independent criticism under the sponsorship of the local government unit, whether through informal or formalized processes. It is distinguished from traditional (Euclidean) zoning and subdivision controls in that it deals with urban design, architecture, or visual impacts. Thus it includes historic preservation review, but not, in my definition, the control exercised by owners' associations or tenant groups, because these are nongovernmental and at least theoretically voluntary. It also does not include review of a project by an owner or owner's agent. Some processes and guidelines are written into the zoning, while some are separate. A few design review processes are advisory, but the vast majority (82 percent) are mandatory and legislated.

Areas of controversy

Many cities and towns sent me their design guidelines and zoning codes that deal with aesthetic issues. In studying these, one gets a better sense of what planners and their governments are hoping to achieve by instituting design review. Some goals are quite lofty, while others, perhaps not surprisingly, are more economic. Common goals include:

- improving the quality of life
- preserving and enhancing a unique place
- maintaining or upgrading the "vitality" of a place (e.g., commercial viability)
- making a comfortable and safe environment for pedestrians
- improving/protecting property values
- making change more acceptable
- making new development compatible or unified

Two other, less frequently mentioned goals include offering community input to development decisions and creating order. Interestingly, improving the design of buildings or making a beautiful city or urban space are rarely goals.

It is hard to imagine how anyone who cares about the urban environment at all could disagree with most of these goals. Yet it seems that rarely does a planner, a citizen, or, especially, an architect engage in the topic of design review without relating their experiences of woe with a design review process. Is this the result of the raw youthfulness of design review (although design control has a long and colorful history inside and outside this country), or are there are conceptual flaws in the idea, flaws that challenge our fundamental ideas about power, beauty, justice, and freedom?

The easy problems

A whole set of problems in the design review process relates to the fact that it is a new regulatory system. When most people talk about flaws in design review, they do not mention power, beauty, justice, or freedom. Instead, they seem to be closely attuned to the mechanical difficulties that plague any form of regulation: it takes too much time, the people who review projects are unqualified, it costs too much, connected people get away with anything, it is too political, the presentation requirements are too stringent, the process needs streamlining, there are too many agencies involved. While acknowledging these issues in the following questions, I do not consider them overwhelming arguments against design review. It is not that they are trivial, but rather that reasonably obvious solutions exist for them.

Design review is time-consuming and expensive. Architects considered delay to be the number two flaw of design review. (The lack of design experience on the part of the reviewers was cited as the primary flaw.) It definitely costs more in professional fees. Of those surveyed, 66 percent estimated the billable hours spent on design review to be between 5 and 25 percent of their time, a percentage that compares to the time spent on the entire preliminary project design. For the client, design review undoubtedly adds to the time and cost of projects. It adds also to the cost of government, which must administer and maintain design review apparatus in the form of additional professional staff, commissions, printed materials, law suits, hearings, and appeals. The additional cost and time factors make the process of design review even more subject to the vagaries of politics: when times are good, government can easily demand design review; when times are bad, clients can no longer afford design review and government is forced to back down or risk losing important construction projects.

Design review is easy to manipulate through persuasion, pretty pictures, and politics. Since the judgment of design is essentially discretionary and inherently difficult, it is easy to use mumbo jumbo design talk to defend decisions that are patently political (pro or con of the proposal) without letting the public become much the wiser. The political tendency is to use aesthetic control for growth control or growth encouragement, or to extract non-design-related amenities in exchange for design approval. Whatever aesthetic purpose design review may have enjoyed becomes