



OBJECTIVE DESIGN STANDARDS DONE RIGHT

The California Legislature has enacted a variety of bills in an effort to address a statewide crisis in housing supply and availability. Under the premise that discretionary development review delays or even derails housing production, SB 35 requires California cities to adopt “objective design standards” (ODS) to enable approvals of multifamily housing developments. Unlike design guidelines, which are open to interpretation and discussion, objective design standards facilitate ministerial, staff-level project review and faster approval times.

Still, many cities view this mandate with trepidation—discretionary design review has been a powerful tool to ensure new development is compatible with the context of local neighborhoods. But objective design standards can threaten local character if they are poorly crafted, employed as one-size-fits-all zoning regulations or discordant architectural styles. And design standards that attempt to capture every possible issue and variation are usually too cumbersome.

ODS require careful calibration to make them work effectively. It’s a three-way balancing act between community expectations for design quality, existing municipal code standards and regulations, and the staff resources to administer them. The intention is to make the requirements for developments more predictable and easier to interpret for everyone—decision-makers, staff, applicants, and the public. The goal is for applicants to understand which requirements apply to a proposed development before submittal so they can design a project to meet those requirements.

With the approval of AB 2011 and SB6, cities are required to permit housing—reviewed only with objective design standards—on land zoned for commercial uses.

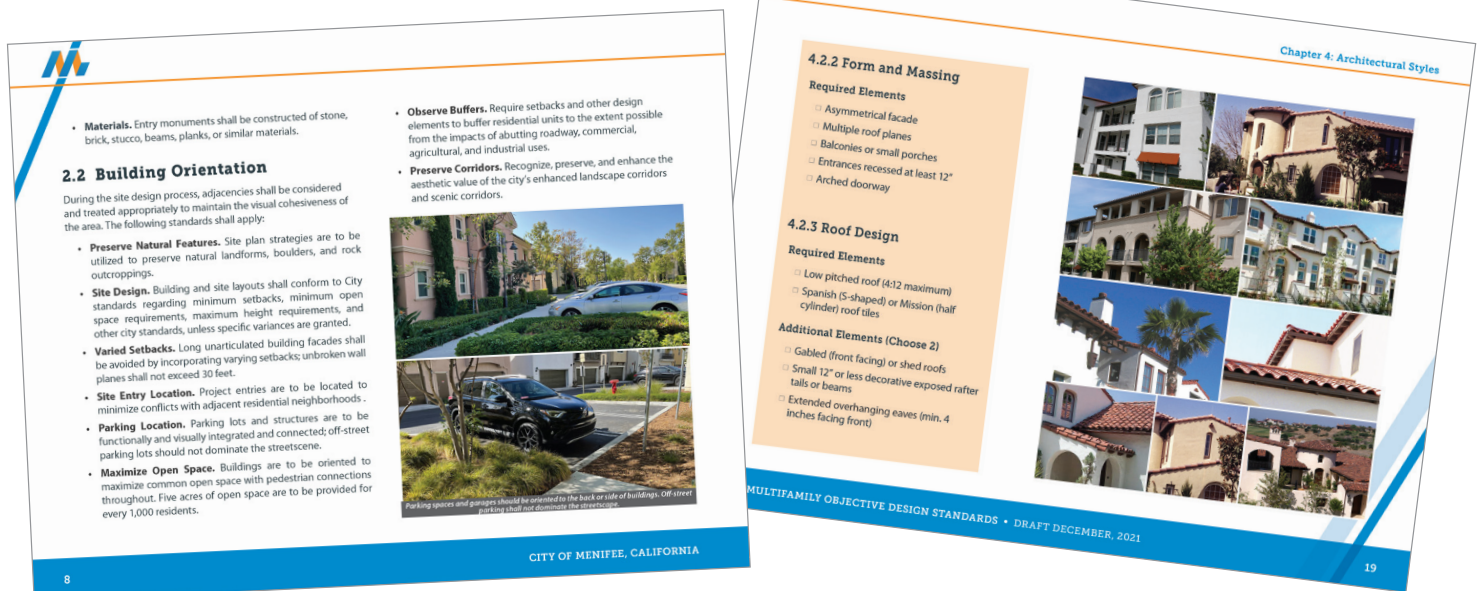
WHAT DO YOU HAVE?

Over time, cities tend to accumulate design guidelines that were prepared for various development types and processing needs. Some are in documents formally adopted by city council; others are statements of design intent in the zoning code; and still others, as often as not, are procedures and attitudes informally executed by city staff in response to council direction and opinions.

Unintentionally but inevitably, the composite result is opaque and confusing for policy makers, applicants, citizens, and staff. Policy makers can’t easily illustrate the aesthetic direction of the community. Applicants have longer processing times as they negotiate city requirements. Citizens can’t compare new development to any concrete measure. And city staff return applications again and again for revisions.

Because the accumulated design guidelines could be in numerous places, the first task is to find them all and sort them by document and design topic.

Figure 1: Example pages of completed objective design standards.





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WHAT DO YOU NEED?

You find out what you need by wading through the multiple layers of design expectations. Most cities already have design policies and standards in their municipal codes, general plans, zoning codes, design guidelines, etc. An inventory of existing policies, regulations, and processes will help you fully understand the city's historical approach to multifamily housing design so you can precisely apply and tailor ODS to local needs.

In some cases, certain design standards in the municipal code already function well. These topics can be left out of the ODS because both sets of standards will apply to qualifying projects.

Many subjective guidelines or other policies can be easily revised from "should" statements to objective "shall" statements so that existing design expectations carry through the ODS.

When certain design topics are either not addressed or addressed in vague terms, you can add more precise direction.

Objective design standards may include portions of general plans, specific plans, zoning codes, overlay zones, subdivision requirements, and landscaping and other land development regulations.

When you've sorted out what and how much you still need, two means are typically used to implement or adopt objective design standards. The first is to embed them in the municipal code, usually as an extension of the development and/or design standards section that is already in the code. This approach works best when jurisdictions already have numerous design standards in the code and want to supplement them with some additional standards. The approach is also appropriate for jurisdictions that have little or no design standards in the municipal code, but do not need expansive new design standards.

The second, more common approach is to adopt ODS in a stand-alone, illustrated document empowered by appropriate reference in the municipal code. With this approach, the ODS can include photographs

and diagrams that are not appropriate or too numerous for the municipal code. It is nonetheless important to ensure that the ODS document and the municipal code do not conflict—in the case of contradictory development standards, amend the code as appropriate.

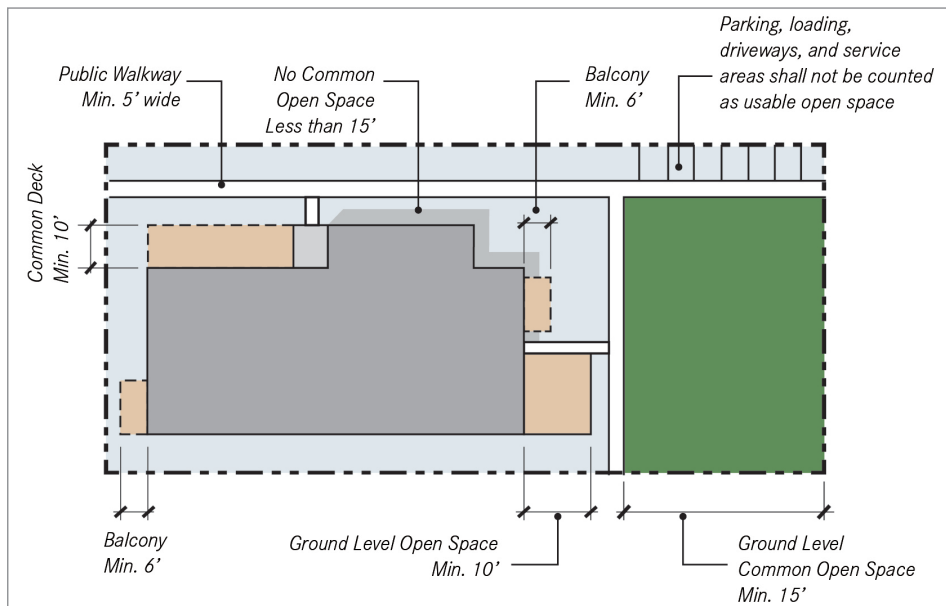
WHAT HAVE YOU MISSED?

No matter who is responsible for developing the ODS, the input of all planning staff is critical at multiple stages, especially staff responsible for implementing the standards at the counter. Current planning staff know, better than anyone, the common problems faced by applicants, the most common mistakes, and the quick work-arounds at the counter that can curtail future permitting issues. Current planning staff will be the primary "users" of the ODS, and their

Figure 2: Example rendering of building orientation standards.



Figure 3: Diagram of multifamily residential open space requirements.



Consider whether the document will be available online. If so, a landscape format may be preferable to portrait, which can be unwieldy online.

Number each standard so that it is easy to reference in staff reports, memos to applicants, and checklists for planning staff and applicants.

learned wisdom and buy-in to the ODS are critical.

Review by other members of the city family is also important to highlight gaps in the ODS. Certain standards have implications for public works, fire, and utility providers and may have unintended consequences. Staff from these departments that are assigned to development review should have an opportunity to comment on the proposed ODS, as should the city attorney's office.

WHAT DO ODS LOOK LIKE?

Let's assume you decide to create a stand-alone document. The document should be organized around specific topics such as "site planning," "building height and form," and "architectural and landscape details," which provide a useful guide to understanding building design. They can be easily used by applicants, city staff, commissioners, and community members to evaluate how well a proposed design meets the city's development goals. Also helpful is an illustrated glossary of commonly used terms, as long as the definitions are consistent with the municipal code and other adopted policies.

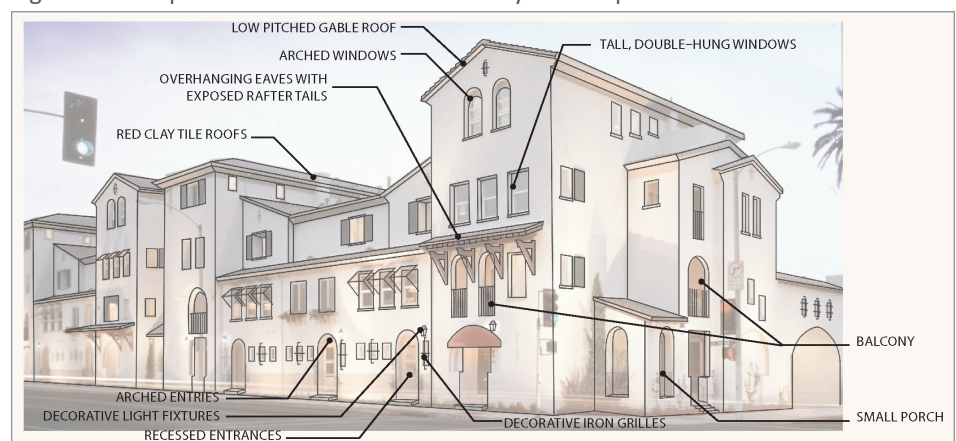
Include a statement of intent for each topic area covered by the guidelines. It is too easy to run through a checklist without understanding the purpose behind the guidelines. We are all prone to this, even city planners. A statement of intent illuminates the purpose of the standards and their expected outcome, so that everyone has a clear picture in mind of the goal.

It is important for the standards to offer some measure of built-in flexibility, especially regarding material. For example, though wood siding or finishes may be desirable for certain architectural styles,

such as Craftsman, other materials that reasonably mimic the appearance of wood should be allowed. A strict prohibition on certain materials, such as stucco, is often unrealistic. The best way to express a strong aversion to these materials is to set a limit on how much of the façade they can cover—e.g., restricting stucco to no more than 40 percent of the primary façades.

Because too much detail is one of the pitfalls of design guidelines, some features, such as decorative details, are best regulated by creating a list of potential features from which an applicant must provide a certain minimum. This encourages variety between projects and allows some freedom of design.

Figure 4: Example of illustrated architectural style descriptions.





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SEPTEMBER 2024

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CONCLUSION

When they are done well, objective design standards are a win-win solution for developers and community members. They cannot produce great architecture, but they can prevent bad architecture and set a bar for acceptable design. But their most important benefits are predictability and transparency. For developers and housing advocates, ODS clearly articulate the city's expectations, cutting the time between application and bringing new homes to the market. For residents, the standards ensure that new housing will fit into the community character.

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