Element 3
Public spaces

Element 3 Public spaces

This element covers

3.1 Public spaces principles

Urban design principles for parks, street spaces, plazas and communal open spaces.

3.2 Street spaces and plazas

Highly accessible public spaces that are extensions of the street system.

3.3 Local parks

Green public spaces up to one hectare in size that include grass, gardens and playgrounds.

3.4 Communal open spaces

Areas set aside on private land for shared recreation by building occupants and, in some cases, visitors.

This element does not cover infrastructure and conservation corridors that principally provide for natural systems, habitat and water management, and which have a subsidiary public space role.

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3.1 Public spaces principles

Public spaces are those areas in the public realm that provide a public use or recreation function, such as parks, plazas and street spaces. Public spaces are generally located on publicly held land, are accessible to everyone and are managed and maintained by councils or other public agencies. Some privately held land provides for controlled public access and use as a public space, such as a building forecourt, a walk-through, a shopping mall or a communal open space. Public spaces are created as part of a land subdivision or by reallocation of land uses in existing urban areas.

Public spaces accommodate a diversity of activities, and provide interest and amenity for people. Critical factors for successful public spaces are their location, size, dimensions and the interfaces with adjacent properties, the paths and arrangement of activities within the space. The area surrounding public spaces also influences how they are used and perceived. A functional system of public spaces offers direct connections to the surrounding pedestrian network and includes through-paths.

Why is it important?

Public spaces are essential for the wellbeing of everyone in a community. They provide opportunity for relaxation, recreation and socialising, and contribute to a neighbourhood's local character and sense of place. Active, safe and enjoyable public spaces draw people to them.

More than a third of the urban land area is public space, mostly streets. Green spaces such as parks make up the second largest component of public space. Street spaces, plazas, forecourts and squares provide for regular and chance social encounters. Parks and green spaces provide opportunities to relax, participate in active recreation and experience nature. Semi-public and communal open spaces, such as courtyards in apartment buildings, hospitals and education facilities, provide for casual interaction and recreation

Related guidance

Element 1   Urban structure

Element 2   Movement network

Element 6   Objects in the public realm

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Objective 3.1.1 To ensure all users have convenient and safe access to and through public spaces

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3.1.1a Connect the public space to the surrounding pedestrian network.

→ **TIP** See Element 1 Urban Structure: guidelines 1.1.5 and 1.1.6

3.1.1b Locate entry paths with clear views to other exits from the public space.

3.1.1c Continue pedestrian paths through the public space with direct, logical routes.

→ **TIP** Pedestrians feel safer when a public space has an obvious through-path, with frequent escape routes linking to surrounding streets.
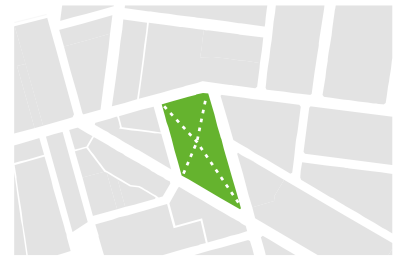

Objective 3.1.2 To achieve attractive and vibrant public spaces

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3.1.2a Include a diversity of activities in public spaces that extend the hours of use.

→ **TIP** Aim for a public space to be attractive to a diversity of users and at different times of the day. A café, play facilities or community uses can assist in activating public spaces.

3.1.2b Locate features towards the centre of the public space to draw people into and through the space.

→ **TIP** Features could be a large shade tree, fountain or water feature, sculpture, play or performance space. They provide a focus that invites people into the space.
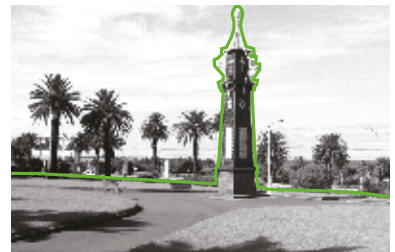
**3.1.2c** Locate spaces for vendor stalls beside the main pedestrian through-paths.

Objective 3.1.3   To establish and support activity at the edges of public spaces

Edges are often the most populated parts of public spaces. People tend to gravitate to, and occupy, the edges of places because they provide good vantage points to view activities within the space as well as to the surrounding area.

3.1.3 a   Arrange doors and windows of buildings to overlook adjacent public spaces.

→ **TIP** Public spaces feel safer and are used more when there are opportunities for informal surveillance of the space.
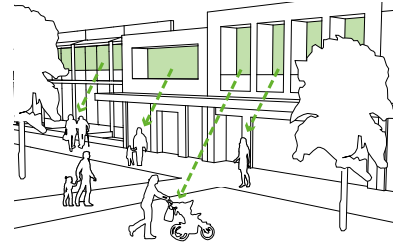
3.1.3 b   Arrange the public space to allow direct, clear sightlines from surrounding areas into and through public spaces.

→ **TIP** An area's topography will affect the sightlines and ease of movement to and through a public space.

3.1.3 c   Use the edge of a public space for informal seating.

→ **TIP** Low walls help define a space and provide informal seating to activate the edge.

3.1.3 d   Define the boundary or transition between public space and private space without the need for high fences or barriers.

→ **TIP** A slight change in ground level can provide a boundary definition between public and private space.

Objective 3.1.4   To ensure safety and amenity in public spaces

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3.1.4 a   Locate public toilets, play and recreation facilities in accessible and active areas.

→ **TIP** Facilities that are located in secluded out-of-the-way places feel unsafe and users will avoid them. See Element 6 Objects in the public realm.

3.1.4 b   Install low transparent fencing around children's play areas near busy streets or bicycle paths.

→ **TIP** A low fence between bicycle paths and children's play areas protects children who may wander on to a street or bicycle path while maintaining its visibility from the street and surrounding areas.

3.1.4 c   Locate lighting to indicate paths and areas for night-time use.

3.1.4 d   Locate utilities infrastructure in a designated zone away from the main pedestrian through-paths and recreation areas.

→ **TIP** Poorly located infrastructure such as service control boxes and telecommunications poles can block views, reduce the usable area and pose a hazard to pedestrians and cyclists.

Objective 3.1.5   To ensure comfortable and enjoyable public spaces

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3.1.5 a   Arrange paths, seating and main areas to catch the sun
during winter and be shaded during summer.

→ **TIP** Position trees to provide summer shade and shelter.

3.1.5 b   Protect public spaces from the strong winds.

→ **TIP** When planting windbreaks or shade trees, avoid
creating concealment opportunities.

3.1.5 c   Locate seating to provide users with an interesting outlook
and views of the space and opportunity to watch passers-by.

→ **TIP** Increase the number of seats in areas that are popular
with people. Popular areas are often those with good
sightlines of the whole space and its entry points.

3.1.5 d   In larger public spaces, install signs with maps to show
connections and destinations, location of public facilities,
and estimated walking times and distances.

Objective 3.1.6   To support a strong sense of place and local character
in public spaces

3.1.6 a   Select planting and landscape elements that support the
existing character or preferred future character of the area.

3.1.6 b   Select planting and landscape elements that engage
the senses.

3.1.6 c   Integrate locally relevant urban art.

→ **TIP** Urban art that people can interact with is popular and
can draw people to a space.

Objective 3.1.7 To ensure public spaces are well used and maintained

A number of agencies are responsible for managing public spaces. Any one public space may have multiple agencies and organisations with different responsibilities, leading to complexity in coordination of development and management.

3.1.7 a   In large, complex public spaces, establish a committee of management with responsibility to coordinate all aspects of the public space management.

3.1.7 b   Establish a program of ongoing events and activities for a wide range of users.

→ **TIP** Events and activities can include markets, performances, displays or community services.

3.1.7 c   Establish a maintenance program for public spaces prioritising prompt identification, removal and repair of any signs of damage and misuse.

3.1.7 d   Provide permeable ground surfaces, where possible, for absorption of rainwater and reduction of stormwater run-off.

3.2 Street spaces and plazas

Street spaces are that part of the street used for social purposes, such as a widened footpath or a pedestrian-only mall. Plazas range from a building forecourt to a large city square. A plaza is often bordered by buildings or streets.

Most street spaces and plazas are paved, and can include trees and other planting, but they are distinguished from parks. The spaces may have vehicles running adjacent to the pedestrian zone, be a shared zone, or may be free of vehicles. Some street spaces operate for specific periods of the day or week to accommodate different use patterns. While street spaces are generally publicly owned and managed, plazas may be publicly or privately owned but still open to the public at all hours.

Why is it important?

Streets are the predominant and most frequently used public spaces in any city. Street spaces and plazas link with the movement network, allowing people to use them as through routes as well as places to linger and socialise. They usually have places for people to sit, eat their lunch, find some sun or shade, get out of the cold wind or rain, chat with friends or watch their children play. They also provide opportunities for people to observe the world around them.

Related guidance

Element 2.2   Pedestrian priority streets

Element 3.1   Public spaces principles

Element 6   Objects in the public realm

3.2 **Street spaces and plazas**

Objective 3.2.1   To ensure attractive and functional street spaces and plazas

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3.2.1a   Locate a street space or plaza where pedestrian volumes will be high.

→ **TIP** High pedestrian numbers help the street space or plaza to feel safe and attractive.

3.2.1b   Allow sufficient space in the street space or plaza to accommodate activities and seating, in addition to the space for pedestrian through-paths.

→ **TIP** Beware of making the street space or plaza too big. A bit of crowding at busy times is acceptable but an empty space may discourage people.

Objective 3.2.2   To ensure convenient and safe access to and through plazas

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3.2.2a   Arrange through-paths across a plaza on the same level as the surrounding pedestrian network.

→ **TIP** Level changes, steps and obstructions reduce accessibility and hinder way-finding, discouraging pedestrians from entering a plaza.


Objective 3.2.3   To establish and support activity around the edges of street spaces and plazas

A street space or plaza performs well when bordered by pedestrian priority streets and buildings with a high level of activity that open on to the space.

3.2.3 a   Provide an active front to buildings on at least one side of the street space or plaza.

→ **TIP** Buildings with uses that engage with the street, such as cafes, provide opportunities for interaction with and use of the street space.
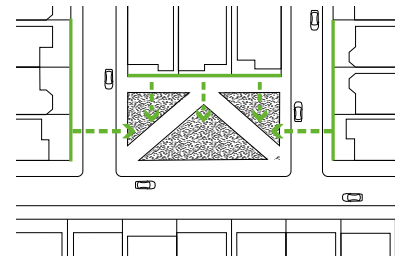
3.2.3 b   Where possible integrate shelters and awnings with the facades of buildings that are facing street spaces and plazas.

→ **TIP** Integrating shelters, by attaching them onto the building wall, allows the street spaces to remain uncluttered. Building Code of Australia sets out design standards for building projections beyond the street alignment. See Element 5.1 Buildings in activity centres, and Element 6 Objects in the public realm.
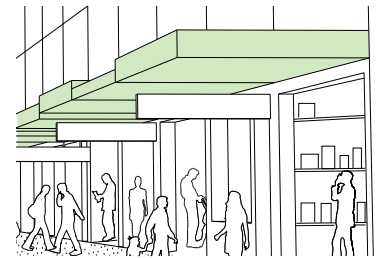
3.2.3 c   Enable adjacent businesses to use the street space for café furniture and to display merchandise.

→ **TIP** Commercial use of a street space may require local standards to be set to ensure obstacle free paths and safe pedestrian movement.

3.2.3 d   Provide a transition zone between traffic lanes and a street space or plaza.

→ **TIP** A transition zone may be landscaped verge or row of on-street car parking.

3.3 Local parks

Local parks are green public spaces up to one hectare in size and may include trees, grass, gardens and playgrounds. Some local parks also include water features, cafes or sports facilities. The location of a park in the movement network often influences its useability. Parks must connect directly to the pedestrian network and be located within easy reach of users.

The most valued parks will be those used by a range of people for a variety of reasons throughout the day. Parks with active uses adjacent to and fronting them are usually more popular than those surrounded by fences and blank walls. Parks can also support natural systems and habitat.

Why is it important?

Parks provide open space for relaxation, recreation and socialising. They also provide a space to be closer to nature, with relief from the noise, activity and hard surfaces of an urban environment. Parks also play an important role in enabling people to be more physically active and healthy. People prefer to use parks that are easy to reach and that feel safe and comfortable. Parks feel and become safer as more people use them. The success of parks is not just a question of scale or quantity, but where the park is located and how it is arranged.

## Related guidance

Element 3.1   Public spaces principles

Element 6   Objects in the public realm

Environment, Land, Water and Planning

Objective 3.3.1   To ensure convenient and safe access to and through local parks

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3.3.1a   Locate park entrances on pedestrian desire-lines.

3.3.1b   Provide at least two main pedestrian through-paths across a local park, linked directly to the surrounding pedestrian network.
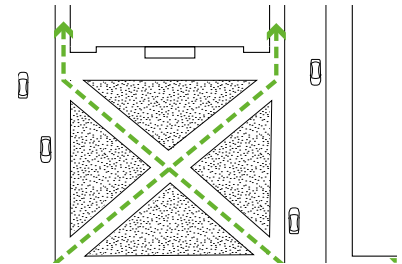
3.3.1c   Where a principal bicycle route passes through a park, provide separated pedestrian and bicycle paths.

3.3.1d   Locate bicycle paths away from children's play areas.

3.3.1e   Provide a pedestrian path around the park perimeter for walkers and joggers.

Objective 3.3.2   To encourage use of local parks at different times of the day by a wide range of users

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3.3.2a   Provide areas and facilities suitable for active pursuits.

→ **TIP** Circuit training, ball games, skate boarding or kite flying may need designated areas.

3.3.2b   Provide areas and comfortable seating for quiet pursuits.

→ **TIP** Seating areas are important for encouraging people, particularly the elderly, to use and enjoy local parks and open spaces.
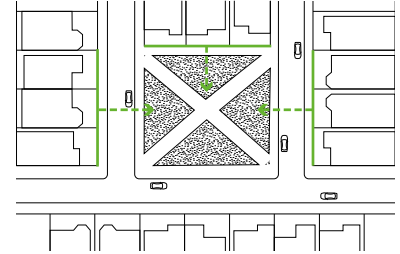

Objective 3.3.3   To ensure amenity and safety for local park users

3.3.3 a   Surround local parks, on at least three sides, with streets and buildings with active frontages to overlook the park.

→ **TIP** A park bounded by blank rear or side fences limits the opportunity for informal surveillance and reduces security for both park users and properties bordering the park.

3.3.3 b   Provide seats at the entry points of local parks.

→ **TIP** Seating at a park entrance sends a welcoming message, provides a place to meet and lets people feel they can be in the park yet connected to the street outside.

3.3.3 c   Locate the paths, facilities and children's play areas in local parks where they can be seen from surrounding properties, paths and streets.
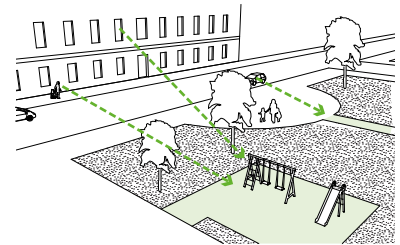
3.3.3 d   Position trees and planting to maintain sightlines between paths within a park and surrounding streets and properties.

3.3.3 e   Provide lighting along main paths and in areas intended for night-time use, lit to the same level as surrounding streets.

→ **TIP** Using the same lighting levels for park paths as the surrounding areas indicates they are intended as safe routes.

Objective 3.3.4   To emphasise a sense of place and character in local parks

3.3.4a Select planting and landscape elements that support the existing character or preferred future character of the park.

3.3.4b Establish large trees and other plants to enhance the local habitat and microclimate.

3.3.4c Protect natural features in or nearby to the park that contribute to a sense of place.

Objective 3.3.5   To ensure local parks are well maintained

3.3.5a When designing parks, take account of the management agency's capacity to resource ongoing maintenance and management.

> → **TIP** Facilitate the formation of local community 'Friends of the Park' associations to participate in ongoing planning and decisions.

3.3.5b Regularly maintain hard and soft landscape elements to ensure that parks are inviting, comfortable and safe.

3.3.5c Close access to or do not light park areas intended for day-time uses only.

3.4 Communal open spaces

Communal open space is an area within a private site providing for informal recreation activities for common use by building occupants and, in some cases, visitors. Communal open space is often incorporated into higher density residential developments, education facilities, supported residential facilities, health care facilities and hospitals, or commercial buildings. They can include roof terraces, courtyards, contemplation gardens, atriums, walled gardens, playgrounds, play spaces and dog gardens. Communal open space may comprise paved areas, grass, gardens, shelters and seating. Depending on the intended user, it may also include pools, garden plots and barbecues.

Why is it important?

Access to well-designed communal open space is important for the wellbeing of building occupants, especially residents of higher density residential buildings. Communal open space provides opportunities for relaxation, socialising and to enjoy outdoors. Communal open space can also support natural systems and habitat.

Related guidance

Element 3.1   Public spaces principles

Element 5   Buildings

Element 6   Objects in the public realm

Objective 3.4.1   To ensure communal open space is accessible and functional

Communal open spaces need to be of an adequate size and in an accessible location to enable building occupants to use them. Remote, small or uncomfortable spaces are rarely used, and may become neglected or unsafe.

3.4.1a   Locate communal open space to be convenient and accessible to building occupants.

3.4.1b   Provide communal open space of a size that accommodates a wide range of activities and uses appropriate for the building occupants.

3.4.1c   Lay out communal open space to create informal surveillance opportunities within the space and from adjacent buildings.

> → **TIP** Dwellings that have an outlook toward communal open space provides opportunities for informal surveillance of the space. This arrangement should, however, maintain the privacy and security of residents in their homes.
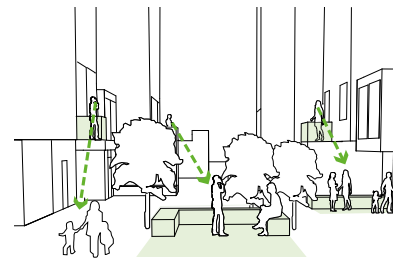
3.4.1d   Design communal open space to be usable in a range of weather conditions and at all times of the year.

> → **TIP** When designing communal open space, take into account orientation of the space for optimum winter solar access and summer shading, shelter from wind and rain and providing all-weather ground surface materials.

3.4 Communal open spaces

Objective 3.4.2   To support a safe and enjoyable communal open space for its intended users

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3.4.2a   Include a place where adults and children can gather and socialise.

> → **TIP** In higher density residential buildings, simple solutions can attract greater use. Arranging tables and seating can encourage informal gatherings while people watch their children play.

3.4.2b   Provide seats and tables to cater for large gatherings of people.

> → **TIP** A large table can accommodate resident gatherings and support social engagement.

3.4.2c   Provide lighting in communal open space to support safe movement and evening use.

> → **TIP** Avoid light spill to adjacent sensitive uses.

3.4.2d   Provide landscape areas with sufficient space and soil volume for trees to grow.

3.4.2e   Incorporate containers for trees and shrubs where free ground with sufficient soil volume is not available.

> → **TIP** Opportunities for planting may be limited on balconies and roof gardens and over underground structures such as car parks.

Objective 3.4.3   To ensure the communal open space protects the amenity for adjacent sensitive uses

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3.4.3a   Locate facilities such as driveways, foyers and barbecue areas to minimise noise, fumes and lighting impacts into sensitive uses in adjacent properties.

Objective 3.4.4   To ensure communal open spaces are well maintained

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3.4.4a   Establish a regular maintenance program for communal open space.