

Urban Design Frameworks

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The purpose of this practice note is to provide guidance about the preparation and use of Urban Design Frameworks. Frameworks are strategic planning tools that set out an integrated design vision for the desired future development of urban places. They translate the broad aims of Municipal Strategic Statements (MSS) and planning schemes to practical urban design action at the local level.

The design quality of the urban environment is more important than ever. The viability of suburbs, towns and major centres requires sharpened competitiveness in response to economic, technological, demographic and social changes. Urban Design Frameworks provide direction for interventions that shape open space, buildings and landscape. They draw upon and integrate the traditional disciplines of designers (building, engineering and landscape) and planners (strategic, cultural and social), heritage advisers, economists and other specialists.

Urban Design Frameworks involve the generation of ideas and the preparation of realistic design concepts based on consultation, research and analysis. Concepts may be drawn or computer modelled, illustrating how a future outcome will look, to enable communication and testing with stakeholders and the local community. Consultation is a key element in the development of a Framework. To ensure community support for the strategic vision and subsequent physical projects, consultation with stakeholders and incorporation of their feedback throughout the process is essential.

Policy Context

Urban Design

Urban design is essentially about bringing a design approach to how towns and cities are analysed and developed. It provides a useful tool to enable performance-based planning to be implemented. A design approach unlocks creativity and allows physical design outcomes to be given a higher profile in planning. It also allows ideas to be tested through design and reviewed for their possible impacts or potential synergies.

Urban design concerns physical solutions for urban problems and is a consultative, interactive and responsive process that embraces the notions of:

- **strategy**, or the significance of considering individual urban design actions within a broader, strategic frame
- **sustainability**, which considers the long-term viability and impacts of development on economies and ecological systems, natural resources and urban communities
- **synergy**, or the advantages of resolving issues of public and private benefit, land use, built form and urban systems in relation to each other, with a high level of coordination
- **responsiveness**, or the benefits of considering urban design interventions in relation to 'the particular characteristics, aspirations and cultural identity of the community' and the specific image, built form characteristics and development dynamics of the urban environment

- **specificity**, or the acceptance of each urban situation as unique in time and space, where different degrees of change and intervention are more valid than generic solutions
- **quality**, or the recognition of the importance of well-considered visual and functional resolutions to urban issues and situations.

These notions support the relevant sections of the *Victoria Planning Provisions* (VPP), including Clause 15 Built Environment and Heritage.

Urban Design Frameworks in the planning system

Urban Design Frameworks are an integral part of the planning system. They are important tools to assist planning authorities develop local action plans and initiatives within a strategic context, helping the agendas established in the MSS to be translated into actual projects and initiatives. A great deal of importance has been placed on the need to clearly interlink all planning initiatives flowing from the MSS to zones, overlays, schedules and local policies, down to action plans for specific localities or sites. An Urban Design Framework is a vehicle to help a community to set an overall direction for a particular place or locality. Recommendations are fed into capital budgets, guidelines and zones for implementation.

Communities and governments frequently identify areas that are undergoing significant change, or where particular issues need to be resolved or new threats or opportunities have emerged. An Urban Design Framework is a powerful tool for resolving these issues. It is particularly useful for identifying areas suitable for urban consolidation, access improvement, medium-density housing and different types of mixed use development (such as the Residential Growth Zone, Commercial 1 Zone and Mixed Use Zone), in conjunction with municipal business strategies and strategies for housing and residential development. The results of the Urban Design Framework process can then inform changes to zoning and Design Development Overlays (DDO) in planning schemes and initiate design guidelines and policies.

Urban Design Frameworks also seek to integrate non-physical actions and opportunities with built form outcomes. They help to coordinate physical development issues with other actions such as social, economic and management strategies across the full range of council activities.

Urban Design Frameworks, Strategic Plans and Master Plans

An Urban Design Framework differs from a strategic plan, or a master plan: it combines the direction-setting and coordination aspects of strategic planning with the detailed and practical design process of a master plan, in three dimensions.

It should enable the community to deal more effectively with specific design issues at a practical level.

Unlike a master plan, which only gives a final vision for how an area will develop, an Urban Design Framework should provide flexibility by identifying key principles rather than finite solutions. It is not a fixed view of the future nor is it a land-use report. It includes a design vision for how a place might develop and should include sufficient detail at key locations so that the vision can be tested for economic and functional viability. An Urban Design Framework should include sufficient information to allow continuous review of detailed actions within the strategic frame, and to enable councils to assess development proposals.

A completed Urban Design Framework is the result of a structured process of preparation and consultation. The package typically includes:

- a record of the analysis
- a description of the issues considered
- a framework plan to identify key action areas and important relationships
- a set of development principles
- visualisations of key design concepts
- action plans for non-physical opportunities
- an implementation strategy.

Guidelines

Key characteristics of an Urban Design Framework

Each place will have unique characteristics and potential, so the framework process needs to be specifically adapted for that place. However, it is important that each framework is systematic, objective and sufficiently comprehensive to ensure all major issues have been considered.

An Urban Design Framework should:

- include a comprehensive analysis of context
- look beyond the individual project and seek to coordinate across projects and opportunities, setting a project in its broader context
- incorporate and respond to information from existing strategies and studies, such as transport, heritage and neighbourhood character studies
- respond to all major stakeholders by integrating their interests and concerns
- incorporate major infrastructure issues and provide design direction for the details within infrastructure construction projects
- set out an implementation strategy that looks at a range of time scales and generally includes:
 - long-term strategies and options (say, 10 to 15 years and beyond)
 - intermediate-term strategies and options (say 3 to 5 years)
 - short-term actions that can be immediately implemented without compromising long-term objectives
- present analysis, principles and options for implementation in graphical and written format to a standard suitable for public consultation
- illustrate existing constraints and available opportunities, identify different options, and provide a record of why particular options are selected referring to key policy objectives, urban design principles, etc.
- provide a 'layered' response to issues at hand, beginning with the broad contextual issues and principles, and working down to detailed design studies and guidelines for critical locations.

Important steps in the framework study process

The process for any particular framework study must be fine-tuned to accommodate local issues and objectives. Community involvement should be sought early in the process and at all relevant stages. A typical process could include the following steps:

Stage I. Preliminary actions

- Identify and define project objectives, scope, boundaries and the significant influences within the region, including population projections.

- Identify stakeholder issues.
- **Milestone: sign off the Study Brief.**

Stage II. Analysis and objectives

- Conduct a review of existing plans, policies, strategies, infrastructure programs, etc.
- Perform a contextual analysis of the opportunities and threats from beyond the project boundaries.
- Perform a systematic analysis of the study area, typically under headings such as:
 - Use patterns
 - land use
 - activities and events
 - economic activities
 - Movement patterns
 - pedestrian access and movement
 - vehicular access and movement
 - transport routes
 - Urban form
 - development pattern
 - topography and landscape
 - views and vistas
 - building form
 - micro-climatic effects
 - sunlight and shading effects
- Conduct an analysis of local strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.
- Identify and summarise key issues.
- Identify possible strategic actions.
- **Milestone: prepare a Progress Report.**

This may include:

- diagrams and text analysing the impacts and influences from beyond the study area, positioning it in its broader context
- diagrams, sketches and text illustrating the key opportunities that could be exploited and the major constraints which will need to be taken into account.
- Test in consultation with user groups and stakeholders.

Stage III. Synthesis and strategic framework

- Develop broad design options and identify possible projects or strategic action areas and potential synergies between projects.
- Test options with stakeholders and conduct broader consultation as needed.
- **Milestone: prepare a Progress Report.**

This may include:

- Urban Design Framework plans and diagrams based on preferred options for physical and dynamic actions
- detailed conceptual designs and guidelines for selected action areas.
- Test in consultation with user groups and stakeholders.

Stage IV. Final reporting

- **Milestone: prepare a final Urban Design Framework Report.**

This may include:

- A Coordinating Framework Plan with diagrams and maps indicating:
 - the total concept
 - the components of the concept: (i) use and activities, (ii) movement and (iii) built form and environment
 - the major project opportunities and linkages between them
 - areas for strategic action.
- Strategic Action Area Plans with plans, diagrams, elevations, sections and sketches illustrating:
 - design concepts for strategic areas identified in the Coordinating Framework Plan, including enough detail to enable further economic, social, visual and technical analysis.
- An Implementation Strategy report identifying planning, project and management actions regarding:
 - immediate, medium-term and long-term actions
 - key stakeholders and beneficiaries
 - potential sources of investment or finance.

- Appendices, when relevant, including, for example:
 - nominated performance criteria
 - lists of people contacted during the framework process
 - economic analysis including costings, economic impact studies
 - traffic and technical studies
 - infrastructure initiatives
 - a marketing plan
 - draft briefs for action areas or projects identified in the framework
 - draft briefs for further studies arising from the framework.

Outputs of the Urban Design Framework process

The extent of the output should be tailored to suit the scope, needs and locality of the Urban Design Framework. The format can also vary from hand-drawn sketches and diagrams to fully developed computer images and models.

The quality of the information is more important than the format and, in many situations, simple modes of presentation may be as effective as sophisticated rendered images for communication with the community.

A high priority should be given to the use of illustrative images and diagrams to complement written explanations.

Required skills for the preparation of urban design frameworks

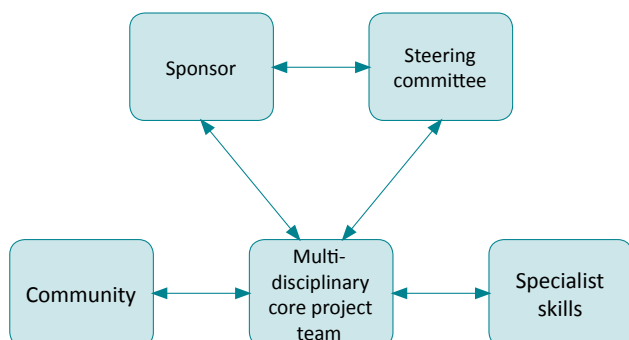
To prepare and implement an effective Urban Design Framework, it is important that the sponsor appoints a core project team and steering committee. A steering committee comprising representatives from the key stakeholder groups can ensure the framework maintains its relevance. Implementation is also easier if stakeholders have been involved in managing the project from the start and continuity of team members is possible.

A multidisciplinary project team is essential. The mix of required skills will vary with the locality and scope of project, but will typically include:

- overall urban design coordination
- architectural and landscape design
- strategic and statutory planning
- transport planning
- cultural planning
- economic impact assessment
- infrastructure specialties, such as traffic planning, road design, and electrical engineering.

Further specialist skills may be required such as:

- public safety and security
- consultation, marketing and communications
- heritage, tourism, retail trading
- environmental planning and management
- visualisation and artistic rendering.



Further information

References

- *Victoria Planning Provisions*
- *Planning Practice Notes*
Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
- *Designing Competitive Places, 1997*
Australian Local Government Association
- Urban design guidelines and case studies at www.delwp.vic.gov.au/planning/urban-design-and-development
- National Urban Design protocol at urbandesign.org.au

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