appropriate materials balance aesthetics with functional qualities such as durability, cost-effectiveness, and sustainability.

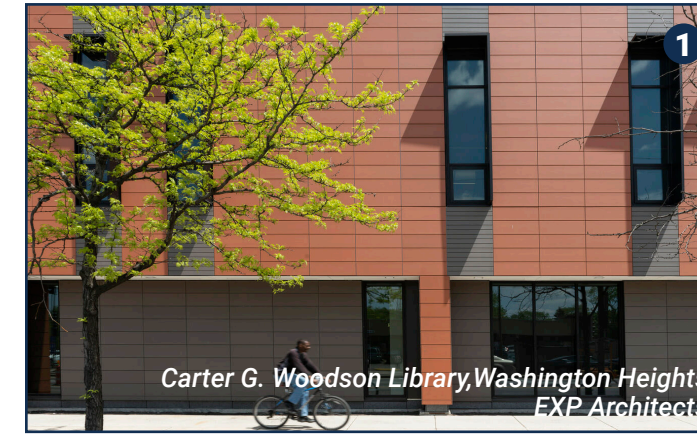
- 1 All façades that are visible to the public should be treated with materials, finishes, and architectural details that are of high-quality, durable, and appropriate for use on the primary street-facing façade.



*The façade utilizes glass and brick materials used in the surrounding neighborhood in a modern way.*



*Stainless steel in three colors are used to create a colorful, sculptural, and inviting entrance.*



*New terra cotta rainscreen curtain wall replaced a hazardous uninsulated brick façade.*

**Ground Floor**

Active and interesting building ground floors add vibrancy to the public realm when properly expressed through the design of a building's façade.

- 1** Provide street-level spaces within buildings that are designed to accommodate active uses visible to pedestrians.
- 2** Use transparent materials, lighting, and other design elements such as art to create human-scale visual interest, especially along sidewalks and open spaces.
- 3** Long façades should be broken up with vertical elements and articulation of the street wall as well as proportioned to enhance existing patterns along the street.



*South Shore Brew Triad Consortium*

*Welcoming atmosphere in a corner cafe, across from a train station*



*Blu Dot Furniture John Ronan Architects*

*Custom screen made of aluminum tubing transforms a dull strip mall into a unique retail space.*



*LINKT BKL*

*Undulating facade was designed to reduce glare from oncoming traffic for a better resident experience*

**Signage and Security**

Building signage is a critical form of communication for building occupants, but care must be taken to ensure that signage is integrated into the overall building design and reflects neighborhood character.

In addition, security features should continue to serve their primary function while integrating with the overall façade design.

- 1** Commercial developments should avoid sign clutter, especially when it obstructs views of interior spaces and activities. Signage should be used to contribute to the neighborhood character and identity by using color, style, and architectural integration appropriate to the context.
- 2** Security gate and shutter visibility should be minimized, and whenever possible, be interior-mounted and integrated into the storefront design.



*Eyeconic Storefront Perkins+Will, Tom Harris Photography*

*Mounted signage is easy to read, clean, and unobstructive to inviting retail space at grade*



*Currency Exchange Cafe Storefront Theaster Gates Studio*

*Window emblems allow for branding that does not impact transparency and light.*



*Commercial Door Company Incorporated*

*Interior mounted collapsible security gates are a discreet way to secure retail space.*

