
Downtown Density Bonus Public Plaza Standards

DC/PARB Public Space Workgroup

Workgroup Objective

To create overall recommendations regarding urban public space policy in downtown Austin.

Task At-Hand Objective: To review Downtown Austin Plan - Density Bonus Program: Public Plaza Standards

Workgroup Members

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Recommendations

Frame the *Intent* for Each Section

Plaza Standards Should Re-affirm

- #1 The Downtown Austin Plan: downtown is the nexus of community interaction within the city.
- #2 The Density Bonus Program is fundamentally about **public benefit**.
- #3 Urban Design Guidelines for Austin: Guidelines for Plazas and Open Spaces (2009): is work we should be building from.

Building off of Past Efforts

- Specifically cited Urban Design Guidelines for Austin: Guidelines for Plazas and Open Spaces (2009)
- PZ.2. Contribute to an Open Space Network
 - PZ.6. Provide Plazas in High Use Areas
 - PZ.7. Determine Plaza Function, Size, and Activity
 - PZ.8. Respond to the Microclimate in Plaza Design
 - PZ.9. Consider Views, Circulation, Boundaries, and Sub-spaces in Plazas Design
 - PZ.10. Provide an Appropriate Amount of Plaza Seating
 - PZ.11. Provided Visual and Spatial Complexity in Public Spaces
 - PZ.12. Use Plants to Enliven Urban Spaces
 - PZ.13. Provide Interactive Civic Art and Fountains in Plazas
 - PZ.14. Provide Food Service for Plaza Participants
 - PZ.15. Increase Safety in Plazas through Wayfinding, Lighting, and Visibility
 - PZ.16. Consider Plaza Operations and Maintenance

Preamble

ONE: Public urban space has always played an **essential role in defining cities**. Cities have historically been places for sharing and exchanging ideas, goods and, services, and as gatherings spaces for shared experiences. It is in public space that much of this sharing and exchange occurs. Public plazas are thus our investment in our lives together as a city.

TWO: In Austin, we know plazas **support the interaction that fosters innovation**.

THREE: We must be **sensitive to context**. Not only with adjacent uses influence decisions about the design and programming of specific spaces, but we must understand our public spaces resources as a larger network of spaces that support each other.

FOUR: Good design is about good conversations and **city staff play a critical role in determining design excellence**. We strongly recommend an ongoing and dynamic dialogue between staff, designers and developer beginning in the pre-design phase and continuing after implementation to ensure plazas are maintained, programed and managed according to the intent of the plaza standards.

FIVE: Plazas are not static entities. Plaza standards should be **reviewed every two years** by staff to ensure they are meeting the city's current public open space needs.

#1 Dimensions

Plazas should be sized and configured to facilitate **a range of flexible activities** that can occur throughout the day. These activity areas should be **context sensitive** and respond to the needs of the adjacent buildings and the overall area's public space need. Such activity areas can include such items as: quiet sitting places, coffee/cafe, children's play area, activities for elderly, etc. (PZ.6 and 7)

#2 Configuration

Configuration of plaza should be shaped to facilitate and accommodate activities that are needed in the area so the space will be activated most of the day. Activities should support the possibility of **public gatherings as individuals or in groups**. The configuration of the space should visually convey that **the space is public and inviting**. There should be no ambiguity about the fact that the space serves a public function. (PZ. 9 and 11)

#3 Visibility

It is intended that the privately-owned public plaza **feel public**. It should visibly display a sense of welcome, and should read clearly as having uninhibited public access to enter and linger. It is also intended that the plaza **feel safe** with the creation of strong sight lines throughout the plaza area.

(PZ. 9 and 11)

#4 Elevation

It is intended that 1) a private plaza **feel public**, and 2) that it **remain accessible** to all users. If not properly handled, a change in elevation can separate the plaza from the public realm in such a way that it no longer feels welcoming to the general public or in particular those with disabilities, the young, the old may feel excluded from using the space. It is recognized, however, that changes in elevation can be both necessary and strategically used to create a compelling design, such as by the use of stairs with wide treads. (PZ.9 and 11)

#5 Circulation Paths

It is intended that public access and activation is carried **throughout the entire plaza**, and that the entire plaza conveys a sense of welcome to wander, linger, and gather throughout the entire space. (PZ. 9)

#6 Prohibitions

It is intended that the infrastructure uses and **activities within the larger development plans do not limit the usability and enjoyment of the plaza**. Some amenities such as restrooms and storage for equipment that support plaza operations are desirable. However, to the extent feasible, these should be designed into the building with operable doors onto the plaza.

#7 Seating

It is intended that **ample seating be provided to facilitate the intended activities** of the plaza and that a significant amount of linear seating be a permanent feature of the plaza. (PZ.10)

#8 Trees and other plantings

It is intended that trees and plantings be provided to enhance personal comfort, support active use of the space, and provide environmental benefit. Trees should be supported by the creation of **strong and ample planting environments below ground** including the use of automatic irrigation and sufficient planter drainage to allow for sustainable plant health and growth. (PZ.12)

9 Sun Control Devices

Rename this section SHADING

It is intended that ample shade should be seasonally appropriate and amply provided **between March and October**. A **shading plan** should be provided early on in the planning process. Shading strategies should be flexible and adaptable and focus on providing dappled light. (PZ.8)

#10 Lighting and Electrical Power

Rename this section SITE INFRASTRUCTURE

Amenities should be provided that can support flexible plaza operations such as power, water, and wireless. Items to be considered include:

- hose bibs
- drinking fountains
- restrooms
- trash containers

(PZ.15 and 16)

#11 Public Space Signage

It is intended that the signage design **ensures that public knows the plaza is public**, provide sufficient information about plaza rules, hours, accessibility etc. Signage should allow for the **recognition of the private ownership and stewardship of the plazas** in a tasteful and contextually appropriate manner. Signage should also tie into the city's larger wayfinding program and illustrate how the particular plaza is **part of a larger network of available public spaces** with the Downtown area.

#12 Operational Standards

It is intended that plazas remain maintained and open and should be recognized that the **plazas which are created under the density bonus program must serve a public function.** (PZ. 16)

It is also recognized that this particular issues raises many questions that merit fuller dialogue including:

- If a private event were to be held, where would the money go?
 - Back into maintenance?
- What type of programming would be deemed appropriate?
 - Could/should this be determined as part of an initial operations and maintenance agreement?

Standards of Accessibility

Yes

(PZ. 9)

#14 Uses Fronting on Public Plazas

It is intended that public plazas be inviting and dynamic environments. Based off the work of William Whyte and other scholars, it is recognized that the two primary ways in which **healthy plazas are activated are with seating and the availability of food service.** (PZ. 14)

#15 Alternative Equivalent Compliance

Put this as the FIRST ITEM & Rename: PROCESS

With the realization that this policy cannot cover all situations, the intent of AEC is to provide plaza designers the flexibility to meet the intent of this policy with elements that have not been anticipated in the current policy.

Specific Items:

1. *Require a Pre-application Meeting* - In order to initiate an early dialogue between developer, designer, and staff. Staff plays a critical role in establishing design excellence.
 2. *Support flexibility* in staff review if the design meets the intent.
 3. *Require pre-design analyses of site context* (location vis-a-vis the open space network, density, etc), shade, soil depth and infrastructure. (PZ. 2, 8, 12)
 4. Have all *design submittal reference intent* with any request for Alternative Equivalent Compliance.
 5. *Require maintenance and operations plans* for all plaza design submittals. (PZ.16)
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