CITY OF SANTA CLARA

Draft Objective Design Standards for City-wide Multi-Family and Residential Mixed-Use Projects

NOVEMBER 2025

This page intentionally left blank.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank.

1 Introduction

I. Intent

The Objective Design Standards identify specific design elements that are required for all multi-family residential and residential mixed-use projects. The intent of the Objective Design Standards is to allow flexibility and creativity in design while providing a clear set of standards and expectations for applicable projects. The Objective Design Standards in this document are a compilation of adopted Objective Design Standards from the City's Specific Plans and Focus Areas.

Residential multi-family and mixed-use development in the City of Santa Clara is regulated by the General Plan, Zoning Ordinance, Specific Plans, and other applicable regulatory documents. Compliance with these regulations is supported by a discretionary design review process established in Santa Clara City Code (SCCC) Chapter 18.120.

The City's Objective Design Standards are intended to be consistent with Government Code Section 65913.4 and 66300(a)(7) as they do not "involve personal or subjective judgment by a public official" and they "are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion".

The Objective Design Standards will do the following:

- Provide clear, objective, and measurable standards for multi-family and residential mixed-use projects throughout the city;
- Streamline project review of housing, in accordance with State law;
- Ensure buildings are appropriate to their surroundings and environment;
- Promote thoughtful, context-sensitive site design;
- Maintain and enhance Santa Clara's built environment through quality architectural design; and
- Promote a pedestrian scale urban environment that enriches the quality of life of its citizens.

II. Applicability

A. The Objective Design Standards are applicable to new multi-family development and residential mixed-use development, and additions to existing multi-family or residential mixed-use development.

B. For modifications to existing residential mixed-use developments where no additional square footage is proposed, these standards and guidelines shall only apply to the use being modified (e.g., a ground floor retail storefront remodel will not trigger any architectural changes to residential units).

C. These standards are additive to the zoning development standards specified in SCCC Chapter 18.10 (Residential Zones) and SCCC Chapter 18.14 (Mixed-Use Zones). Development pursuant to any California state law that references objective design standards, including but not limited to Government Code Section 65589.5 (Housing Accountability Act) and Section 65913.4 must abide by these standards.

D. The objective design standards shall not conflict with the standards applicable to a specific plan area but if there is conflict, the specific plan standards shall apply

E. The specific applicability of these objective design standards will be determined by the multi-family or residential mixed-use product type (such as townhouses, podium/wrap-style buildings) that is proposed. The following table breaks down the applicability of the standards

Table 1: Objective Design Standard Applicability

Design Standard	Product Type	
	Townhouse	Podium/Wrap-Style
Site Design		
Site Access (Parking)	--	•
Site Access (Loading Zone)	--	•
Site Access (Driveways)	--	•
Site Organization (Public Realm Extension)	•	•
Site Access (Corner Building Orientation)	--	•
Building Design		
Massing (Building Length)	--	•
Massing (Massing Increment Dimensional Standards).	•	•
Massing (Massing Increment Design)	•	•
Massing (Massing Increments as Distinct Buildings)	--	•
Massing (Distinct Buildings)	--	•
Façade Design (Facade Composition)	--	•
Façade Design (Base, Middle and Top)	•	•
Façade Design (Façade Fenestration)	•	•
Façade Design (Parking Structure Façade Standards)	--	•
Access & Entrance Design (Building Orientation)	•	•
Access & Entrance Design (Primary Entrances)	•	•
Access & Entrance Design (Frequency of Entries)	--	•
Access & Entrance Design (Vehicular Access)	--	•
Materials (Primary Materials)	•	•
Pedestrian Level Design		
Ground Floor Treatment - Retail (Facade Transparency and Ground Floor Retail)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment - Residential(Ground Floor Access)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment - Residential (Stoops)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment – Live/ Work (Entrances)	--	•
Open Space Design (Podium Style Buildings)	--	•
Open Space Design (Pathways)	--	•
Open Space Design (Special Paving)	•	•
Open Space Design (Public Art)	--	•
Open Space Design (Refuse & Recycling Receptacles)	•	•
Alley & Service Access (Lighting)	--	•
Alley & Service Access (Alleys)	•	•

Introduction

Glossary

Note: The definitions below are only applicable to the Objective Design Standards on this section of the Santa Clara City Code.

Podium-Style Building: A development project that involves a horizontal separation between an upper building and a lower, or podium, building. The lower building typically is constructed out of concrete; the upper building (some three to five stories tall) is made of wood.

Primary Materials: Any wall finish material or color that occupies more than 50 percent of the façade.

Product Type: The proposed residential building type like detached single family residences, townhomes, podium style buildings, & etc.

Special Paving: A distinct impermeable material such as natural stone paver, unit concrete pavers, brick, textured and colored concrete.

Townhouses: Attached side-by-side or stacked units that generally have front doors on one side and garages on the back side. Most townhouses have two-car garages, either two spaces wide or two tandem spaces (end to end). The front doors look onto a public street, private drive, or common open space, while the garages are usually lined up along an alley with garage doors on both sides. This development type typically includes tuck-under garage parking and additional surface parking spaces for visitors.

Wrap-Style Building: A development project that typically consists of a central above-grade concrete parking structure surrounded or "wrapped" by 4 – 7 stories of wood or steel construction.

Organization of Objective Design Standards

The Objective Design Standards are organized into three design components: site design, building design, and pedestrian level design.

Site Design: These standards apply to the site layout to foster multimodal connectivity and create cohesive neighborhoods.

Building Design: These standards apply to the architectural features such as massing, fenestration, and articulation.

Pedestrian Level Design: These standards apply to the ground floor frontage to promote pedestrian activity and human-scale development.

Note: Graphic reference for this page to visually show each chapter of these standards.

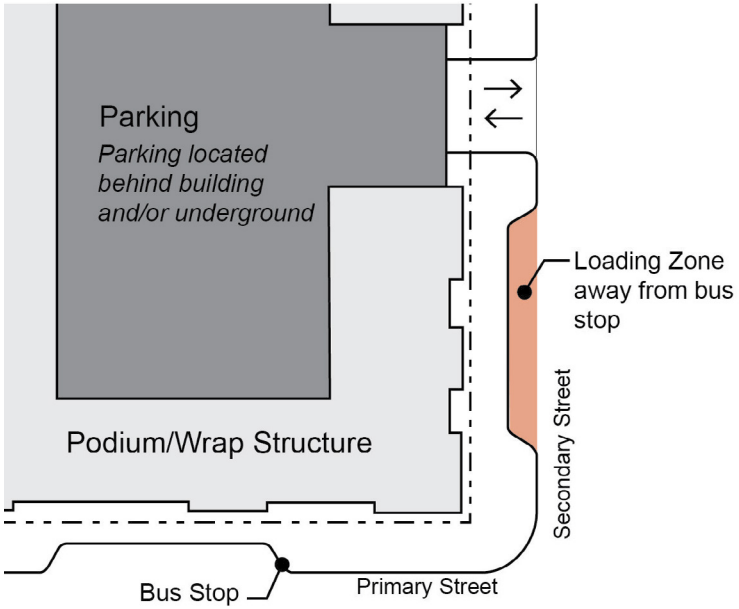
2 Site Design

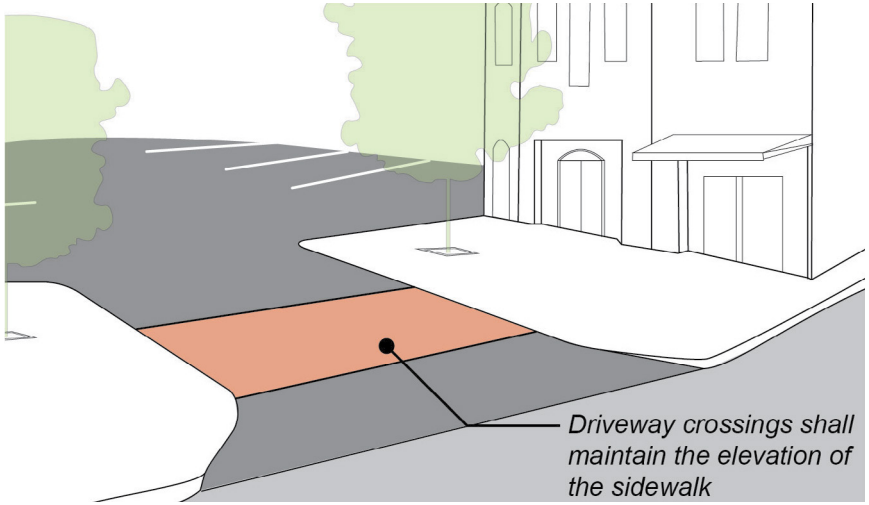
I. Purpose and Goals

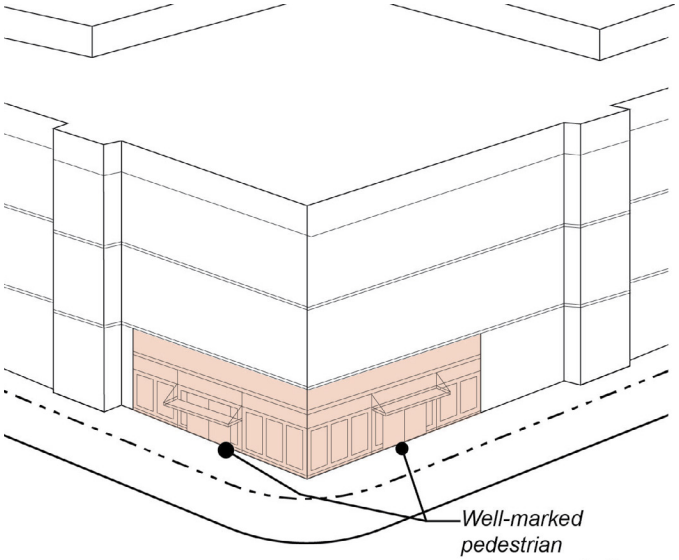
This section provides site design standards to create more pedestrian-friendly functional communities through expanded pedestrian access, convenient multi-modal connections, and human-scaled block sizes.

II. Site Access and Layout

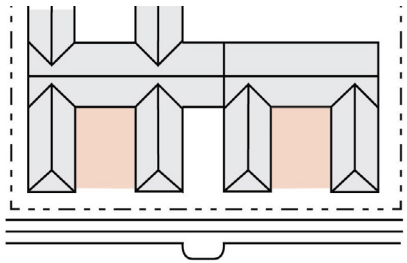
1. Parking. Parking shall be located away from streets and other public and communal spaces. Parking shall be located behind buildings, underground, or at the interior of the block except where there is ground floor retail (Lawrence Station)
2. Loading Zones. Locate loading zones and rideshare pick-up / drop-off areas away from bus stops. (FC Focus Area).
3. Driveways and Access. Driveway access shall be designed to clearly prioritize pedestrians, according to the following requirements:
   a. Driveway crossings shall maintain the elevation of the sidewalk;
   b. Driveway aprons shall not extend into the pedestrian clear walkway where cross slopes are limited to a maximum of two percent; steeper driveway slopes are permitted in the furnishing and edge zones of the streets;
   c. The dimensions and design of parking entry and exit points shall be coordinated with the requirements for stormwater treatment areas and street trees;
   d. Curb cuts shall be minimized on greenways or open spaces, with at most only one maximum allowable curb cut (Tasman East)

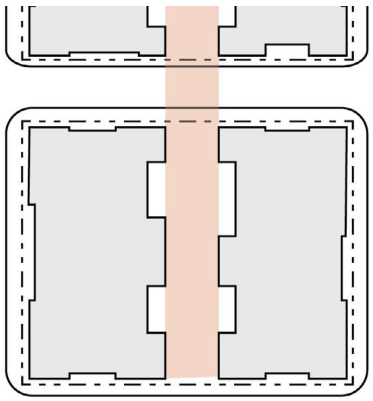






Well-marked pedestrian entraces on both corner facades.

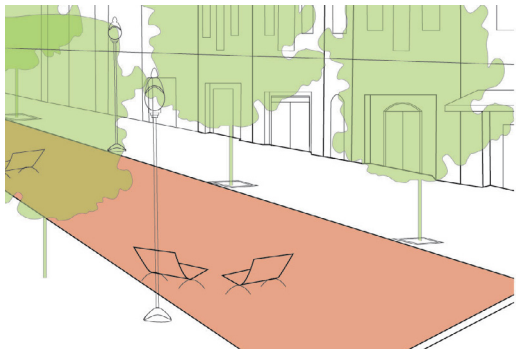




Public realm extensions also provide connections through blocks. This is accomplished with a paseo or through a sequence of courts and paseos linking together through the block.

III. Site Organization, Planning, and Design

1. Public Realm Extensions. While most buildings and ground-floor units will front onto and take their primary access from the adjacent Public Realm right-of-way, some buildings and ground-floor units may take this primary access from shared private spaces and connections that function as extensions of the public realm into a site. Such spaces comprise a “Semi-Public Realm” and serve as transitions between fully public and fully private spaces. Public Realm Extensions are subject to the following standards: (Downtown Form Based-Code)
   a. Connectivity. Public realm extensions also provide connections through blocks. This is accomplished with a paseo or through a sequence of courts and paseos linking together through the block. Where non-vehicular paths are used, full and unrestricted public access shall be provided throughout the route.
   b. Design. No wall or fence enclosing a public realm extension may exceed three (3) feet in height.
2. Corner Building Orientation: Ensure that corner buildings actively address both streets with well-marked and attractively designed pedestrian entrances (Patrick Henry Drive)



3 Building Design

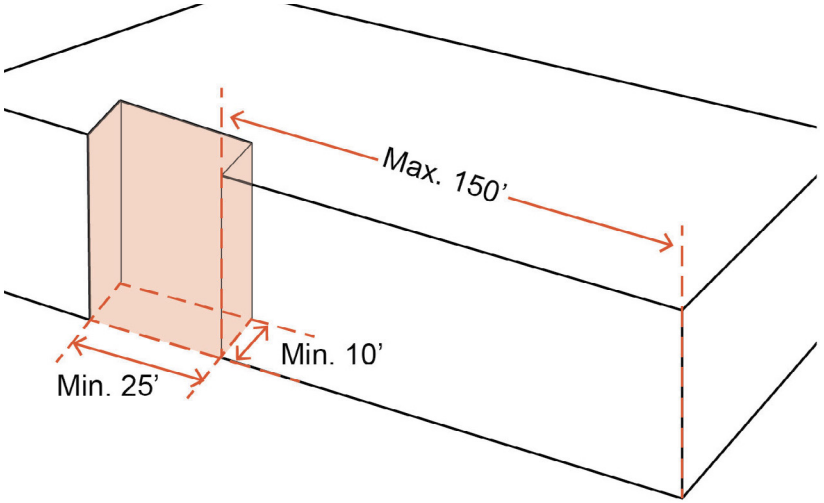
I. Purpose and Goals

This section provides architectural design standards to create functional and welcoming human-scaled buildings that blend well with their surroundings and support active streets and public spaces.

II. Massing

1. Building Length. To create a more interesting and walkable public realm, individual buildings shall be no longer than 150 feet in length. For those buildings that are longer than 150 feet in length, a building notch shall be provided on the podium starting at the street level, for the entire height of the façade, to break up the massing. The building notch shall have a minimum dimension of 25 feet in width and 10 feet in depth (Tasman East)

2. Massing Increment Dimensional Standards



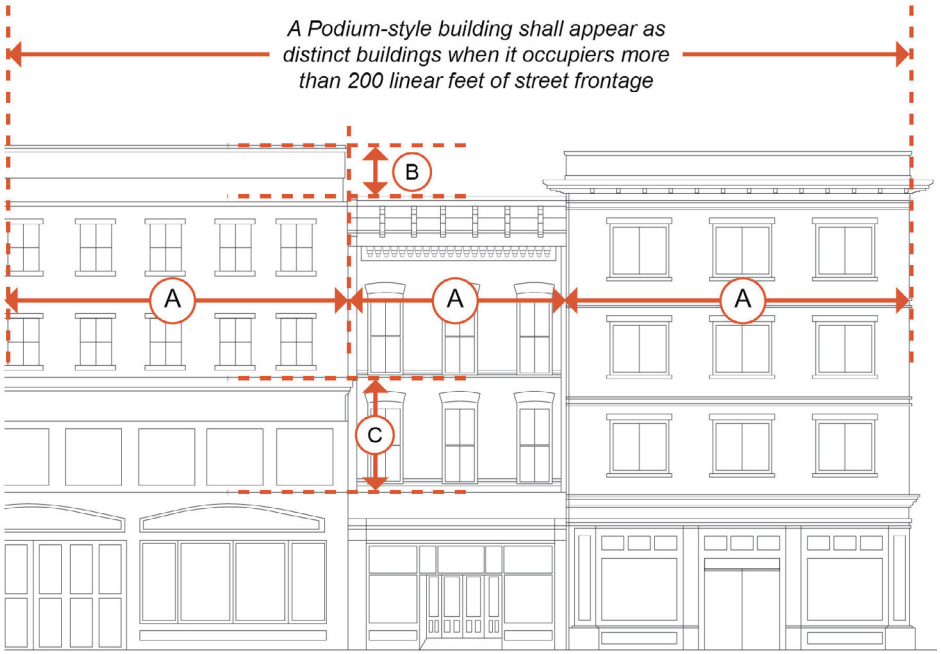


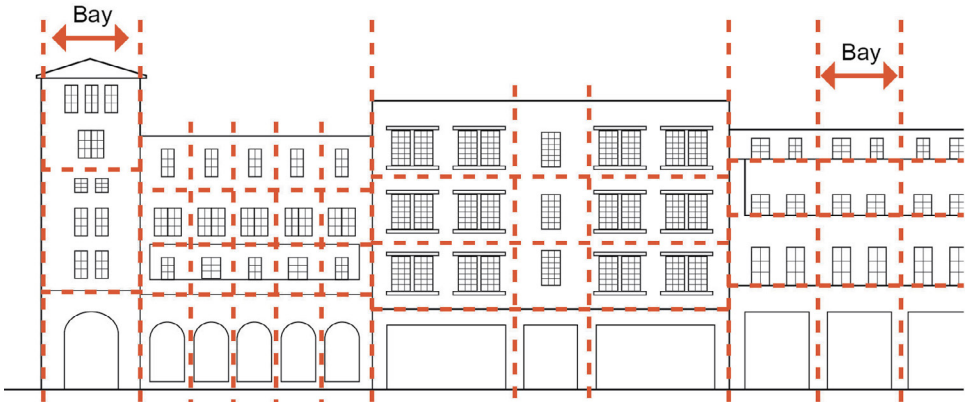
Table 2: Massing Increment Dimensional Standards

	Objective Design Standard	Dimensions
A	Massing increment (max.)	150 feet
B	Facade Height Difference between Massing Increments (min.)	10% of Lesser Facade Height
C	Building Base Height Difference between Massing Increments	3 feet

3. Distinct Buildings Using Massing Increment Design. A Podium-Style Building shall appear as distinct buildings when it occupies more than 200 linear feet of street frontage. At a minimum, it shall appear as three (3) distinct building using massing increments design: (Downtown Form-Based Code)
   a. There shall be a clearly noticeable difference in facade materials and color between Distinct Buildings
   b. There shall be a clearly noticeable difference in the type and composition of facade openings and architectural elements between distinct buildings.
   c. The building base heights of adjacent Distinct Buildings shall differ by an entire floor.
   d. A Massing Increment Design shall only be repeated up to a maximum of three (3) times on the same project elevation.
      i. Repeated Massing Increments shall not be immediately adjacent to each other.
      ii. Forecourts may provide separation between repeated Massing Increment Designs

III. Facade Design

1. Facade Composition. Facade elements shall be organized by a grid. Patterns of openings within each individual facade or Building Increment shall be organized into a grid per the standards below. (Downtown Form Based Code)
   a. Horizontal alignment of elements. Rooflines, openings, and materials within each facade or facade module must align horizontally and be consistent in style across the entire width.
   b. Vertical alignment of openings into bays. The entirety of a building's façade or massing increments shall be clearly divided into vertical bays, subject to the following:
      i. Façade bays shall extend from the ground to the top of the façade and are defined by vertical structure (solid portions of wall, piers, etc.) which extends from the ground to the top of the façade.
      ii. Each bay must be stacked within bays as illustrated in the figure below. Openings shall be arranged symmetrically within bays.
      iii. Each bay shall be at minimum 15 feet wide.



Facade elements shall be organized by a grid. Rooflines, openings, and other materials must align horizontally. Facade elements or massing increments shall be divided into vertical bays.

2. Base, Middle and Top. Buildings shall have a Base, Middle, and Top. (Downtown Form Based Code)
   a. The Building's Base shall be differentiated from the rest of the façade whether through a change in material, change in type of opening, belt course, or a combination of these elements.
   b. The Building's Middle features floors shall be generally repetitive, with only minor variations between each floor.
   c. The Building's Top shall feature some form of capping element, such as a cornice, enhanced ornamentation, or a decorative parapet. In larger buildings, the upper most floor shall be visually incorporated into the building's top design.
3. Facade Fenestration.
   a. Fenestration Area. Façade shall be designed with fenestration – openings on the façade, including windows and doors – the amount identified by:

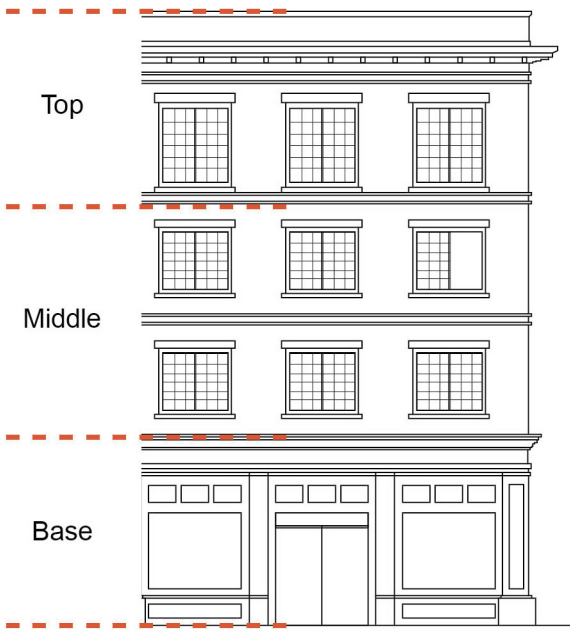
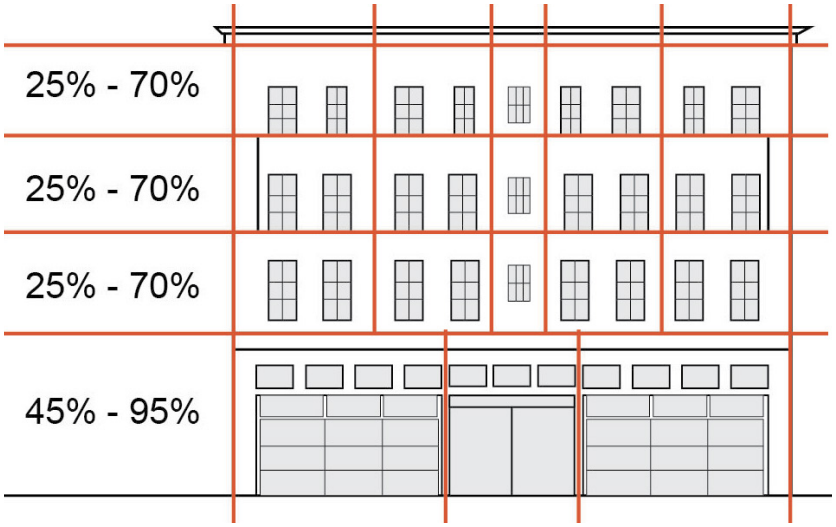


Table 3: Fenestration Areas

Facade Area	Dimensions
Base of Building	40% - 95%
Middle & Top of Building	25% - 70%



   b. Fenestration amount is calculated as a percentage of openings – including all windows and doors on the façade – to an area of façade. Each portion of the façade grid must have a fenestration percentage which falls within the range identified by Table 3.

c. General to Base, Middle, and Top. Window jams shall be set in a minimum of four (4) inches from the main façade plane. Trim/ moldings on the façade do not count toward this recess depth.

d. Specific to the Top. Upper-floor wall openings shall be square or taller than they are wide. Individual vertically proportioned windows can be grouped side by side to form a horizontal ensemble of windows

4. Parking Structure Façade Standards. (Downtown Form Base Code)

a. Façade Design. Parking Structure Facades shall be designed to fit into the urban context in one of the two following ways:

i. The Façades meet the Massing Standard of this document.

ii. Facades designed as art walls, murals, or screens that incorporate decorative, graphic, or sculptural elements. Such facades are subject to recommendations from the Cultural Arts Commission and the Historical & Landmarks Commission, followed by Community Development Director or their designee approval, based on the following Required Finding:

- Façade design is unique and iconic, using durable, element-resistant, materials and techniques

b. Future-Proof Parking. Parking Garages shall be designed to accommodate conversions to other uses and shall have at least one of the following features:

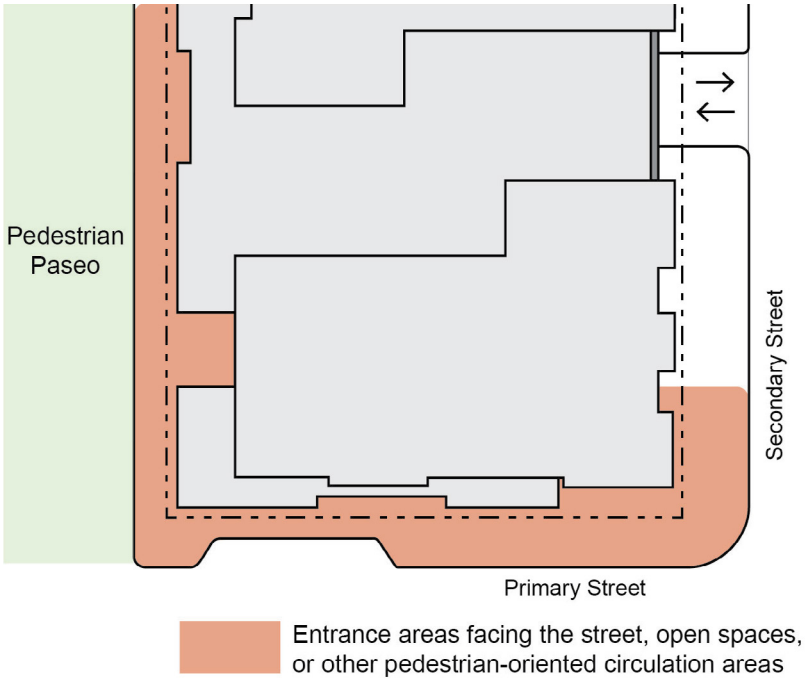
i. Level floor, apart from necessary ramps

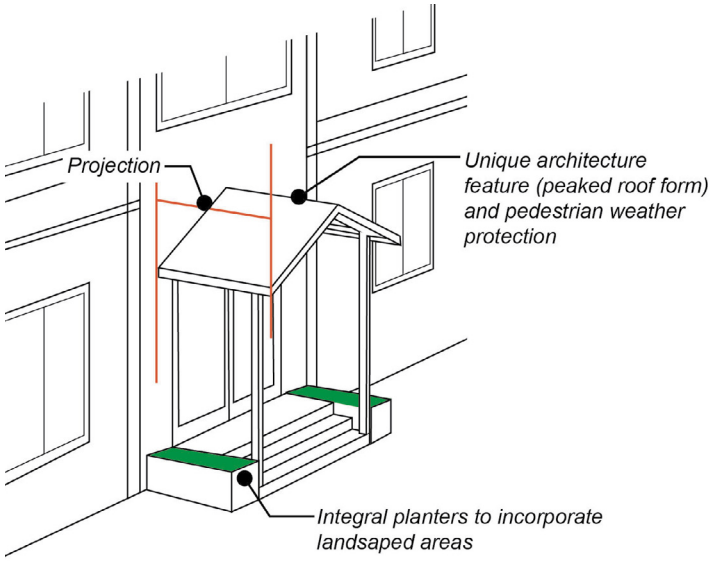
ii. Floors with 10 feet minimum clear height from floor to ceiling

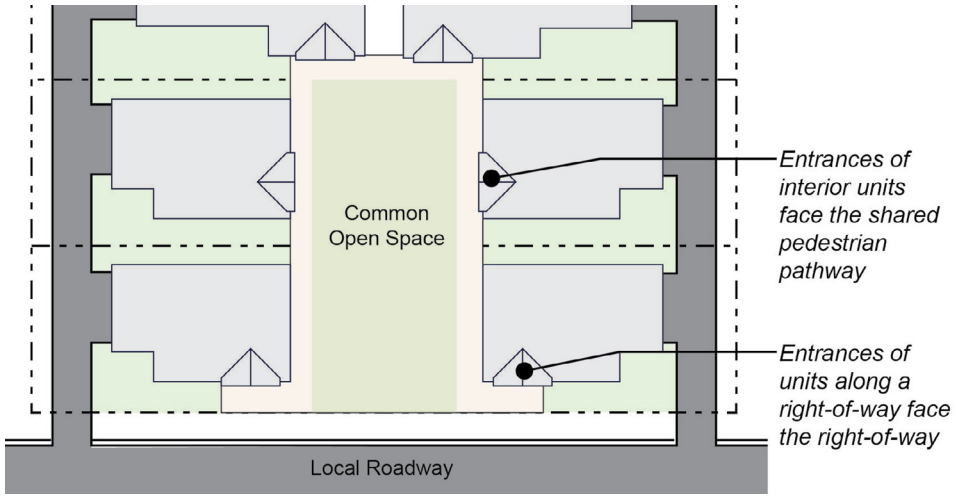
iii. Cut-outs for planned shafts in decks and other structural members to accommodate future utilities (heating, cooling, venting, etc.)

IV. Access and Entrance Design

1. Building Orientation. Buildings shall be oriented to ensure the primary facades and entrance areas of all buildings face the street, open spaces, or other pedestrian-oriented circulation areas. (Lawrence Station).
2. Primary Entrances. Primary entrances shall feature at least two of the following: (Tasman East)
   a. Unique architectural feature (i.e. prominent tower feature or peaked roof form and/or variation in building color/material);
   b. Recess or projection;
   c. Pedestrian weather protection (i.e. canopy, overhang, or arcade).
   d. Streetscape including outdoor patio, integral planters or wing walls that incorporate landscaped areas and/ or places for sitting.



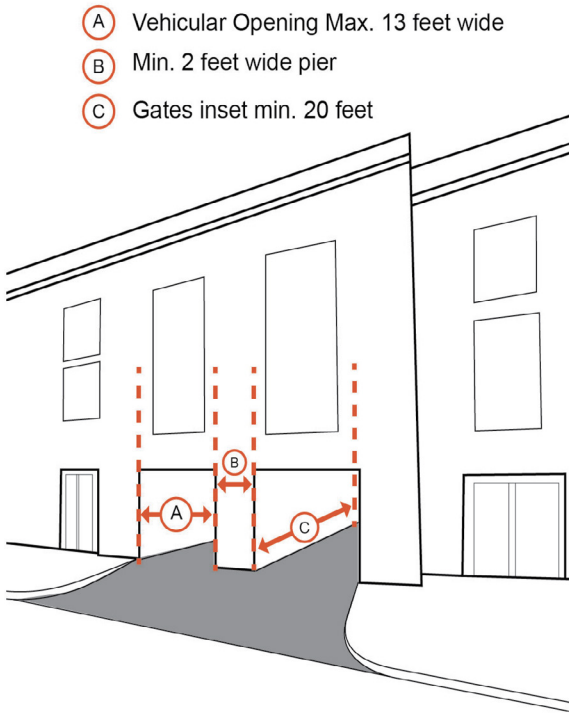




3. Frequency of Entries (Podium/Wrap-Style). The quantity of building entrances on a street has a drastic effect on the perceived liveliness of a street. The frequency of entrances is regulated by Table 4 (Downtown Form Based Code)

Table 4: Frequency of Entries (Podium/Wrap-Style)

Facade Area	Residential	Mixed-Use
Frequency of Building Entries (max. distance between entries)	100 feet	75 feet



4. Vehicular Access. (Downtown Form Based Code)
   a. Vehicular Access openings shall be no more than 13 feet wide. Where adjacent openings are necessary to provide entry and exist, they shall be separated by a pier (a portion of wall) of at least two (2) feet in width
   b. Gates which open to allow cars to enter (excluding security doors that are shut when the garage is not accessible) shall be inset from the façade by a minimum of 20 feet, to allow cars to await entry without blocking the sidewalk.

V. Materials

1. Primary Materials. Untreated plastics, unfinished metal, corrugated fiberglass and non-architectural grade plywood shall not be used as primary materials (Tasman East).

4 Pedestrian Level Design

I. Purpose

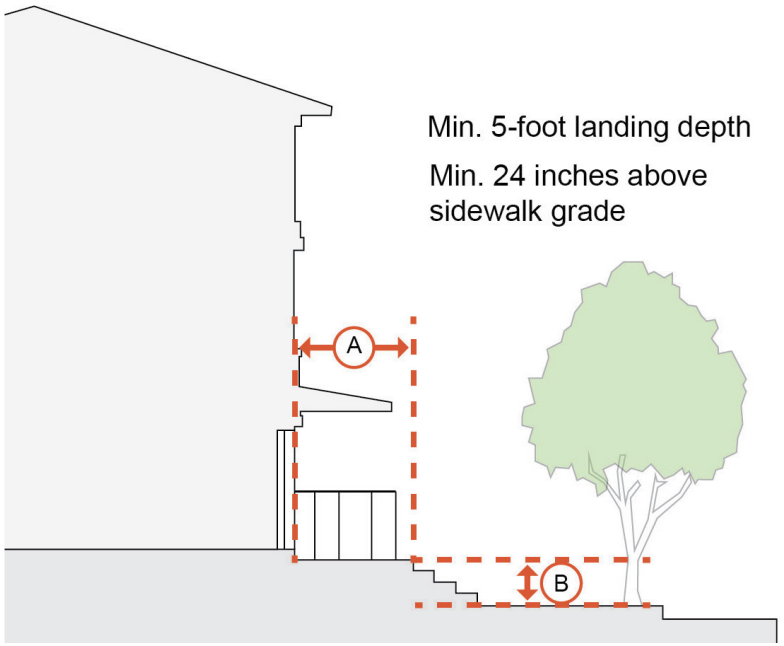
This section provides standards to enhance the character of new development's street frontage to promote pedestrian activity.

II. Ground Floor Retail and Active Uses

1. Ground Floor Retail. Ground floor retail uses shall be at the same grade as the adjacent sidewalk (Lawrence Station)
2. Façade Transparency. Facades of all commercial structures shall incorporate transparent features (clear glass on windows and doors) over a minimum percentage of the surface area at ground-level (Lawrence Station)
   a. Retail uses: a minimum of 75% shall be transparent
   b. Other uses: a minimum of 35% shall be transparent

III. Ground Floor Residential

1. Ground Floor Access. Where residential units are located at the ground floor, at least 50% of units on each frontage must be individually accessed from the sidewalk via stoops, side yards or other means. (Tasman East)
2. Stoops. Stoops shall have a minimum five (5)-foot landing depth with room for a table and chairs to provide an opportunity for residents to engage in the social life of the street. (Tasman East)
3. Stoops that face public rights of way shall be set at least 24 inches above sidewalk grade (Tasman East)

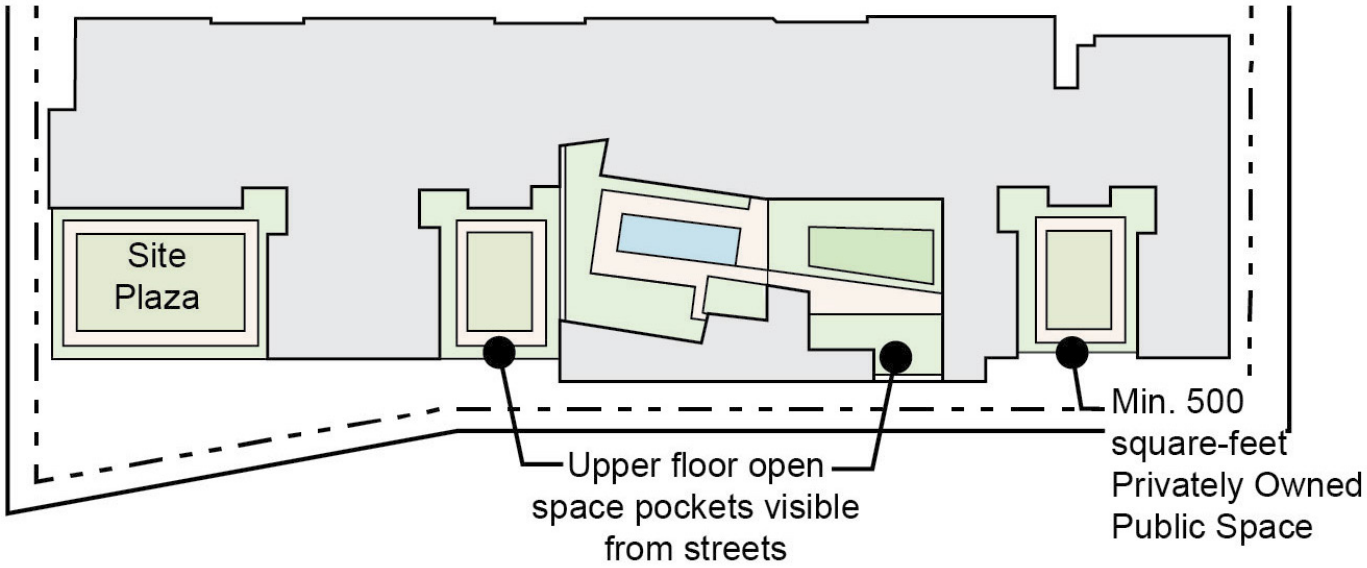


IV. Ground Floor Live / Work

1. Entrances. Because live/work units are meant to be public facing, they shall be entered at-grade and are not required to be elevated above sidewalk level. (Lawrence Station)

V. Open Space Design

1. Podium Style Buildings.
   a. Podium – Style buildings shall have well-defined outdoor space, such as on site plazas, interior courtyards, patios, terraces and gardens
   b. Podium – Style buildings shall have privately owned public open space of at least 15 feet wide and 500 square feet in size. (Patrick Henry Drive)
2. Pathways. Pedestrian paths through the site shall be at least five (5) feet wide (Patrick Henry Drive)



3. Special Paving. Special Paving shall be used for the following areas:
   a. Pedestrian crossing (mid-block, raised pedestrian crossings/speed tables, and etc.)
4. Public Art. Outdoor plazas and semi-public courtyards shall have public art elements such as sculptures, fountains, and art pieces.
5. Refuse & Recycling Receptacles. Provide a maximum of one receptacle every 200 feet along streets if proposing more than 10 units. Additional receptacles should be provided only if a private sponsor provides continued maintenance
   a. Provide one receptacle at each corner of intersections (Patrick Henry Drive)

VI. Alleys and Service Access

1. Lighting. Provide lighting in alleyways for safety.
2. Alleys. Alleys intended for emergency vehicles access shall have a minimum width of 25 feet to allow for access and landscaping (Patrick Henry Drive)