Design Review *Off the Record* … well actually… I guess this *is* on the record … if you've clicked here …

If you're an active architect, no doubt you've noticed Design Review popping much more frequently. In fact, it's getting rare to have a project NOT subject to design review. The notion of design review seems simple and compelling: why let places, and spaces, get built, without subjecting them to some kind of quality check process? In practice, though, design review is tricky. How to get value from design review – without having a process that creates uncertainty, disincentives to innovation and creativity, and stifles investment and progress? My own notions:

1. **LEAVE PERSONAL TASTE OUT OF IT.** "I like it" is not an acceptable criterion for a government program. Clear, written guidelines – as tough as they are to put together – can help quash the notion that seems to bubble up when one sits upon a dais that Design Review is about the reviewer's good taste. I'm pretty sure that neither good taste, nor 'enlightened wisdom' are among in the job descriptions of Design Commissioners or staff. Without guidelines, how can you have a framework for a rational design review process?

   Guidelines also help counter the fact that group decisions based on 'consensus' will favor safe blandness and uniformity. **If the civic goal really is *to offend no one*, the results aren't likely to inspire and excite anyone**. Even worse, if the criteria is based on the 'lowest common denominator', it's all too easy to hit that very mark.

2. **KEEP AN OPEN MIND.** There is no cookbook approach to insure "quality" design. Rules need to be broad and flexible, because "quality design" is a moving target that depends on time, place, observer, and the myriad other factors that can make civilized life such a puzzle. The inspiration and delight found in our best urban places and spaces does not occur because of a static perspective or set of rules; in fact it's likely the result of complexity involving many known and unknown variables. It's easy enough to find buildings that were controversial when new, that with time have become icons. Some off the top of my head: the works of Antonio Gaudi in Barcelona; Frank Lloyd Wright in Chicago's suburbs; the Transamerica building in San Francisco and I. M. Pei's pyramid in front of The Louvre. In my view it's good

to be loose and a bit messy, and allow for the 'happy accident' that only time will reveal as important.

3. **FOCUS ON THE PRIZE.** An ideal guideline makes it clear when there is an opportunity to sing, and when it's judged most appropriate to just hum softly. There are times and places where the best design approach is to fade to the background and be nearly invisible. Other times, a place really needs an icon, a symbol of hope and change, a rallying point for investment and dreams of the future. When the civic minds that lay out the patterns reflected in guidelines find that 'background invisible design' is the ticket to success, I would suggest that should be spelled out clearly. Something along these lines would do: "Design buildings for this place that so blend into their background that, to the casual observer, they will appear not to be there at all." If that's what's wanted – say it!

On the other hand, for those places where visionary ideas are welcome; where change is part of encouraging investment, optimism, growth and healthy diversity, then **focus on the prize – the big picture that occurs over time.** As much as I admire the craftsman bungalows of the early 1900's, I know that most were built over the swept away bones of Victorians of the mid 1800's. How does a proposal fit with what exists … and how does it fit with what will be the future context over the lifespan of that building? Thoughtful design is not completely driven by the present moment, but also informed by a vision for the surroundings at the mid-span of a building's life. Transformation of built places takes place in jolts, not always seamlessly, as building by building we are inspired by the courage of individual developers and their architects – who in turn are ideally supported and encouraged by well-informed, forward thinking planning professionals

4. **DESIGN BY COMMITTEE IS NOT PRETTY.** When it comes to personal taste – everybody has some – and of course one person's personal preference is likely different than another person's. To try to get a bunch of individuals to each take some part of a building – the light fixtures, the wall color, the molding – and put all those individual opinions together to make a design – OUCH! Suggestions: always welcome (particularly when offered with a sense of humility and care). Conditions: Ouch! It's NOT paint by numbers. Please … resist the temptation to mess with the details.

Design on the fly is never a good idea. The impact of design changes cannot be properly considering in a public hearing. If a building gets flipped during a meeting, the city might end up with the equivalent view of a plumber's loose-fitting pants as he works under a sink. At the corner of Broadway and 10th the ugly 'back' of a strip center faces the prime corner, reportedly as a result of design-on-the-fly conditions imposed during a public hearing.

In general, when 'design' is occurring *without knowledge or consideration of the program, the budget, or the schedule, it's not really design.*

5. **FOLLOW THE RULES** Any design review process that attempts to 'improve every submittal' is flawed in my view. Attempts to make what one person thinks is a B project into an A project - by applying conditions – is just as likely to take what another observer saw as an A project and mess it up to make a C. Projects which meet the guidelines, and which have been crafted carefully in deference to the adopted standards should pass. If in processing a submittal it comes to light that the rules have weaknesses - by all means those should be addressed - but to avoid being inconsistent, arbitrary and capricious, those adjustments should not be made on the fly in the middle of the game! As I've already noted, I'm all for suggestions that might lead to improvement in all design submittals, especially when they are presented in a positive and constructive way. I find that a dialogue will generally result in the intended effect even if the 'better ideas' are not literally adopted. All too common "Conditions of approval" that involve design details are in my view akin to adding or changing ingredients to another cook's recipe while the pot is on the stove. As often as not, too many cooks can lead to unpleasant surprises.

6. **BURY THE BAD.** In my book, the core mission of Design Review is to stop projects that will tear apart urban fabric. That's the basis for using Police power to regulate design – to just say "no". Bear in mind though, that with any process reasonable enough to not be onerous, a few rude boys will slip through. In time, most of these get fixed in the normal course of place evolution. An East Sac example - the "porthole façade" of Dave's Shoes on Folsom Blvd caused grimaces to many for years … until someone in an ownership position finally woke up to that fact that it's not good for business to have your store cited as the "ugliest in the area". We have to allow for a measure of messiness in my view – it goes with the territory of diversity of people, ideas, and aspirations – all of which add something to the rich tapestry of

city life.   Fortunately, truly bad projects that come out of a *systematic* and *professional* design process are, in my experience, very rare.

7. **TREAD LIGHTLY**. One objective of an excellent design review process, in my own humble view, should be to *minimally condition* and *minimally offend*. In a collaborative and cooperative environment, gentle guiding and nudging can shift thinking more effectively than rhetoric or insults (it helps to remember that suggested 'improvements' are, in the end, likely more subjective than not).   Being nice is only a little harder than being efficient but rude.

Full disclosure: I have over a decade of personal experience as member and chairperson of both Design Review commissions, and Preservation Boards.

Care to share your own 'off the record' thoughts on Design Review? Email me at mfm@appliedarts.net.

Consider joining the AIACV Design Review Task Force, led by Alicia Moniz AIA and Gordon Rogers AIA – working on an exciting program of educational tools that I'm confident will be a great help to design review jurisdictions both newly minted, as well as those long established.