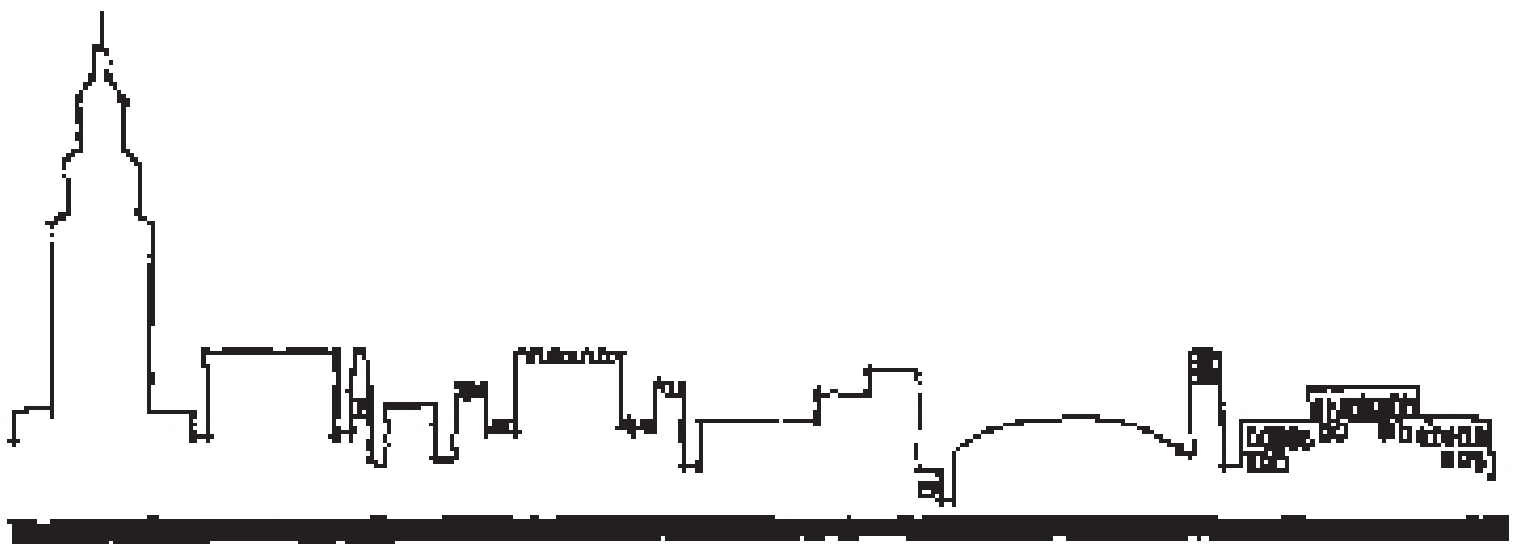


# Urban Design Handbook



**HORIZON** *still is happening*

January 2009

City of Baton Rouge ★ Parish of East Baton Rouge ★ Planning Commission

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# INTRODUCTION

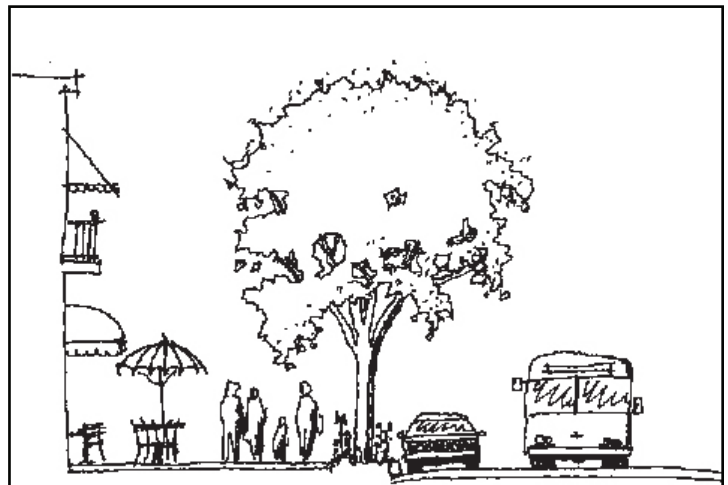
When determining design decisions about any development site, be careful not move too hastily through crucial considerations which address the suitability and limitations of a piece of land for development in the first place - such as geology, hydrology, ecology, the availability of streets, utilities, and a system to handle storm water flow. These considerations should be assessed before designing a site plan.

Baton Rouge's Unified Development Code (UDC) standards deal with the basic physical fabric of the city.

The urban fabric is constructed with many different parts. From building design, parking lots, services and utilities, to streets, parks, drainage ways, and natural areas, everything unites to form a cohesive whole we call our City-Parish.

This Handbook illustrates solutions to some basic local standards for how to arrange these parts into sustainable developments.

Goals for the functioning, health, and appearance of the Baton Rouge community depend on arranging the parts of new developments more along the lines of a traditional walkable town. This means confronting and balancing the tendency for disconnected developments dominated by traffic, parking lots, and garages.



*Good Urban Design promotes how buildings are scaled and oriented towards the street. Walkways are landscaped to buffer between pedestrians and vehicular circulation.*

# What is Urban Design?

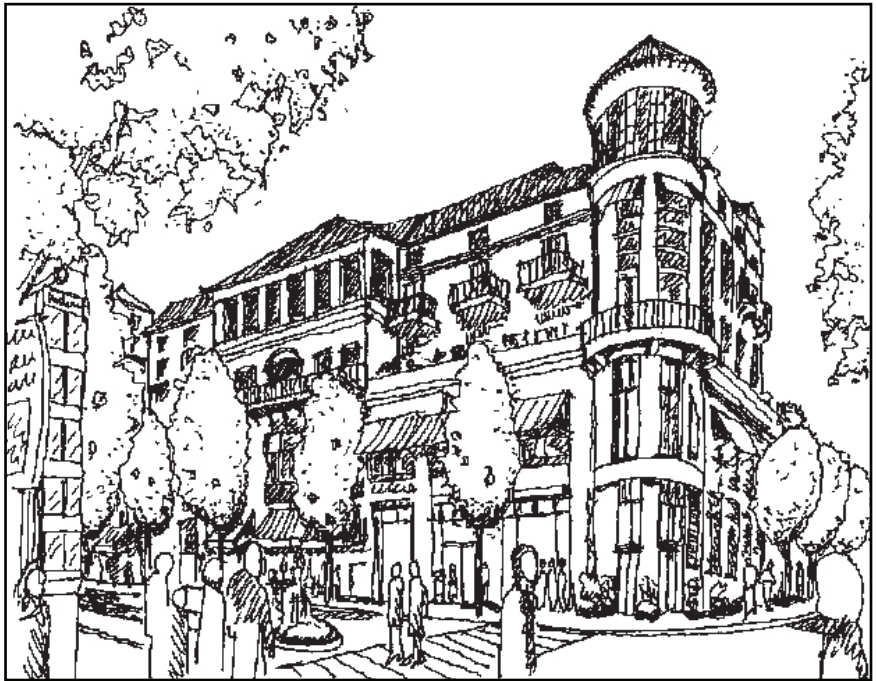
Urban design is the discipline through which planning and architecture can create or renew a sense of local pride and identity. It has great potential for enhancing the visual image and quality of neighborhoods by providing a three-dimensional physical form to policies described in a comprehensive plan. It focuses on design of the public realm, which is created by both public spaces and the buildings that define them. Urban design views these spaces holistically and is concerned with bringing together the different disciplines responsible for the components of cities into a unified vision. Compared to comprehensive plans, urban design plans generally have a short time horizon and are typically area or project specific.

Key elements of an urban design plan include the plan itself, the preparation of design guidelines for buildings, the design of the public realm - the open space, streets, sidewalks, and plazas between and around buildings and the public interest issues of buildings. These include massing, placement, sun, shadow, and wind issues.

Urban design plans are prepared for various areas, including downtowns, waterfronts, campuses, corridors, neighborhoods, mixed-use developments, and special districts. Issues

to be considered include existing development, proposed development, utility infrastructure, streets framework, and sustainable development principles. Urban design plans require interdisciplinary collaboration among urban designers, architects, landscape architects, planners, civil and environmental engineers, and market analysts.

The City of Baton Rouge, through the implementation of the Horizon Plan, has taken some bold steps to preserve and enhance the appearance of the community through the adoption of sign, landscape, and lighting ordinances. Additional elements addressed by urban design include parking and service areas, transportation, building orientation, building materials, and fencing, which can increase property values.



*An example of mixed use development, with clearly defined pedestrian areas, landscaping, and signage.*

# Elements of Urban Design

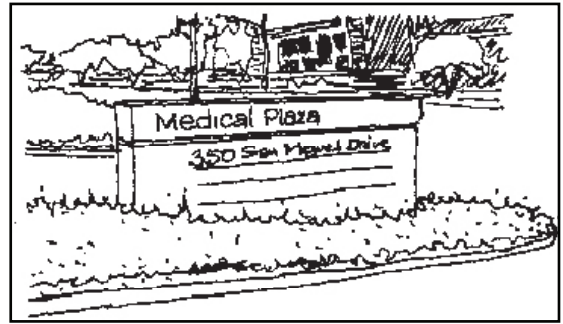
- o Signage
- o Lighting
- o Parking
- o Landscaping
- o Service areas
- o Fencing
- o Building materials
- o Building articulation
- o Transportation



*Neighborhood scene with pedestrian ways, building articulation & landscaping.*

## Signage

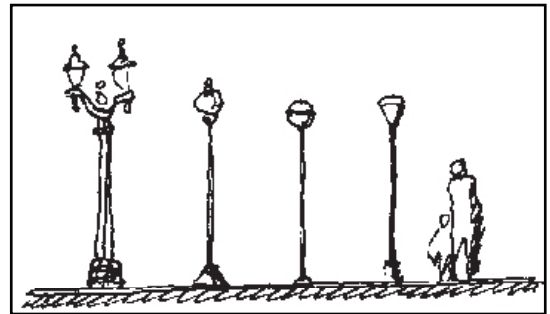
When choosing a sign one must consider several aspects such as the desired size, type and placement of a sign. The first question that you should ask is how much space do you have to construct a sign? If you have limited space you should consider constructing a wall, canopy or awning sign. If the site is large enough to construct a monument sign you should do so in addition to wall, canopy or awning signs.



Architecturally integrate all signs with their surroundings in terms of size, shape, color, texture and lighting so that they are complementary to the overall design of the building and are not in visual competition with other signs in the area.

## Lighting

Lighting is an important element in Urban Design. When considering a lighting design, one must take into account the type of light needed for the specific purpose of the site. Is the light designed to enhance security to the property, provide ambiance, aid drivers by increasing visibility on roadways, or used simply to illuminate a sign? Consult the UDC to determine the proper lighting for your structure or site.

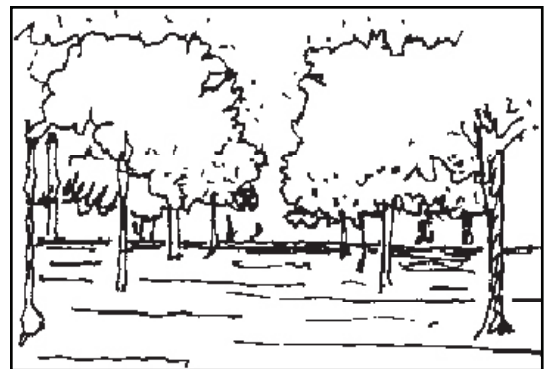


## Parking

Parking is an essential element in regards to urban design and traffic circulation. A parking plan should be developed for each site prior to development (consult the UDC). The type and number of parking spaces should reflect the desired uses of each site. Landscaping of parking areas is also recommended to provide shade, enhance the beauty of a site, and allow for a reduction in storm-water runoff. Parking structures are generally constructed using asphalt or concrete, but the East Baton Rouge City-Parish Planning Commission suggests the use of alternative and porous pavement materials whenever feasible.

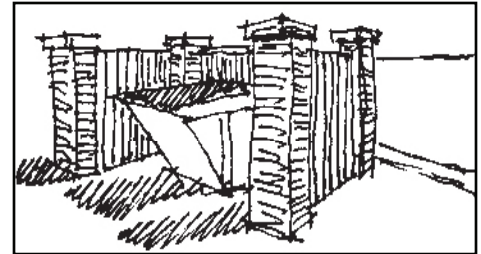
## Landscaping

The enhancement of an area's aesthetic beauty is directly related to that area's landscaping. All efforts should be made to enrich the visual landscape of Baton Rouge. Each parcel of land should be landscaped thereby reinforcing the area's sense of place. Not only does landscaping add to the visual appeal and contiguity of a site, it also preforms important and invaluable function relating to the reduction of pollutants and Stormwater treatment.



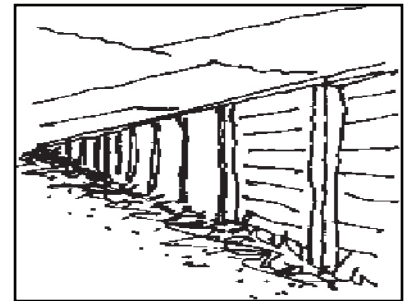
## Service Areas

When considering the placement of service areas one should remember the old maxim, “out of sight, out of mind.” Service areas should be oriented towards the rear of the building to minimize visual eyesores. In addition service areas should be screened from public view, and the best way to do this is to build a solid fence around the service area in the same style as the building to which the service area is designated.



## Fencing

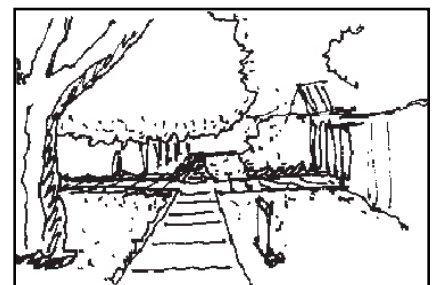
It is to everyone's advantage to construct, and maintain good solid fences between two abutting properties, especially when the abutting properties are not under the same zoning classification. Chain-link and barbed-wire fences are discouraged as building materials in many areas of Baton Rouge. Wood and masonry fences are preferred.



## Building Materials

Façade treatment and the architectural detail of buildings contribute significantly to the way a building ‘reads’ from the street and to the character and continuity of the streetscape. The composition and detailing of the building façade also has an impact on the apparent bulk and scale of a building. It is important when considering the design of new development that the predominant patterns, compositions and articulation of façades reinforces the character and continuity of the streetscape. This does not mean replicating the appearance of buildings. Contemporary design solutions based on sound design principles, which reinforce and make reference to the underlying elements that create the character of the area are encouraged.

Design consideration is to be given to the underlying building materials that contribute to the character of a building. Such things include roof shape, pitch and overhangs; entry porches, verandas, balconies and terraces; materials, finishes, fixtures, patterns, fenestrations, colors and detailing; the location and proportion of windows and doors.



## Building Articulation

Building articulation refers to the three dimensional modeling of a building and its surfaces, giving emphasis to architectural elements (windows, balconies, porches, entries, etc.) that create a complementary pattern or rhythm, dividing large buildings into smaller identifiable pieces. Building articulation establishes the building's street address, its response to the local context and environmental conditions and the degree of continuity between indoor and outdoor rooms. Use existing lot structure to influence the design of building articulation when development on amalgamated sites is required to respond to the existing or prevalent lot structure.

## **Transportation**

When planning a new development one should make transportation a foremost concern. You should incorporate into your development a sidewalk system with walkways with large enough surface area to allow at least two people to walk side by side. Attention should also be given to cyclists. You should provide an adequate number of bicycle parking spaces as well as bicycle racks which are in plain sight and easily accessible to all.

Public transit should also be incorporated into development plans with new bus shelters and stops. Public transportation decreases the number of vehicles on the road, thus reducing traffic and emissions, as well as providing those without vehicles a means to travel, shop and go to work.

## **Urban Design Districts**

### **Urban Design Zoning District**

Urban Design Zoning Districts include design guidelines and also regulate permitted uses in the district. This type of design district is utilized when properties are in transition, usually from a residential use to an office or neighborhood commercial use. Urban Design Zoning Districts do not automatically rezone parcels in the district when the design district is approved. Each property owner must apply to the Planning Commission to rezone their property to Urban Design District.

Urban Design Zoning Districts regulate uses within an area as well as operating rules for the specific uses, for example operating hours. This type of design district tends to utilize more stringent design regulations, including building materials and setbacks. A goal of Urban Design Zoning Districts is to minimize impacts on neighboring residents and establish a high level of design quality.

### **Urban Design Overlay District**

Urban Design Overlay Districts do not change the underlying zoning category, but rather impose additional requirements relating to concerns such as greenspace, landscape, and architectural features.

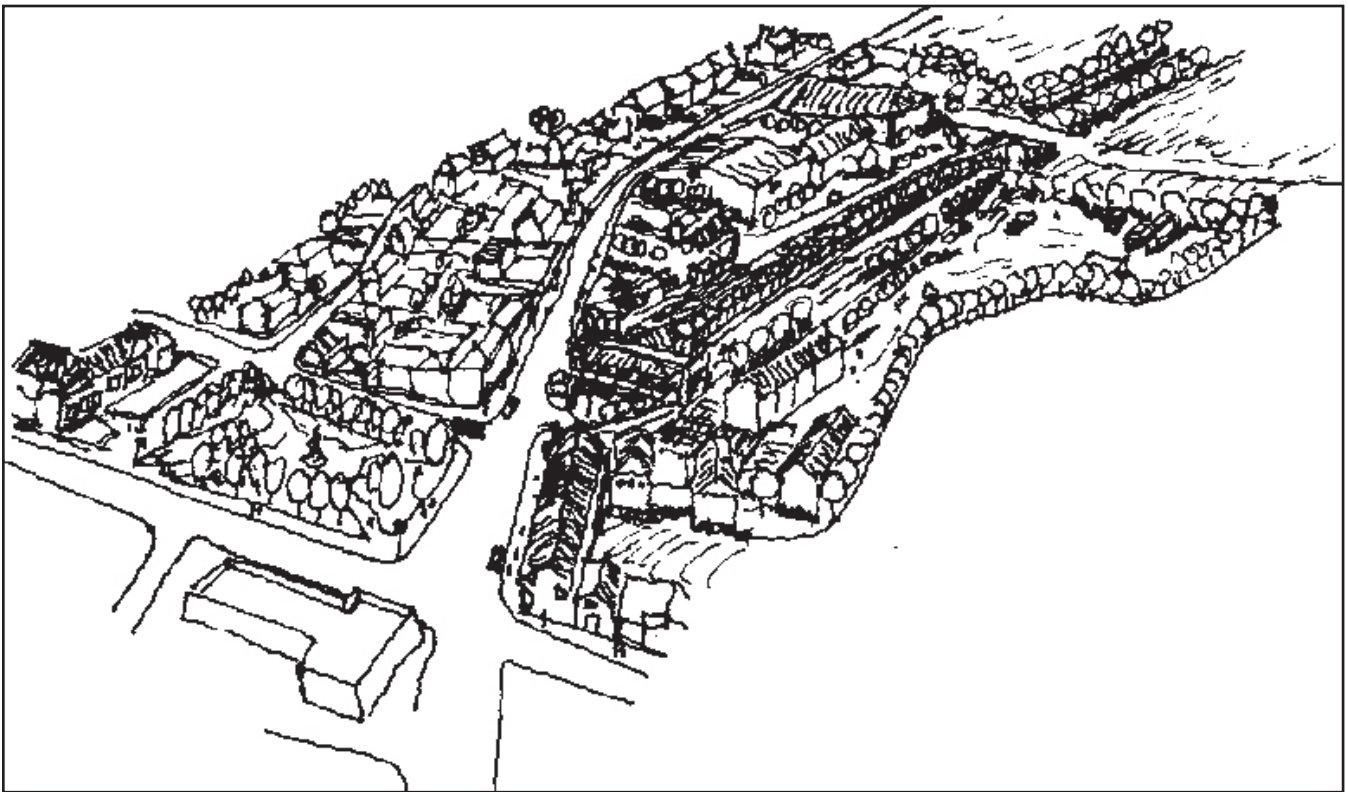
Urban Design Overlay District guidelines are a voluntary supplement to general zoning regulations, designed to provide a framework for the protection and enhancement of the aesthetic, economic and environmental quality by addressing development issues as related to neighborhood character and economic diversity. This type of design district is utilized in areas with a mixture of uses and zonings. Urban Design Overlay Districts can bring uniformity and cohesion to areas with a mixture of residential, office and commercial uses. Existing mixed use areas benefit from the design standard guidelines provided by an Urban Design Overlay District.

Urban Design Districts provide guidelines for development activity in clearly defined special design areas and can strengthen the physical and economic character of each neighborhood by mitigating or avoiding functional and architectural incompatibility of buildings or services.

# ESTABLISHING AN URBAN DESIGN DISTRICT

## Process

- o Form a committee
- o Define the purpose
- o Specify the boundaries of Urban Design District
- o Establish urban design guidelines
- o Present to Planning Commission
- o Present to Metropolitan Council
- o After Planning Commission and Metropolitan Council approval, the Urban Design District becomes part of the Unified Development Code



*This is an example of a well defined Urban Design District with building articulation, open areas for recreation and the incorporation of natural features.*

# Composition of an Urban Design Committee

## Urban Design Committee Composition

It is suggested that the committee include representatives from the following groups:

Five (5) Representatives from area civic or neighborhood associations

Three (3) Representatives from the business community

Two (2) Representatives from the real estate/development community

Two (2) Representatives from the design field (architecture, landscape architecture, planning)

One (1) Representative from the field of engineering (civil or transportation)

One (1) Metropolitan Council member or representative

The City-Parish Planning Commission Planning Director as *ex officio* member

The Planning Commission and representatives of the Department of Public Works will be invited to participate. The Metropolitan Council member appoints a committee chairman.



*The Committee may meet as often as necessary. The Planning Commission will provide space for formal committee meetings, and will provide technical assistance necessary for the committee to complete its work.*

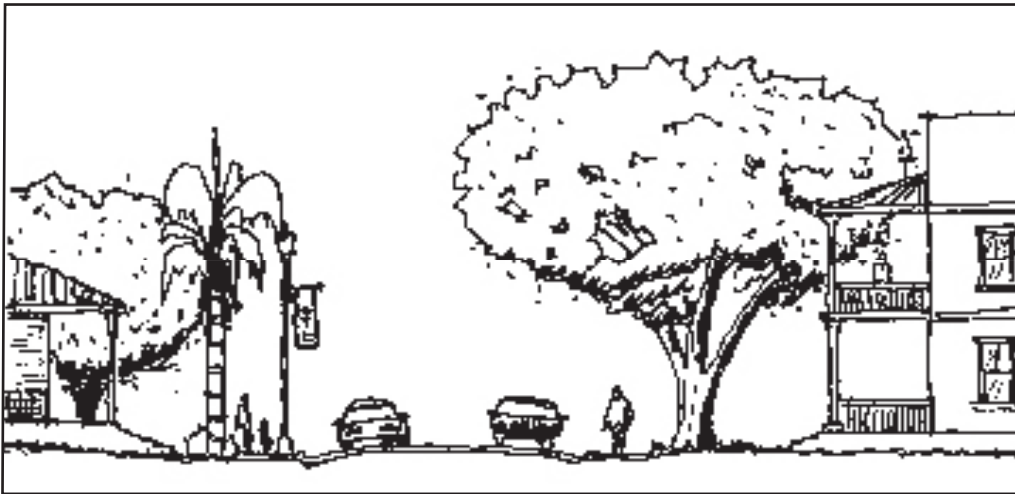
# Things to Consider When Establishing a District

**Start with a Vision** – Building consensus within the committee and the community at large on the goals and purpose of the district can provide a common vision and reference point for the committee. A strong common vision will help the committee stay on track and attract community support.

**Enforcement of the ordinance will be important** – Keep in mind that guidelines will have to be enforceable. Clear and straightforward definitions and enforcement mechanisms should be included in the ordinance.

**Use the Planning Commission staff as a resource** – The three (3) divisions of the Planning Commission staff – Advance Planning, Current Planning, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) – can be useful in every step of the establishment of the Urban Design District. Planners and other technicians at the Planning Commission have experience in drafting ordinances, reviewing plans, and can present different means to achieve the aims of the committee.

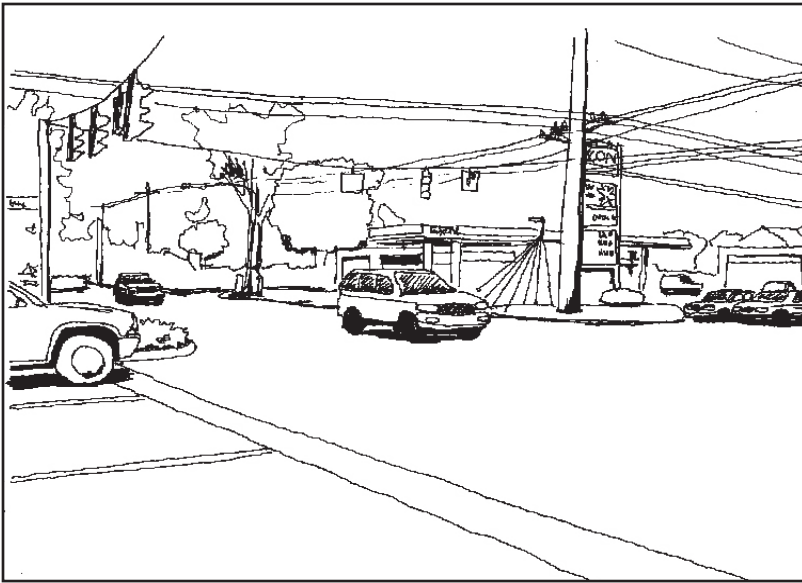
**Public Awareness** – Operating in a transparent manner and engaging local stakeholders can build trust, solicit creative ideas, and prevent misunderstandings throughout the ordinance-drafting process.



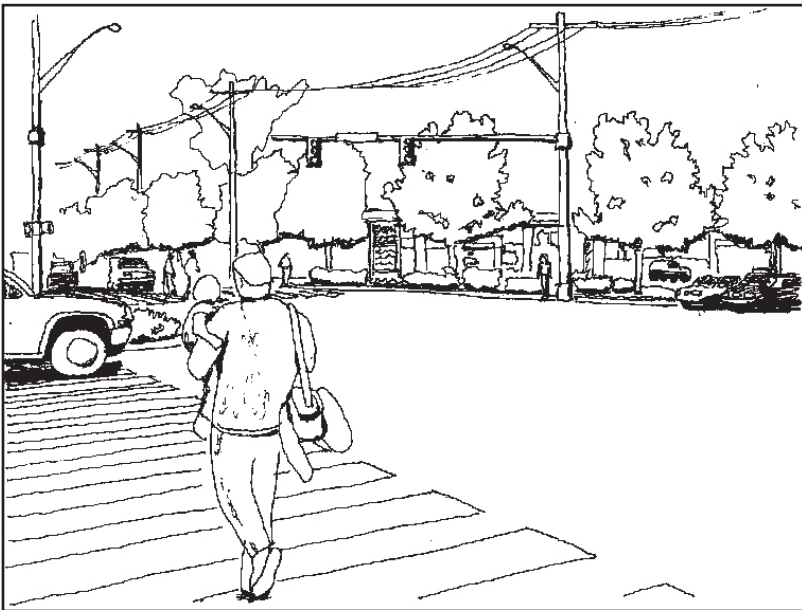
*Lighting, signage, parking, landscaping, building articulation and transportation elements.*

## What Can Be Accomplished with Urban Design?

Urban Design guidelines have great potential for enhancing the visual image and quality of neighborhoods. These next few examples show simulations of intersections and roadways here in Baton Rouge.



In this image, the original signs have been replaced with monument signs according to the design guidelines for the urban design district. The utilities have also been consolidated.



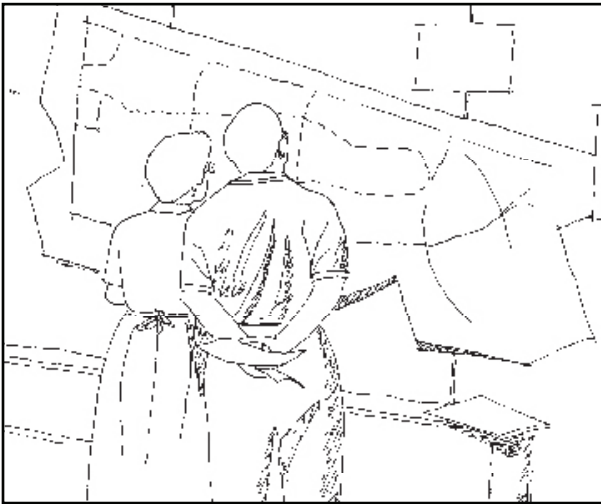
Landscape improvements have been implemented as well as pedestrian amenities. Increased landscaping enhances the aesthetic appeal of the area.

# Public Participation

Community participation is the involvement of citizens in the creation and management of their built and natural environments. Its strength is that it cuts across traditional professional boundaries and cultures. Community participation is based on the principle that the built and natural environments work better if citizens are actively involved in its creation and management instead of being treated as passive consumers.

The main purposes of participation are:

- o To involve citizens in the planning and design decision-making process and, as a result, make it more likely they will work within established systems when seeking solutions to problems.
- o To provide citizens with a voice in planning and decision-making in order to improve plans, decisions, service delivery, and overall quality of the environment.
- o To promote a sense of community by bringing together people who share common goals.
- o Experiences in the participation process show that the main source of user satisfaction is not the degree to which a person's needs have been met, but the feeling of having influenced the decision.



*From public hearings to neighborhood meetings, planners seek out public input in the decision making process.*

# The Horizon Plan

Specific goals and objectives in the Horizon Plan provide for protection and enhancement of the character of existing business, commercial and residential areas, as well as the visual and aesthetic character of the Parish. Action Items or strategies in the Horizon Plan call for citizen participation in order to maintain or establish neighborhood identity through Urban Design Guidelines.

An Urban Design Program providing guidelines for development activity in clearly defined areas, or design districts, can also be used to strengthen the physical and economic character of areas throughout the Parish. These design districts may include Growth Centers, major transportation corridors, historic districts, and other unique community areas, and features.

Design guidelines provide a connection between general planning policies and implementing regulations. The principal purpose of design guidelines is to convey a sense of the preferred quality for a place. Although the written language aspect is necessary, particularly to meet legal tests, design guidelines often use photographs, sketches, and diagrams to convey their information. No single form of communication alone is adequate to explain design concepts so that they are meaningful to planners, designers and the general public.

The principal users of guidelines are the participants in the development process: architects, landscape architects, project managers, the building owners, as well as the reviewing body. Design guidelines are not meant to encumber participants in the development process.

Instead, they are to aid development and future growth for the city. All projects require the applications of numerous codes and standards, including building, fire, mechanical, electric, safety, traffic, and environmental. Certainly the addition of a set of design guidelines addressing the exterior of a project adds some complexity, but it need not be onerous.

The public should make use of guidelines. They can serve as a yardstick to measure how successful a proposed project is in its surroundings. Furthermore, a comparison of the project with the guidelines can reveal a need to strengthen the language, improve the review process itself, or carry out enforcement.

Real estate agents can use them to inform a client of their obligations in a property purchase. Guidelines reveal locations and subjects in which a community has a keen interest. They can warn people to be prepared to address certain issues. Guidelines can also be effective in sending a message as to expectations.



*Enhanced visual and aesthetic character; alternative parking and landscaping.*

# Existing Urban Design Districts

The Bluebonnet Corridor was the first Urban Design District (UDD) established in East Baton Rouge Parish. The design guidelines in this area focus on compatibility of office uses with adjacent residential properties.

The Bluebonnet Boulevard Corridor Study began in response to concerns regarding the future land use of the newly constructed Bluebonnet Boulevard extension. The result, after months of public input and the creation of design guidelines, was Baton Rouge's first Urban Design District. The City-Parish of East Baton Rouge's 20 year comprehensive plan, known as the Horizon Plan includes a set of Action Items which are related to urban design in Baton Rouge.

Bluebonnet Boulevard is a major corridor in Baton Rouge. When plans were made to extend the road, it was apparent that the extension would have to cut through a residential area. In order to address the needs of the community, the Planning Commission worked to form a Committee comprised of property owners, developers and representatives from neighborhood associations.

After months of public input and committee meetings, design guidelines were created to address the following seven elements: Setbacks; Landscaping and Buffers; Building Height and Size; Parking; Building Materials; Lighting; and Signage. The Bluebonnet Boulevard UDD was divided into subareas and guidelines were catered to fit each subarea, depending on lot size and proximity to homes. Greenspace and preservation of selected trees were incorporated into the design guidelines. In addition to landscaping the medians, the City-Parish Department of Public Works landscaped several city-owned lots in the Bluebonnet Boulevard Urban Design District to enhance the overall aesthetic beauty of the corridor.

The procedure by which the Bluebonnet Boulevard UDD was established is an excellent example of public participation in the local planning process. Despite the lengthy planning process, what has been achieved by directly working with the community and taking into consideration the needs of all residents is a set of guidelines that incorporate transportation planning, and land use planning while at the same time retaining the characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood.

The Growth Center Community Planning Process also educates the public on the benefits of Urban Design Overlay Districts. Growth Centers include mixed use areas identified by the Horizon Plan for their potential to establish design districts.

Since the first Urban Design District was established in Baton Rouge, several additional design districts have been established. The Planning Commission continues to coordinate with communities in Baton Rouge regarding Urban Design Districts.

# Growth Center Community Planning

The Growth Center Community Planning process was based primarily on active community participation. At the conclusion of each public meeting, citizens had the option to form their own committee and begin a community-based planning effort with the assistance of the Planning Commission and other design and planning professionals. This community based planning effort involved residents, business people, landowners, and patrons working together as a committee to identify specific design assets and challenges within their community. The Growth Center Community Design Committee will work with the Planning Commission to identify the proper tools available to address those assets and challenges. Using this framework and professional assistance, the committee can then create a set of urban design guidelines to be used by the Planning Commission when reviewing future development and redevelopment.

Growth Centers are areas of concentrated activity such as retail, office, public facilities, a range of residential development, cultural and recreational activities linked with a variety of transportation choices such as vehicular, bicycle, and pedestrian. The Growth Centers were adopted with the Horizon Plan in 1992. Specific boundaries for the Growth Centers were delineated in 1997 after a series of public meetings around the parish. The Growth Center Community Planning Process was a planning education program that began in 2003 with the Horizon Plan updated and continued until 2007. The purpose of the public meetings was to give residents, patrons, business owners and land owners opportunity to participate in planning for their Growth Center. Elements studied in each Growth Center included transportation, land use, environmental features, and design. Topics for discussion at the meetings included Horizon Plan land use, bicycle, pedestrian and transit facilities, landscape improvements, and possible design guidelines for future construction in Growth Centers. The following are the two types of Growth Centers within the City-Parish.

## Regional Growth Centers

These include regional shopping centers, institutions, higher density office and residential complexes, medical centers, and other major activities serving both the City-Parish and adjacent parishes. There are nine (9) Regional Growth Centers. (Originally the City-Parish had 10 Regional Growth Centers).

## Community Growth Centers

These include community shopping centers, office and residential complexes, public and recreational facilities and similar activities serving community areas. There are 18 Community Growth Centers. (Originally the City-Parish had 19 Community Growth Centers).

# Unified Development Code

The Unified Development Code (UDC) was developed in August 1996 with the assistance of a technical advisory committee. The UDC Committee was comprised of seven members representing professional fields associated with development and construction: attorney at law, engineer, developer, realtor, banker, contractor and real estate appraiser. The committee reviewed the existing ordinances and made minor format and text changes. No major changes were made during this review and codification. As a consolidation of land use regulations into one comprehensive and easy-to-use document, the Unified Development Code for East Baton Rouge Parish includes the current Zoning Ordinance, Subdivision Regulations, Landscape Ordinance, Tree Ordinance, Sign Ordinance, Flood Prevention Ordinance and portions of the City Code that logically fit the format.

The UDC, consolidates various development ordinances and regulations into a single reference manual, which will ease the preparation of plans and applications for residents and developers.

Sections of the UDC that relate to urban design include:

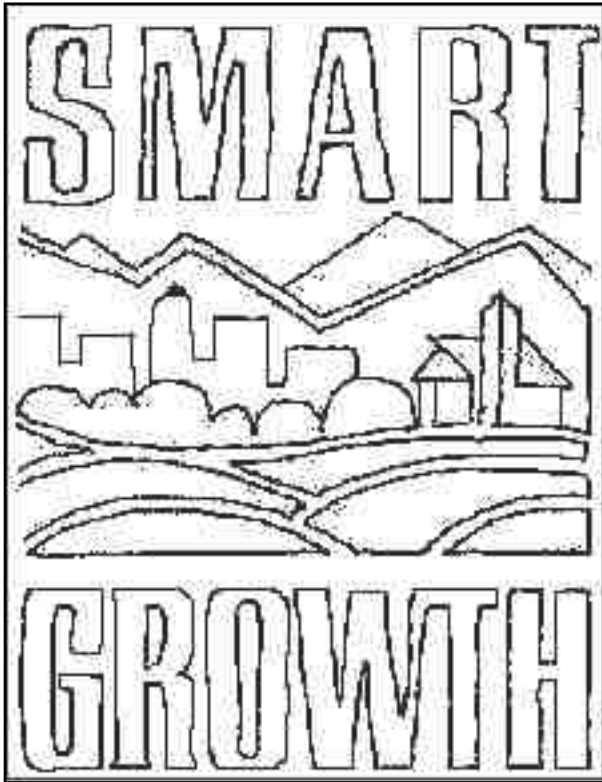
- o Zoning Districts (Chapter 8)
- o Dimensional Regulations (Chapter 11)
- o Recreation Facilities and Open Space (Chapter 12)
- o Streets and Sidewalks (Chapter 13)
- o Utilities (Chapter 14)
- o Signs (Chapter 16)
- o Parking (Chapter 17)
- o Landscape and Trees (Chapter 18)

The UDC treats in one text those areas of regulation more typically dealt with in separate zoning and subdivision ordinances. The combined approach of the Unified Development Code provides several advantages. Because modern development tends to require review by multiple agencies and conformance with multiple ordinances, the combination of all of these ordinances into the UDC format will allow the development process to be more efficient.

The UDC permits the land use control system to be administered more efficiently because the administrators and members of the various boards need to become familiar with only one set of standards. The approval processes for all types of development are covered in one ordinance.

The UDC avoids the overlapping, conflicting or inconsistent ordinance provisions found in land use control systems consisting of separate zoning and subdivision ordinances. It avoids excessive regulation and redundancy.

# Baton Rouge Smart Growth and Urban Design



The Smart Growth Leadership Institute (SGLI) and the University of Southern California (USC) funded by a grant from the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are providing technical assistance to communities that have made a commitment to Smart Growth but are struggling with implementation, building support, identifying the most problematic policies, and other issues that typically accompany a major change in development practice.

Baton Rouge was selected as one of nine candidate communities in the nation after an extensive application and review process. The project team composed of Jessica Cogan (SGLI), Susan Weaver (USC), Deepak Bahl (USC), and Chris Williamson (USC) reviewed both the policies and zoning codes of Baton Rouge and conducted an audit of the Unified Development Code to identify inconsistencies between Smart Growth policies and implementing codes.

In March of 2004, the project team visited Baton Rouge, held meetings with stakeholders including developers, local political leaders, as well as planning staff, and presented preliminary findings to the Smart Growth Task Force.

In 2005, the office of the Mayor-President initiated a Smart Growth Partnership to bring public and private groups together in an effort to implement policy recommendations from the Smart Growth Audit. Subcommittees were formed to discuss Design, Infill Development and Street Design Standards. Amendments have been made to the Unified Development Code with work still on going.

Finally in 2008 the Planning Commission began wrapping up the Smart Growth Audit recommendations by ensuring all recommendations have been implemented into City-Parish ordinances.

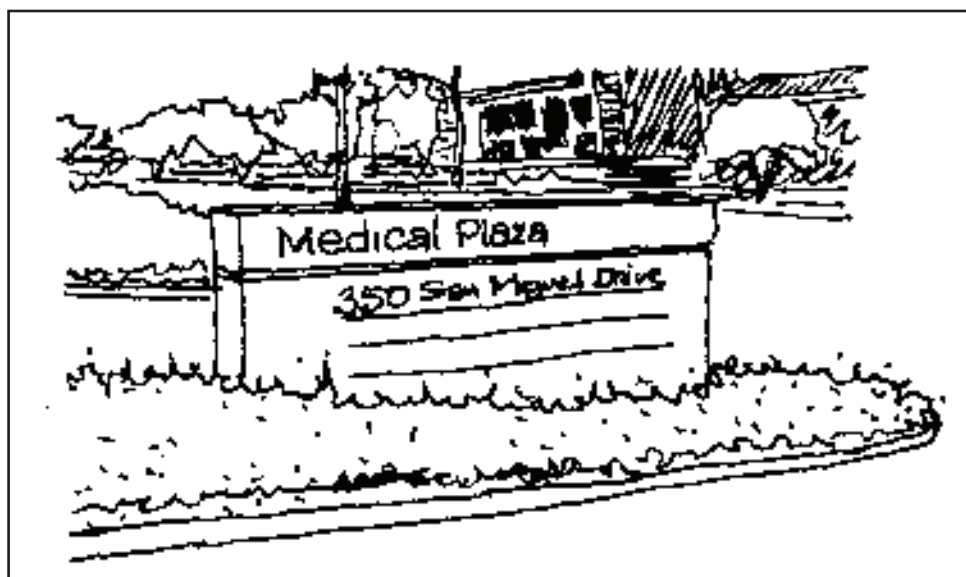
## Signage



*Awnings and wall signs.*



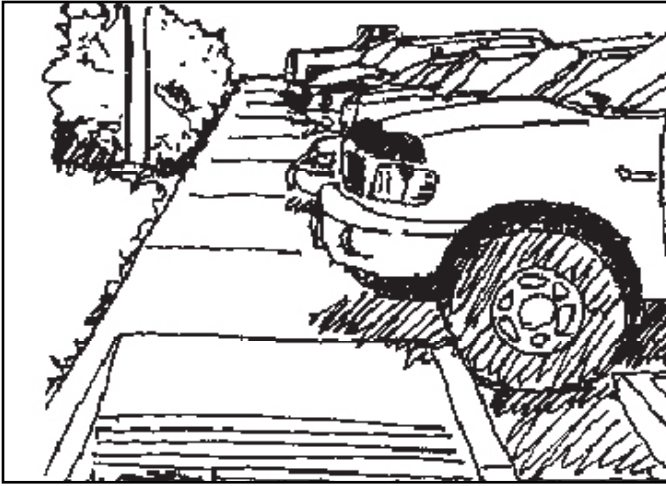
*Banner sign.*



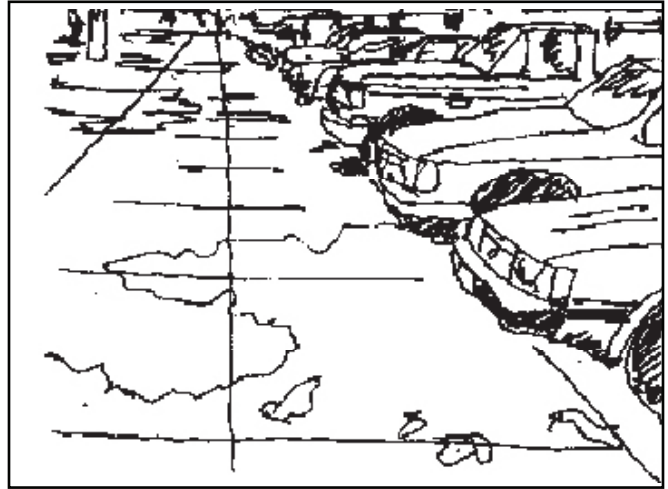
*Monument sign.*

## Parking, Landscaping and Trees

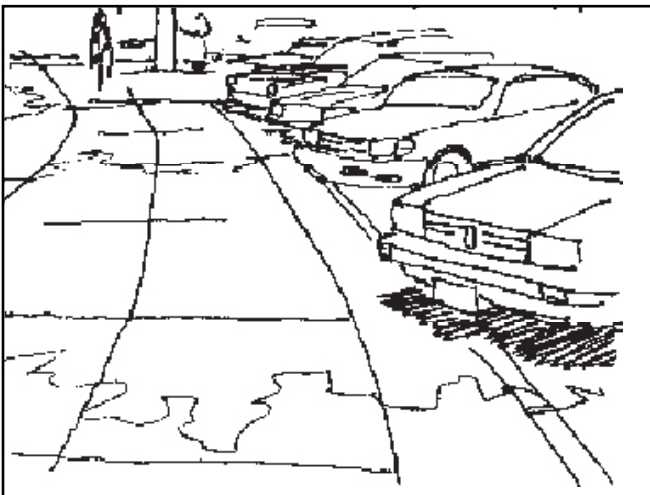
90-degree parking along connecting walkways is intrusive, physically and visually. Pedestrian friendly solutions make room for a clear walkway area that is defined separately from the bumper overhang area. Think in terms of a curb area wide enough for the overhanging cars, plus an adequate sidewalk. The sidewalk part can be marked by a row of trees, paving details as simple as scored bands, and landscaping. This is a place for creative design attention.



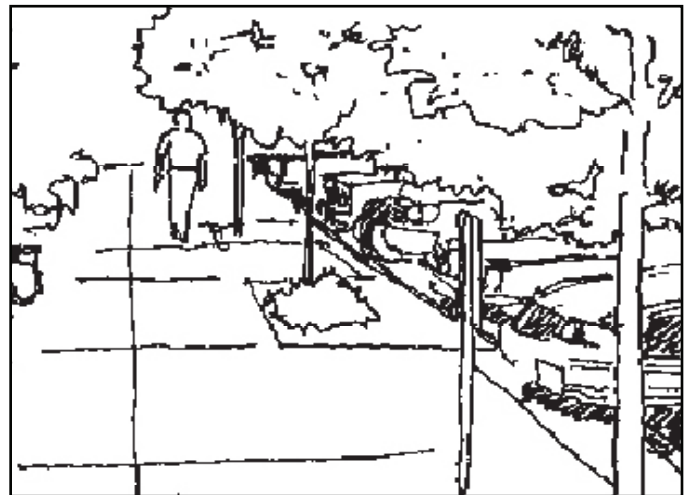
*Five (5) feet — the bare minimum allowed by the standards. This design can work for secondary or utilitarian walkways, but should not be used as primary connections.*



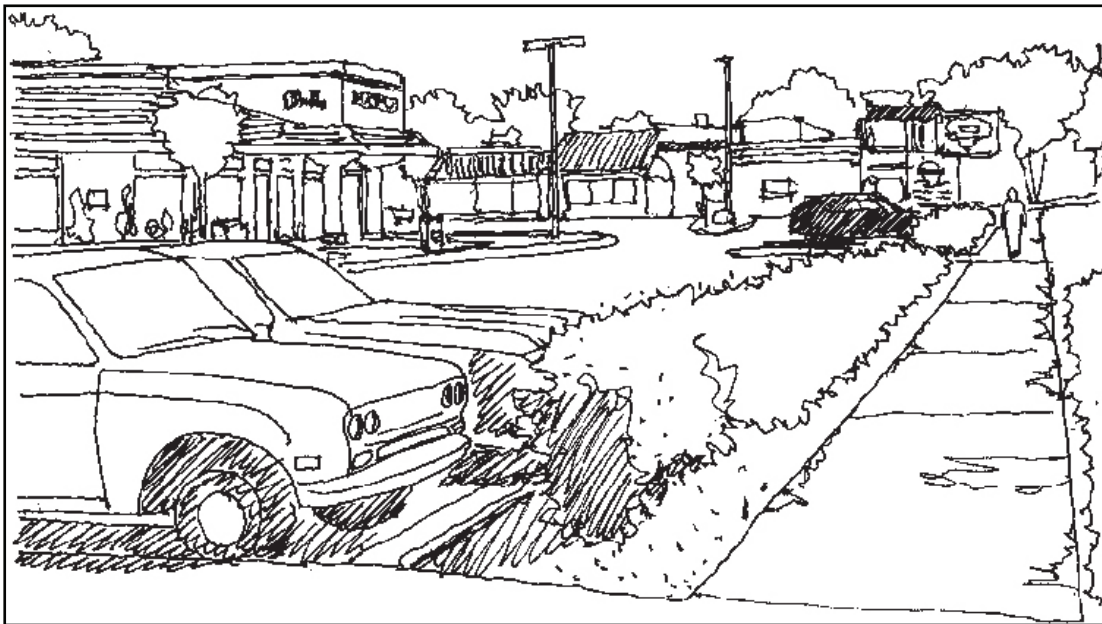
*Ample width (10 feet) but no definition.*



*Same width with definition, plus angled parking.*

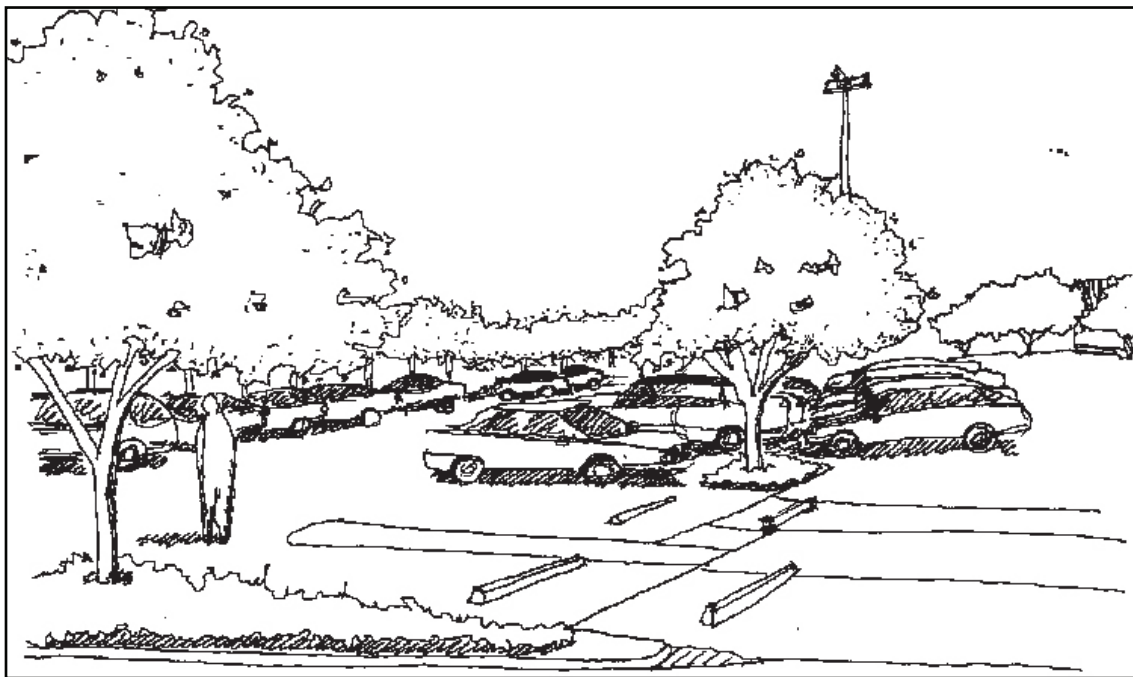


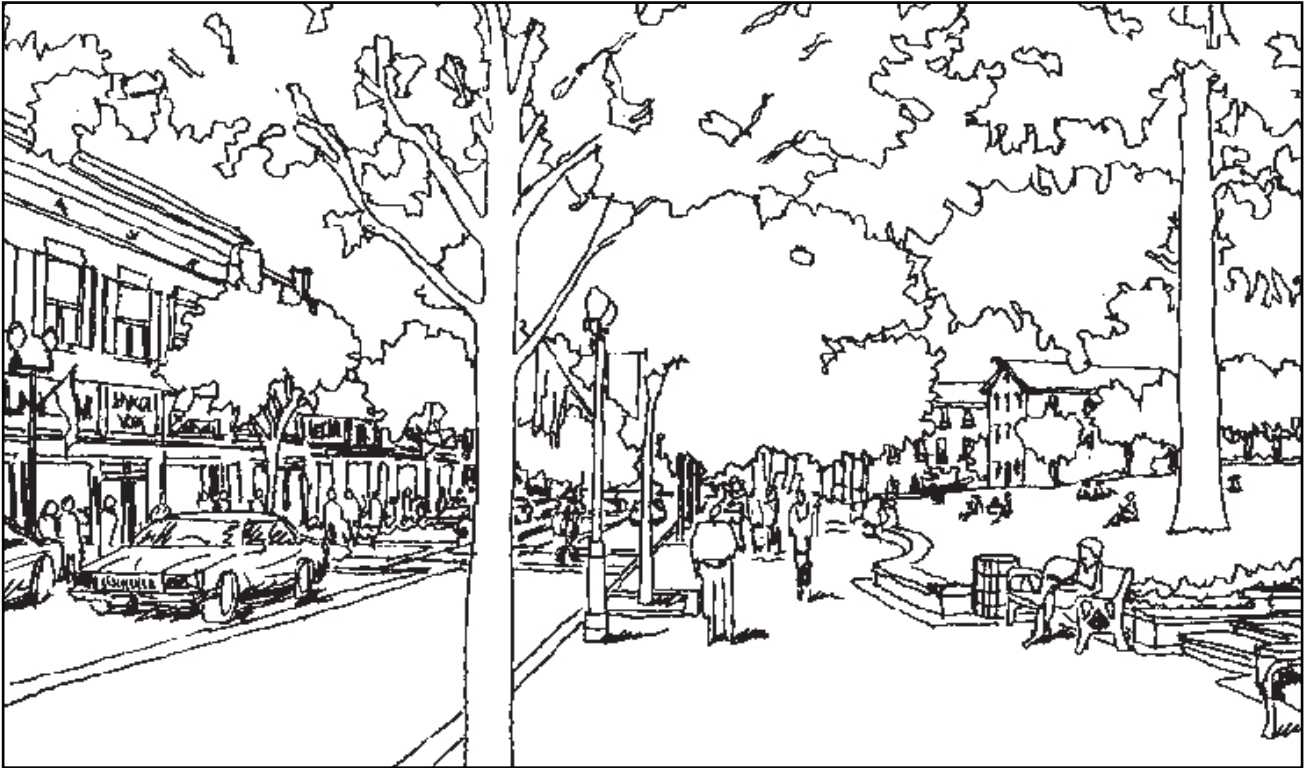
*Tree cutouts and concrete scoring define a separate walkway area. Connecting walkways warrant this kind of attention.*



The two sketches on this page show design mitigation options for development that is based on the car. Above, landscaping, architectural quality and parking limited to just one row of stalls creates a pedestrian friendly atmosphere. This arrangement still pushes development back from the main street.

The sketch below, nicely landscaped with angled parking, if placed at the rear of the building, would be preferred. This arrangement would keep the front of the building closer to the pedestrians on the sidewalk, as well as reducing traffic back-ups on the main thoroughfare.





*A streetscape with defined pedestrian areas, and maintained landscaping.*

# References

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Planning and Urban Design, American Planning Association, John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2006