

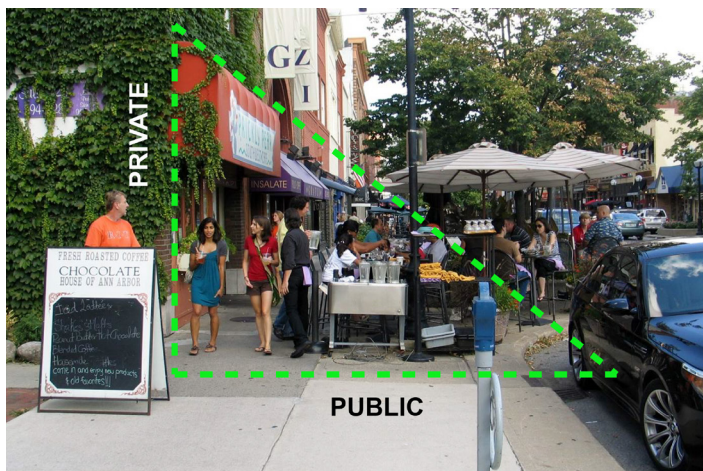


# Urban Design & Placemaking

## What is Urban Design?

Urban Design is the discipline of creating equitable, vibrant, and sustainable places with distinct identities. The profession pulls from other built environment disciplines such as planning, architecture, and landscape architecture but focuses on shaping the physical setting of the public realm.

The public realm is the space that the general public has right of access to and is the setting for street life. It is typically defined as the space along a street between the building facades. Urban Design influences both private elements along the building facades and public elements within the street.



Above: Urban Design focuses on shaping the physical setting within the “Golden Triangle,” the space between private buildings and the public right-of-way where street life takes place.

## Top 10 Design Elements

Each place is different and there are a number of options for creating a vibrant public realm. There are, however, fundamental design principles that help ensure a successful public realm. If the following 10 elements are designed well you’re likely to enjoy a dynamic public realm.

**1. Contextual Streetscapes:** As discussed in the Transportation & Mobility class, streets make up 13% of the land area in Charlotte so the design of streets understandably plays an important role in influencing the character of our community.

There are a number of elements that make up a streetscape but not every element is needed to create a successful streetscape. It is important to select the appropriate streetscape elements based on the surrounding context. Streetscape elements can include:

- Travel Lanes
- Medians
- Bike Lanes
- On-Street Parking
- Curb and Gutter
- Planting Strip
- Sidewalk
- Amenity Zones
- Seating
- Lighting
- Trash Receptacle



Above: While the two streetscapes above do not have the same design elements each are appropriate for the surrounding context and are considered successful streetscapes.



In order to determine what elements are needed for a streetscape professionals must evaluate the surrounding context:

- What is the street's role in terms of transportation? Is it a collector street intended to carry heavy loads of commuter traffic? Or is it a neighborhood street that carries less traffic?
- What land uses are along the street?
- What constraints are present? Is there enough room to include all the desired streetscape elements?

## 2. Safe Sidewalks

Sidewalks are a vital element for a vibrant public realm because they enable pedestrians to walk to and through the space. It is considered best practice to provide some separation between travel lanes and the sidewalk in order to offer pedestrians a sense of safety. The width of sidewalks, however, can vary depending on the type of place they serve:

- Neighborhood Streets: Avg. 5' sidewalks
- Mixed-Use Streets: Avg. 6 - 8' sidewalks
- Urban Commercial Streets: 8'+ sidewalks
- Outdoor Dining: Requires 12'+ sidewalks



*Above: In many situations, it is ideal to provide a planting strip and trees in order to buffer the sidewalk from adjacent vehicular traffic.*

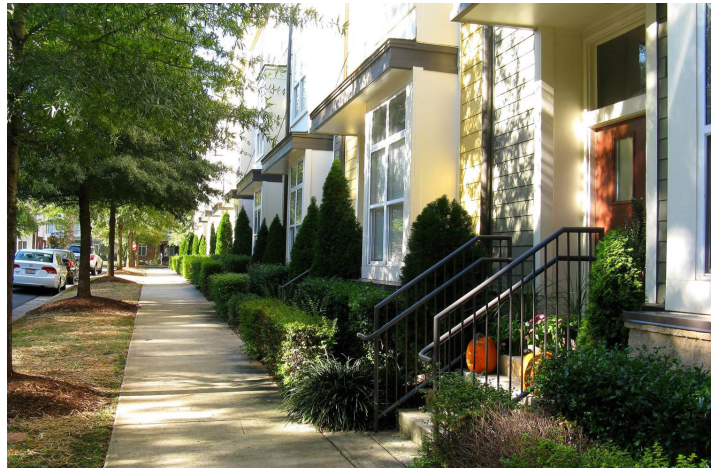
## 3. Frequent Connections

Connections from surrounding uses to the public realm are also important because, similar to sidewalks, they help bring pedestrians to the public space. Connections can include a number of elements such as sidewalks, gates,

and stairs - anything that allows pedestrians to move from a private space to the public realm. Connections from surrounding buildings and parking are almost always encouraged. Connections from private residences to the public realm, however, should be designed to provide a sufficient level of privacy for residents.



*Above: While a sidewalk connection from the residence to the public realm is provided the fence prohibits residents from using the connection. The fence should be replaced with a functional gate.*



*Above: The stairway provides both a connection to the public realm and a degree of separation from it which offers residences a sense of privacy.*

## 4. Active Building Edges

In order to have a vibrant public realm, building edges need to be active rather than blank. An active building edge includes elements that provide visual interest and offer a connection between activity inside the building and the public realm. Some common elements used to activate a building edge include transparent windows and frequent building entrances.





Above: The transparent windows and frequent entrances create an active building edge which helps enliven the public realm and create an interesting place to walk.

## 5. Prominent Building Entrances

As described, frequent building entrances can help activate a building edge and provide regular connections between the private space inside a building and the public realm. One prominent building entrance per building is also important because it helps pedestrians know where to first enter the building. Prominent building entrances also contribute to the unique character of a public space.

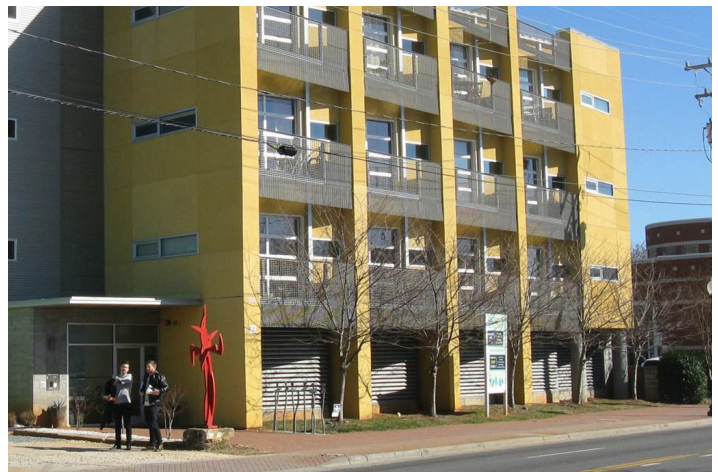


Above: Pedestrians can easily find this building entrance which is located at a prominent corner and is emphasized by a large staircase and monumental street numbers.

## 6. Appropriate Building Form

The form of buildings (height, width and overall massing) plays an important role in enhancing the public realm. Buildings with a small to medium form (low to medium building height and moderate building width) are not usual-

ly an issue because the scale of their design provides an inherent rhythm or level of interest along a block. Buildings with a larger form (tall building height and long building width), however, can be problematic if they are not designed to incorporate frequent elements of interest along the ground floor. For example, a tall, block-long building with no windows, entrances or architectural details along the first floor will feel intrusive and domineering from the public realm. If, however, the same first floor is treated with various elements of interest the form will feel more inviting and approachable from the public realm.



Above: The ground floor of the yellow building is lined with opaque corrugated metal which makes this large form feel uninviting and oppressive from the sidewalk. In comparison, the ground floor of the brick building incorporates a lot of windows, regular entrances, and various materials for architectural interest. The ground floor treatment of the large brick building is more inviting and approachable.

## 7. Proper Building Placement

Where a building is placed on a lot, either set-back from the street or built close to the street,



impacts the public realm. Buildings that are built close to the street help frame the public realm, and a well-framed space frequently feels safe, active and interesting. Buildings setback from the street can contribute to a vibrant public realm but active uses such as outdoor dining or a parklet need to be incorporated into the setback. The public realm is hampered when a building is setback from the street and inactive uses like a parking lot are located in the setback.



*Above: On-street parking is provided in front of the main building. Additional parking is provided in the surface parking lots located to the side and rear of the building.*



*Above: The two new buildings being constructed on the north side of the street are built close to the pedestrian realm. The existing building in between the construction sites is setback from the road and a parking lot is located between the building and public realm. The parking lot detracts from the pedestrian experience.*

## **8. Thoughtful Transitions**

Similar to building form, transitions between buildings along a block can either impact or enhance the public realm. Thoughtful transitions such as a step down in height between a mid-rise and low-rise building allow two different forms to harmoniously occupy the same block. An abrupt change in building forms, however, can make pedestrians feel like something is out of place or context.

## **9. Well-Placed Parking**

Parking is an important amenity for urban communities. However, thoughtful design of the type of parking and location of parking is important to protect a vibrant public realm. On-street parking, when feasible, provides convenient short-term parking for storefronts

and creates a buffer between vehicular traffic in the travel lanes and pedestrians on the sidewalk. On-street parking, however, is not always feasible or sufficient. On-site parking can include surface parking lots or structured parking decks. In order to protect the public realm and ensure it's occupied by active uses, surface parking lots should be located to the rear or side of buildings. Structured parking is expensive to construct so it is typically only feasible with a minimum amount of density. When structured parking is feasible, it should be located within the site and wrapped with active uses. Structured parking, like blank building edges, should not be adjacent to the public realm.

## **10. Opportune Open Space**

Open space within the public realm may include small formalized plazas or landscaped parklets. These spaces are usually created by





recessed building facades or at the corner of lots. They offer pedestrians an opportunity to sit and rest or chat with others, enjoy a bite to eat, or interact with public art or an installation.



Left and above: The outdoor seating area and public fountain fill in space not utilized by a building footprint. Both spaces offer a unique element of interest for the public realm and provide residents an opportunity to interact with other people or their public space.

## Placemaking: What & How?

Placemaking is both an overarching idea and a hands-on approach for improving a neighborhood, city, or region. Placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine or reinvent a local asset or space in order to create something that is unique, inspiring and reflective of the community's identity.

Anyone can participate in placemaking:

- Neighborhood Organizations
- Local Students
- Advocacy Groups
- Local Government
- Urbanists (People who love cities)
- Planners
- Kids

And there are so many types placemaking:

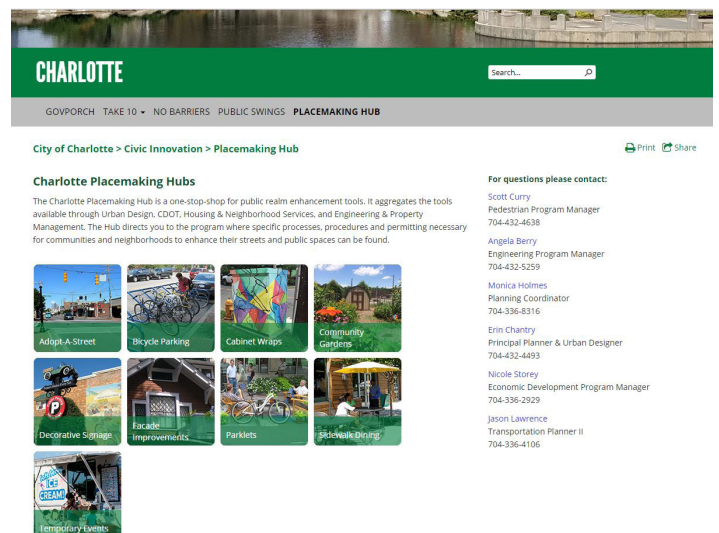
- Temporary events
- Parklets
- Little Free Libraries
- Building/Pavement murals
- Neighborhood bus stops
- Neighborhood bike racks
- Painted intersections



- Interactive artwork
- Games
- Street seats
- Guerrilla gardening
- The options are endless...

If you have a placemaking idea or want to learn more about the topic please visit the **Charlotte Placemaking Hub**, an online one-stop-shop for placemaking references and tools:

<http://charlottenc.gov/civicinnovation/Pages/default.aspx>



Above: The Charlotte Placemaking Hub is an amazing online resource for anyone interested in creating unique places for their neighborhood.