

Shape Your Future Victoria

Urban Design

A full report on urban design is available on the City of Victoria's website for the Official Community Plan review at: www.ShapeYourFutureVictoria.ca

Definition and Description

Urban design is the art of creating and shaping cities and towns. It involves the arrangement and design of buildings, public spaces, transport systems, services and amenities. Urban design is the process of giving form, shape and character to groups of buildings, to whole neighbourhoods, and the city. It is a framework that orders the elements into a network of streets, squares and blocks. Urban design blends architecture, landscape architecture and city planning together to make urban areas functional and attractive.

Source:The Center for Design Excellence

Why Is This Topic Important?

Urban design contributes to sustainability through policies to develop compact land use patterns. Urban design also shapes safe and attractive cities with distinctive architecture, streetscapes, landscaping features and character areas. Some elements of sustainable community design include: cultural landmarks, green buildings, built and natural heritage, parks, open spaces, public art, community facilities and a public realm encouraging pedestrian activity and social interaction and vitality.

Did You Know?

The *Local Government Act* gives local governments in British Columbia powers to designate sensitive areas in a community as **Development Permit Areas** (DPA).

DPA's can be designated in B.C. for aesthetic reasons and/or to protect natural habitat, to control hazards (e.g. flood risks), to conserve energy and water, and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

There are two types of design-related DPA's. One controls general form and character in an area. The other controls exterior design, finishes and landscaping.

Victoria has 30 DPA's each controlling urban design elements in sensitive areas in the community located in Burnside, Downtown, Fairfield, Fernwood, Gonzales, Harris Green, Hillside-Quadra, James Bay, North and South Jubilee, North Park, Oaklands, Rockland and Victoria West.

Local governments can also designate **Heritage Conservation Areas** (HCA) as a special category of DPA whose purpose is to protect heritage properties and districts. HCAs control exterior design, finishes and landscaping. There are 13 HCAs in Victoria.

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Each DPA and HCA is listed in an official community plan with goals, criteria and design guidelines. The latter are used to evaluate applications in the relevant area and inform City Council decisions.

Issues and Trends

Geographic setting:

- Geography influences urban design and contributes to sense of place. It is important for built form to consider topographic features such as ravines and valleys. Laying the form of a community on a natural base results in unique patterns and shapes the identity of a city.
- Victoria's natural setting provides an underlay for the city form. The diversity of terrain and plant life, influenced by ocean, forest and geomorphic conditions, are the source of subtle changes in context and micro-climate across Victoria.
- Public vantages are important to the character and quality of life in Victoria. There are many opportunities for views at the water's edge and higher elevations, in places like Selkirk Waterway and Rockland, and along streets and paths that rise and fall with geography.

Human needs and liveability:

- Urban design gives a city an image, character and organization that meet human needs such as travel through a physical pattern. This pattern is the result of geography, landscaping, streets, the public realm, open spaces, buildings and structures in the urban environment.
- There is a human need to feel a sense of continuity with the past and connection to nature and to escape and rest from urban life. Most of Victoria's neighbourhoods feature heritage property, open spaces and community parks but more are needed in some places.

- Quality pedestrian and cycling linkages exist throughout Victoria in the form of pathways, bikeways and well-recognized pedestrian routes. However, some neighbourhood linkages do not connect to Downtown and some could be improved to enhance and complete the system.

Building in context:

- Landmarks help to give orientation as way finding markers and contribute to the identity of Victoria and its neighbourhoods. Examples of local landmarks include Government House, the old Rockland water tower and the cluster of churches on Quadra Street.
- Urban design needs to be contextual, balanced and compatible with existing layers of form and character and includes the conservation and enhancement of heritage features. Victoria contains diverse eras and scales of buildings as well as private gardens and landscaping and trees and parks in the public realm that have shaped the city's neighbourhoods over time.
- The street system of Victoria responds to its geography and gradual development. It includes street grids and irregular patterns that reflect pre-contact First Nations trails, Victorian commercial streets, early 20th century streetcar lines and postwar automobile suburbs.



LANDSCAPING, SUCH AS STREET TREES AND PLANTS, CONNECTS PEOPLE TO NATURE AND CAN SHAPE THE CHARACTER OF AN AREA

The City in Action: What We Do Now

- The City of Victoria shapes the design of buildings, streets, public spaces and whole neighbourhoods through land use plans, policies, development permit areas (DPAs), heritage conservation areas (HCA's), DPA and HCA design guidelines and zoning regulations. The OCP contains a list of design guidelines for 32 DPAs and 13 HCAs. There are also site-specific guidelines for some of the newer developments, such as the Selkirk Design Manual and the Design Guidelines for the Dockside Area.

Share your thoughts and ideas:

Urban design has shaped Victoria's layout and character areas but the appearance, vitality, safety and environmental sustainability of each of the neighbourhoods could be enhanced. Municipal policies can help to guide changes to the city's existing built fabric

- What do you consider good urban design? Does it improve your quality of life?
- Where would you like to see design improvements in your neighbourhood?
- How can urban design reduce the threat of climate change and conserve energy and water?

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

- Additional topic sheets are available online at www.shapeyourfuturevictoria.ca/research-facts