

**Curb Appeal: Landscaping, Quality of Building Materials and Access to Views  
and Light Plane**

Subcommittee Report - October 29, 2015

**Introduction**

One of the key factors influencing the community's perception of buildings in the downtown area is the "curb appeal" of the developed properties. Our subcommittee's task was to consider existing zoning regulations and guidelines applicable to three aspects of curb appeal – landscaping, quality of building materials, and access to views and light plane -- and to identify any potential changes to be recommended for consideration by the Downtown Buildings Committee.

The curb appeal of a building is also attributable to other important factors such as height, bulk and setbacks. Evaluation of those factors has been addressed by another subcommittee and has not been the focus of our report. However, we note that changes to current zoning and guidelines applicable to those elements, such as reductions in height limits, increases in front setbacks at street level and requirements for setbacks at higher levels, will likely result in improved curb appeal for new buildings in the downtown area. Such changes would also create improved landscaping options and provide benefits relative to access to views and light.

We discuss separately below several observations and recommendations particular to individual curb appeal elements. In addition, our subcommittee offers the following General Recommendations:

- i. Reduce maximum permitted height of buildings and towers, and provide for greater setbacks in the CD/R3 and CD zones.
- ii. Decrease the number of zones in the Downtown area in order to create a more cohesive downtown.
- iii. Ensure adherence to the Downtown guidelines and enforcement of the required Design Review findings. (See, e.g., guideline 3.2.7b, page 37 of downtown design guidelines regarding "small human scale" and avoidance of "monumental building elements")

## **LANDSCAPING**

**Observation:** Street trees are inconsistent in size and quality.

**Objective:** Use trees that require little watering once established in order to conserve water, provide adequate shade and lush dense greenery.

**Recommendation:** Trees along streets in the downtown area should have a height of 8' when planted and a canopy which is at least 15-25' in diameter 8-10 years after being planted. All trees should be properly watered and maintained to ensure proper growth and health of tree.

**Recommendation:** All landscaping plans for commercial and residential projects in the downtown area must be reviewed and approved by the certified City of Los Altos Arborist.

**Observation:** There are too many single trees and too much empty space, leaving the landscaping often looking bare.

**Objective:** Create more dense landscaping in order to improve the aesthetics.

**Recommendation:**

- 1) Implement companion plantings that will help fill in and hide the small tree trunks of younger street trees.
- 2) Require trees to be planted along streets every 15-20'.

**Observation:** There are buildings in the downtown corridor with minimal or insufficient setbacks, therefore limiting the landscaping possibilities and creating an uninviting pedestrian environment.

**Recommendation:** All commercial and residential buildings in the downtown corridor must have a setback to accommodate landscaping guidelines for all types of projects/buildings for all the districts.

**Observation:** New projects in downtown have limited landscaping on walls and non-transparent surfaces.

**Objective:** To create a village feel it's important to cover large portions of bare wall with landscaping as well as accent and enhance building entrances with landscaping.

**Recommendation:** Require denser landscaping in order to improve the aesthetics.

**Recommendation:** The guidelines (3.2.3b) specifically call for use of flowers as a way to add color to the landscaping. Regular maintenance of all required landscaping, including flowers used for color, must be enforced.

**Observation:** Sidewalk hardscape is an important element of the pedestrian experience. The current design guidelines do not provide adequate discussion or direction for this element.

**Objective:** Create a continuous, positive pedestrian experience throughout downtown.

**Recommendation:** Walkways should be addressed in the design guidelines.

### **ACCESS TO VIEWS AND LIGHT PLANE**

**Overall Observation for view and daylight plane:** There are no guidelines in any of the zoning or downtown plans to address access to views and daylight plane in commercial areas. In Los Altos, daylight plane is only addressed for residential projects. Considering daylight plane is imperative when the goal is to create a warm, inviting and human scale experience in a residential and commercial area. Height, bulk and mass of buildings in the downtown area are the main factors impacting access to views and light planes.

**Overall Objective for daylight and view:** Protect and preserve access to views, and daylight plane in relationship to the development of the downtown and surrounding areas.

**Overall Recommendation for view and daylight plane:**

Include in the design review process an assessment of proposed impacts on access to view and light plane for each proposed project, in consultation with architects where necessary. Add a requirement to the design review findings for consideration of impacts on views and daylight plane to be considered and require mitigation of any negative impacts.

### **DAYLIGHT PLANE\***

**Observation:** The current new heights and mass of buildings, in conjunction with the limitations of width and angle of the street creates a situation that creates a shadow effect. This shadow effect impacts the sidewalk and streets in front of, along the sides of and across from the new buildings. This is due largely to height, bulk and mass of the new, taller, more dense and wider buildings.

**Objective:** To preserve and improve light for pedestrians, residents and nearby businesses. Also to preserve and contribute to the goal of providing a human scale feel to the downtown experience.

**Recommendation:** Clearly examine and understand the need for daylight plane guidelines in a commercial area. Fully define and outline the goals of daylight plane for the commercial zones. Put guidelines and requirements in the building codes.

**Recommendation:** Commission a study of the effect of shadowing during daylight hours as well as throughout the seasons. Specifically study First Street to begin with. Do this via computer generated shadow projects/shadow study. See following link for an animated example of such study. [http://gardenbleu.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/shadow-study\\_Feb20.gif](http://gardenbleu.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/shadow-study_Feb20.gif)

**Recommendation:**

- i. Delay any further recommendations regarding height/bulk/mass until a shade study is conducted and provided to the Downtown Buildings Committee. This needs to be done in order to understand how the current buildings interact, what they will be like in conjunction with (theoretically) similarly sized buildings across from and nearby the current buildings with regard to shadowing and shade.
- ii. Recommendations regarding daylight plane, setback requirements and angles of buildings can then be made and adopted based on facts. Ignoring the impact will prove detrimental in the long run.
- iii. Height, bulk and mass reductions or limits can also be determined based on the study findings.
- iv. **Alternative Recommendation:** Require all future developments and remodels to provide a complete animated shade study to show impacts on all sides and angles so staff, PTC and Council can see and understand the impact on the nearby businesses and residents.

**Recommendation:** Plan for future environmental requirements. For example, solar panels need access to light and reduction of reliance on use of electricity requires more natural light to penetrate housing and businesses.

\*Note: Los Altos only has residential requirements. 14.06.100 - Daylight plane (R1-10)

## **VIEWS**

**Observation:** Los Altos has no zoning to protect the views of the hills and surrounding tree canopies.

**Recommendation:** Amend building guidelines specifically in CD/R3, CRS, in addition to other areas, to prevent blocking or obstructing all current views, or views as they are opened up, of surrounding hills and tree canopy. This would apply to new and remodeled construction.

**Recommendation:** Amend same districts, plus, R3, OA and others to prevent obstruction of view of tree tops and large expanses of tree canopy. Follow the same for tree lined parking plazas

**Recommendation:** Amend All zones to protect historical views such as those seen when standing and making a 360 degree turn at the corners of San Antonio and Main. Take the lead of nearby city zoning requirements from cities such as Los Gatos and Woodside to define the areas of discussion and to provide concrete guidelines for all development that will encroach on these areas.

**Recommendation:** Be as clear as possible by using example language as used in Los Gatos Guidelines and Woodside Guidelines. **Example:** “**Views to the surrounding**

**hills should be maintained** – especially at signalized intersections.” (Los Gatos

Commercial Guidelines, pg. 42, # 5A.1

<http://www.losgatosca.gov/DocumentCenter/View/325>)

**Example:** *SCENIC CORRIDORS.* (a) Lands visible (if currently visible, or if visible if existing vegetation was removed) from the driving surface of the following (state-designated) scenic highways: From Town of Woodside 153.221

## QUALITY OF BUILDING MATERIALS

**Observation:** The current Design Review process requires the following finding:

*“D. Exterior materials and finishes convey quality, integrity, permanence and durability, and materials are used effectively to define building elements such as base, body, parapets, bays, arcades and structural elements.”*

All of the new buildings in the Downtown district which have been the focus of our discussions within the Committee and with others in the community were found by the PTC and Council to meet the above criteria regarding quality of materials. In general, controversy and discussion concerning the designs of these new buildings has not been centered on the quality of exterior materials used but upon other factors such as height, bulk, setback and pedestrian scale. (One possible exception is the residential project at 396 First St., which, in addition to drawing criticism for its height and bulk, is also viewed as having exterior materials and finishes that fall below the desired level of quality and integrity.)

**Observation:** No regulation or guideline was found that specifies acceptable -- or prohibits any unacceptable -- colors and textures of exterior finishes for buildings in the Downtown area. \*\* The current Submittal Requirements for design review require a Materials Board with color photos of exterior materials as well as a color rendering and 3D digital model. The colors and exterior materials which are approvable in the design review process are not limited by any specific prohibition or directive.

**Objective:** To ensure that the color and texture of exterior finishes for buildings in the Downtown area reflect an appropriate relationship with other buildings in the area, are consistent with the village character and are selected to coordinate with other architectural elements to minimize the appearance of height, bulk and mass.

**Recommendation:**

- i. We propose that the required findings be modified by adding the following:  
    **“Exterior materials, finishes and colors used serve to reduce perceived**

**appearance of height, bulk and mass, and are harmonious with other structures in the immediate area and in the downtown village**". In addition, the current required finding "D" should be amended to insert the word "high" immediately before "quality" : "Exterior materials and finishes convey **high** quality, integrity..."

- ii. Adopt a requirement providing that proposed buildings in the Downtown district be modeled using 3D and other forms of simulation that reflect the Materials Board and allow for closer consideration of color and textures of exterior finishes in context. Submission of a physical Materials Board of samples of colors, materials and finishes should also continue to be a requirement and included in the submission requirement checklist. Submission of larger scale samples and/or examples of uses of the materials and finishes in prior projects should be required for materials and finishes not in common use in the Downtown district.

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\*\* The Downtown Design Plan includes the statement that "Color schemes should be harmonious with surrounding structures and consistent with the original time period of the building." The Downtown Design Guidelines include a reference to a "wide variety of natural materials" as one feature of Village Character (p. 11) and warn that "Corporate Architecture" will not be approved with "...materials, or colors that do not relate to the site, adjacent development, or Los Altos' community character" ( p. 23). The guidelines for the First Street District (p.68) refer to use of "materials that are common in the downtown core."