
The debate on design review

Brenda Case Scheer
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Design review is a procedure, like zoning, used by cities and towns to control the aesthetics and design of development projects. Although it is a new phenomena, its adoption by local jurisdictions is growing at a rate that compares to the rapid adoption of zoning in the 1930s. I have recently completed a national survey of planning agencies in more than 370 cities and towns on the topic of their design review processes; 83 percent of the towns surveyed had some form of design review. My initial assumption—that aesthetic review was primarily restricted to historic districts and structures—proved to be wrong. Only twelve respondents reserved design review exclusively for historic structures or districts. Therefore, we can conclude that more than 85 percent of the cities and towns in this country have moved into the arena of design review of ordinary, nonhistoric development projects. This widespread use of design review is also new: 60 percent of the respondents with design review have introduced it in the last twelve years, 10 percent in the last two years.

Design review is a difficult and controversial process that needs thoroughgoing, professional criticism before it is introduced on a wide scale. In spite of the astonishing growth in the adoption of design review, it was very difficult to find resources about design review that did not paint it as a rosy picture, a no-lose situation for planners, designers, and citizens alike. Most planners who answered my survey are satisfied with their design review process; the fine-tuning of guidelines was seen as the major improvement to be made, along with giving themselves more autonomy to make design decisions without board interference. Citizens appear in favor, too, as they survey the results of thirty years of McDonald wastelands and trash spec office buildings, and hope that design

review will solve the problem. Architects, on the other hand, are curmudgeons of a sort, being somewhat reluctant to throw themselves in with design review fans. Architects who responded to our survey for the AIA consider design review “petty, meddling, and useless” (25 percent), while the largest group said they thought it was a “good concept, but had serious flaws” (50 percent) (Gordon, 1992).

Why is this hard look at design review so important? In the end, what does it really matter if we decide to control signs and parking lot landscaping, and require bricks instead of clapboard? Why does it matter if we take the ultimate decisions about the design of buildings away from architects and their clients and put it in the hands of planners, lay persons, and design review boards? Why should anyone but a few prima-donna architects care about this regulation of aesthetics in the city? The massive adoption of design review seems like a tidal wave of approval of this method of development control. Why should we not happily lay aside the admittedly flawed way in which cities and buildings have been built in recent years and respond to the new call, indeed a new recognition of the importance of physical design in the environment?

Using the data from the planners’ survey and from the architects’ survey, I would like to outline the scope of design review, who is doing it, what they hope to get out of it, and the broad areas of controversy that are being defined across this country and abroad.

Definition

Design Review refers to the process by which private and public development proposals receive