

Downtown Design Review – the Big Picture

Purpose of Design Review:

From the UDO: *Purpose.* The review procedure for a major work seeks to encourage rehabilitation and new construction in a manner that will promote visual harmony, enhance the historical integrity, and develop creative design solutions. While the design guidelines will not dictate architectural styles, they will suggest a variety of design options for achieving compatibility within the designated commercial core, gateways, and periphery boundaries. Major works shall be reviewed by the downtown commission with a recommendation from the DTDR staff as part of a mandatory review, voluntary compliance program.

Role of the Design Review Committee:

The Design Review Committee plays a very important role for downtown projects in that it provides a feedback loop for developers from a group of designers and also helps the Downtown Commission in their review. The committee is often the first outside group to look at plans or concepts for projects. Developers and architects usually come to the committee before submitting to TRC.

This meeting is not mandatory by ordinance, but is strongly suggested by staff. The Design Review Committee will look at design and operational issues, ask questions and make suggestions. It is important that committee members feel comfortable to be up front with the developer when they see “red flags” or concerning element. While the UDO requirements in downtown are substantial, they do not necessarily prevent large buildings from potentially overwhelming a street or the skyline.

Process:

Design Review in the Central Business District is a **Mandatory Review/Voluntary Compliance** process. This means that projects need to be reviewed either by staff for small projects or by the Downtown Commission for Level II and Level III projects. Current guidelines cover only new construction and rehabilitation of buildings, but not signs, pushcarts or other elements.

After the Downtown Commission conducts their review, the minutes of the Commission meetings and staff reports are forwarded on to Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council for their consideration. Staff also lets each reviewing body know verbally in their presentation how the Downtown Commission voted and if there were major concerns about the project.

Voting:

Once the Downtown Commission votes, the project will move on to Planning and Zoning *regardless* of how the Commission voted. The applicant is not obligated to come back before the Downtown Commission.

A “Yes” vote means that the design meets most of the guidelines and generally meets the intent of creating an inviting, livable built environment in Downtown.

A “No” vote means that the design does not fit in downtown or in that location. A “No” vote does not mean that the use is inappropriate, the price point is wrong, etc.

If the Commission members agree that the applicant has not provided enough information, or that the design is not really final enough for a vote, the Commission can vote to delay the Design Review vote by continuing the item. It is typical in design review to have a conversation with a developer or an architect about specific elements and ask for changes. Such a conversation does not mean that the design is not ready to be reviewed. The Historic Resources Commission frequently has these same types of conversations during design review. This is the appropriate venue for this discussion.

Questions that are Appropriate or Inappropriate to ask during Design Review	
YES	NO
Can you explain how this design fits in with the surrounding buildings?	What will the rents be?
Why did you make these material choices?	Are you providing enough parking?
Would you consider altering the roof line?	Are you including affordable housing?
What kind of trees are you proposing?	
Comments that are Appropriate or Inappropriate to make during Design Review (before the vote)	
YES	NO
I think this design fits in well/does not fit in well here because_____	I don't think we should have any more hotels in downtown.
I am concerned that the design is not pedestrian friendly because of _____	You're not providing enough parking.
I think that _____ makes the building feel overwhelming to a pedestrian in this area.	Your current business in another location is a problem because...
The materials that are shown are a good/bad choice because_____.	The logo for your projects is stupid, etc.

1. **Opening of the Item:** **Chair of the Commission** opens the agenda item and if there is anyone on the Commission who has some level of involvement in the development project, brings up that those members have some level of involvement in the issue. If needed, those members ask to be recused at that time. Their recusal does not affect the quorum.
2. **Staff Report:** **Staff** presents a short report lasting up to 10 minutes, which is mainly a review of the memo sent out to the Commission ahead of time. This is a report out, not a discussion. Staff will let the Commission know if the application is considered to be complete, or if there is anything missing. As a part of the presentation, staff should make clear if there are any variances needed/required and any other pending issues, such as air rights, issues highlighted by other staff review (concerns about traffic, drop offs, tree commission, etc).

Staff will summarize Design Review Committee meeting conversations and design evolutions, if any. Committee members may add to this, or save their perspectives until after Design team presentation.

3. **Design Team Presentation:** **The project's design team** then presents the project. They have ten to 15 minutes to do a presentation that explains the project concept, shows the general location and site and explains how the project fits into that location, describes the buildings, facilities and amenities, landscaping and other urban design choices; they speak to the function and programming of the things that you can see. The commission should ask clarifying (yes no) questions only, and save substantive questions or questions that don't have to do with design review for later. ***It is up to the Chair to remind the presenter if they have run out of time.***
4. **Design Review Discussion:** **The commission as a whole** then has a discussion about design review; this is the time they can ask the DRC members questions about their recommendation, or ask the design team about why they are or are not making specific design choices; or ask staff to clarify things like "what do the design guidelines say about..." or "when is this going to Council, how does this work" **The Chair of the Commission** moderates that discussion as it is an official part of that meeting and must be kept "on track" with time, while also supporting a robust discussion about design, and ultimately s/he needs to call for the commission as a whole to vote on the project regarding design review. **The Chair of Commission** can gently remind Commission members when they ask "what are the rents going to be" and other important but not design review related items that they will have time at the end to ask them other questions about the project.

After discussion, Chair might ask if DTC feels the application is clear enough for a vote.

5. **Public comment:** **Chairperson of the Commission** asks if the public has any pertinent comments they want to make *regarding the design of the project* and whether it meets the intent of the guidelines. The Chair should review the public comment procedure if this wasn't done at the beginning of the meeting. If persons making public comment ask questions, the Chair will ask them to finish their comments first and sit down. All questions will be answered at the end of public comment. Public comment is not a time for a conversation between members of the public and the Commission and staff. Members of the Commission should not feel compelled to comment just because a member of the public is standing there.
6. **Pre-vote**

If variances are requested, Chair may ask for discussion about each, and may ask for vote on each, rather than vote on the project as a whole, so the applicant understands where the problems may be, and so that P&Z or other reviews understand the issues. Remember, approval of a variance is due to a hardship unique to the site or project. Variances create precedents, and should follow precedents, and should not be granted because the Commission happens to like what might happen inside the building.

If there has been significant discussion that indicates that the project will not be approved, the Chair can ask the applicant if they would like the Commission to continue the item and come back at a later meeting (to address Commission concerns).
7. **Vote:** The Downtown Commission **Chair** calls the vote and asks for a motion, second and if there is any further discussion. Staff prepares a motion as a part of the staff report, but the Commission may choose to alter the motion or add specific conditions or details. After the discussion (if any) the Chair asks for the vote.
8. **Follow up discussion:** Chair of DTC asks the DRC Chair if they had other comments on the project related to economic development or social or environmental issues, things they did not get to discuss during design review (this is where the "strongly supporting affordability" comes in. She then invites other Commission members to follow up with questions they have that are outside of design review.
9. **Closing of the Item:** Chair of the Commission closes the agenda item. Note: if any member of the public wants to provide comment on the project OUTSIDE of the design review issues, the chairperson of the DT Commission may wish to point out that generally public comment will be held as always, at the end of the meeting.