

Urban design frameworks

The design quality of the urban environment is more important than ever. The viability of suburbs, towns, and major centres depends on them becoming more competitive in their responses to economic, technological, demographic, and social changes.

Urban design frameworks provide direction for the interventions that shape open space, buildings, and landscapes. They draw upon and integrate the traditional disciplines of designers (building, engineering, landscape) and planners (strategic, cultural, social), heritage advisors, economists and other specialists.

What is an urban design framework?

Urban design frameworks involve generating ideas and preparing 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 developing an urban design framework. To ensure community support for a strategic vision and subsequent physical projects, consulting with stakeholders and incorporating their feedback throughout the process is essential.

Characteristics of an urban design framework

Each place has 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 responding 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.

Outputs of an urban design framework

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 Vision statement (if no preceding Strategic Framework)
- 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.

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-generated 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.

Urban design frameworks in the planning system

Urban design frameworks are an integral part of the planning system. They are important tools to help planning authorities develop local action plans and initiatives within a strategic context, helping the agendas established in the Municipal Strategic Statement, for example, 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 higher level strategy through to zones, overlays, schedules and local policies, right down to action plans for specific localities or sites. An urban design framework is a vehicle to help a community 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 low-density residential zones, neighbourhood centres and mixed use zoning]), in conjunction with municipal business strategies and strategies for housing and residential development.

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The results of the urban design framework process can then inform changes to zoning and design development overlays in planning schemes and initiate design guidelines and policies.

Urban design frameworks also seek to integrate non-physical actions and opportunities with built forms. They help to coordinate physical development issues with other actions such as social, economic, and management strategies across the full range of local government activities.

Appointing a team for your urban design

To prepare and implement an effective urban design framework you need to appoint a core project team and steering committee. Including representatives from key stakeholder groups on the steering committee will help to ensure the framework maintains its relevance.

Implementing the framework will be easier if stakeholders have been involved in managing the project from the start and there is a continuity of team membership.

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.

How can GANSW help?

GANSW can assist in the planning and delivery of projects by providing a range of design-related services, including providing specific advice on urban design frameworks and when this is appropriate for your project.

Further information

For more information see Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW (GANSW 2017) available on the GANSW website: ga.nsw.gov.au

Government Architect NSW

GANSW provides design leadership in architecture, urban design and landscape architecture. In this role, GANSW works across government, the private sector and the community to establish policy and practice guides for achieving good design. GANSW provides strategic advice across design, planning and development to support good policy, programs, projects and places.

Contact GANSW

GANSW makes every effort to keep its advice up to date. From time to time we will release new versions of these advisory notes. For further advice, or if you think there is information missing, please contact GANSW.

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