

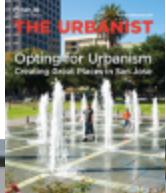
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Issue 528 | November 2013

The Urbanist

Walk This Way

A roadmap for better urban design in San Jose. Excerpted from the SPUR report "Getting to Great Places."

[Urbanist Article / November 17, 2013](#)



Pedestrians on the Paseo de San Antonio in downtown San Jose, one location where San Jose has worked to create a walking-friendly environment.

This article is excerpted from the SPUR report Getting to Great Places. Read the complete report at [spur.org/greatplaces >>](http://spur.org/greatplaces)

Silicon Valley, the most dynamic and innovative economic engine in the world, is not creating memorable urban places. But tastes and values are rapidly changing. Today's top firms and top talent are increasingly demanding engaging places, diverse experiences and convenient amenities. Simply put, they are demanding urbanism.

San Jose is critical to the future of the Bay Area. The Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) projects that San Jose will add more new residents in the coming decades than any other city in the region — more than San Francisco and Oakland combined. The shape of that growth is critically important to the sustainability, livability and economic vitality of the region. San Jose faces a particular set of challenges—

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Achieving this transformation is a daunting challenge. To be successful, it will require changes in culture, public policy, professional and technical practices, infrastructure, markets and norms. San Jose's real estate market has been relatively soft. The city government faces fiscal challenges that limit its capacity for ambitious investment. Many aspects of this transformation are out of the control of policymakers, and many contradictory imperatives drive decisions within city government.

While San Jose's General Plan does an excellent job of sketching a transformational vision and includes an impressive level of detail in defining the location and density of growth, its successful implementation is far from assured. The physical form of new development at the human scale will determine as to whether the benefits of denser land use patterns actually translate into livable, walkable, less car-oriented places or simply to denser sprawl: placeless apartment complexes and office parks hemmed in by worsening congestion.

San Jose brings tremendous assets to this challenge. The broad-based enthusiasm for a more urban future — along with the city's spectacular weather and natural setting, diverse communities and legendary capacity for innovation — present a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reinvent for a more sustainable and competitive future.

The design of the built environment can either inhibit or encourage walking. Through its General Plan, San Jose pursuing a transition from a car-oriented to a more walkable city. The two places pictured below — both recently built employment centers — send very different signals to pedestrians.

San Jose



Emeryville

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Getting to Great Places

SPUR's report *Getting to Great Places* (from which this issue of *The Urbanist* is excerpted) is intended to diagnose the impediments to creating excellent, walkable urban places in San Jose and to recommend changes in policy and practice that will improve urban design outcomes. It is directed at implementing the vision outlined in the 2040 General Plan. In particular, it emphasizes the Urban Village planning process as a timely opportunity to improve implementation through clearer, more effective policies and codes.

SPUR's goal with this report, however, is not to lay out an additional set of urban design guidelines. Many excellent guidelines exist in San Jose and the South Bay, but their impacts on the quality of the built environment have been limited. Getting to Great Places is a pragmatic effort aimed at making common sense improvements. While some of the recommendations are modest in scope, they are made with an eye to dramatic long-term improvements in San Jose's built environment.



In suburban settings like this one in San Ramon (left), residential areas are walled off from workplaces, retail, restaurants and other amenities. In contrast, walkable cities like San Francisco facilitate pedestrian connections (right).

For the purposes of this initiative, urban design is the physical organization of buildings, streets and open space into whole places that work for people. Urban design does not include architectural style and visual

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the urban design quality of most new development in San Jose falls far short. The vision is compelling, but the political will and policy apparatus are not yet sufficient to achieve it.

Major Project Goals

The recommendations in this report are intended to help San Jose accomplish the following:

Improve the development process

1. Increase the speed, certainty and quality of development
2. Provide support to decision-makers and city staff in upholding policies and implementing the General Plan vision
3. Build urban design knowledge, capacity and enthusiasm
4. Support General Plan implementation and Urban Village planning

Make San Jose more livable and attractive

5. Attract development that increases long-term economic value
6. Cultivate a better quality of life and sense of place
7. Attract top firms and top talent to San Jose

Build long-term sustainability

8. Support a shift to walking, cycling and transit
9. Create flexible places that can change over time
10. Align city resources and practices to realize efficiencies and support great places

If this problem were an easy one, it would have been solved long ago. There is tremendous vision and talent

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the most important policies and to suggest additional ideas and mechanisms.

Selected Recommendations

Getting to Great Places includes more than 50 recommendations addressing every aspect of the development process. Here are some of the key ideas. (For the complete set of recommendations, see the full report at www.spur.org/greatplaces.)

Make the Rules Matter

Today, many policies on the form and design of new development are vague or subject to negotiation through the political process. The Urban Village planning process provides an opportunity to revise zoning codes so that they reflect policy goals and increase certainty for developers.

- Create Urban Village zoning districts that include form controls. These should require fine-grained pedestrian circulation, buildings meeting the street, and integration with transit and public space.
- Establish a retail policy that discourages surface parking and encourages multilevel and pedestrianfriendly solutions in Urban Villages and Growth Areas.
- Revise fire, transportation and zoning codes to support more compact development.

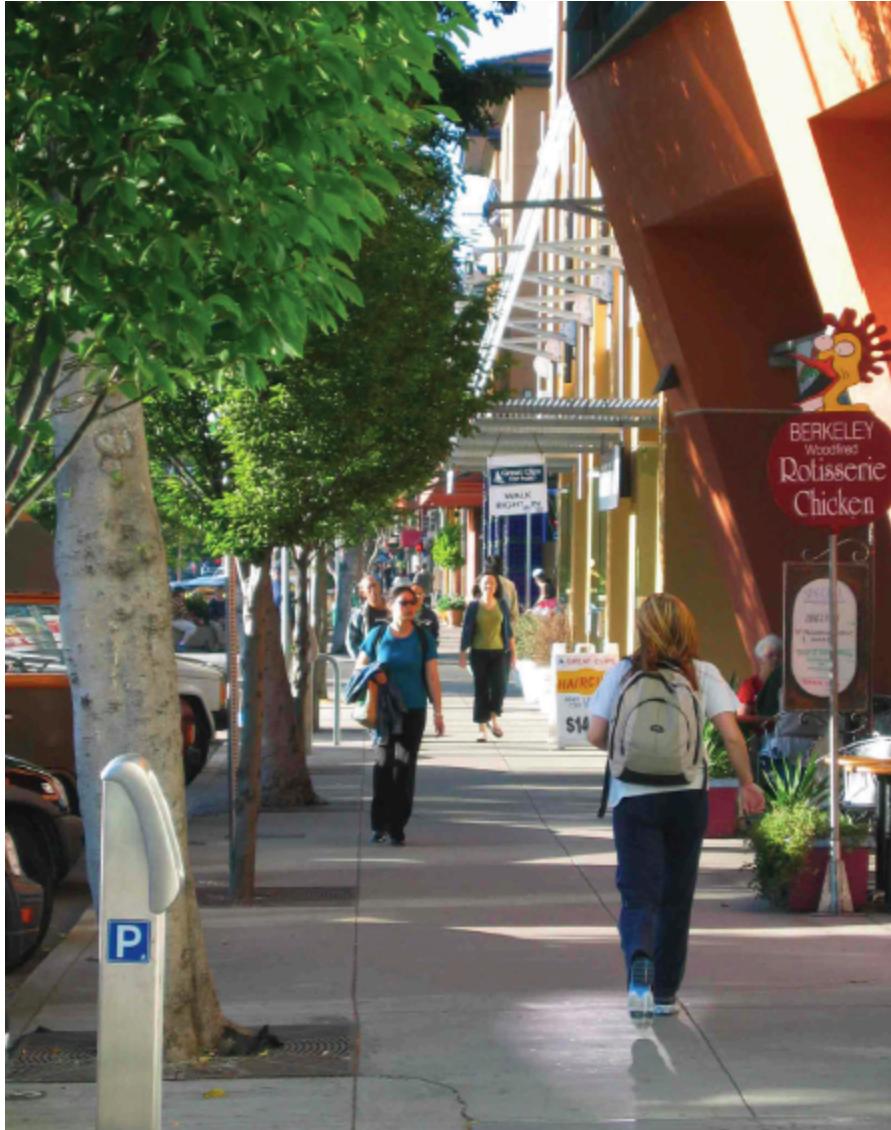


In many places built around the automobile, pedestrian access is an afterthought, as this abrupt San Jose sidewalk (above)

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Improve Design Review and Design Capacity

The City of San Jose has no full-time urban design staff, in contrast to San Francisco, which has more than 10. What design review exists is geared toward architectural aesthetics rather than the kinds of site planning fundamentals that determine whether a place will encourage walking and transit use.

- Hire dedicated urban design staff in the planning department and train existing staff in physical planning fundamentals.
- Require more detailed preliminary review of projects in Urban Village areas, especially in the early “napkin sketch” stages of site design, when changes are more feasible.

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Pedestrians on the Paseo de San Antonio in San Jose. **Density in itself is not enough: great walkable places depend on the integration of land uses into streets and public spaces designed for people. Everyone is a pedestrian, even if they arrive by car.**

Align Resources to Support General Plan Goals

Public resources are scarce and should be directed to solve multiple problems at once. Great places depend on every available dollar and every available mechanism working together. Public spaces can shape development, facilitate transit access, treat stormwater and support public life — but only if a strong vision is integrating all the pieces.

- Create one to three “catalytic clusters” where a sustained city effort combines high design standards, innovative financing strategies and partnerships with public, private, philanthropic and non-profit entities to model urban design excellence.
- Use post-redevelopment financing tools to implement public improvements in designated Urban Villages.
- Use existing funding streams (including parkland dedication fees, impact fees and construction taxes) more flexibly to implement complete, integrated, walkable places.

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Streets designed only to move cars result in intimidating unsafe environments for people (above). Creating “complete” streets that welcome a variety of travel modes is one key to a more walkable, livable city.

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Public space — like this greenway in Emeryville — can provide a framework and catalyst for new development, tying multiple projects into a single place.

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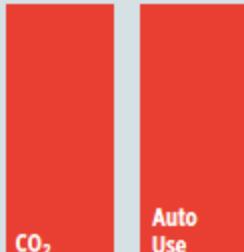


Sustainability

Urban dwellers consume far fewer resources and emit far less carbon than their suburban counterparts. Urban environments provide more activity in less space and facilitate access by foot, bike and transit. They save resources in transportation, energy, heating and cooling, and their compact physical footprint preserves land for open space and agriculture.

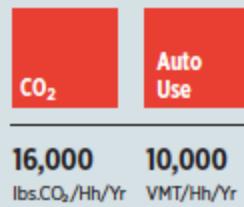
Low Density Single Family

<5
Dwelling units/acre



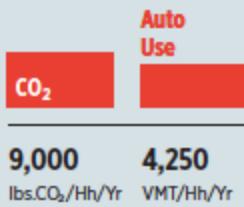
Transit-Oriented Multifamily

20-30
Dwelling units/acre



High-Density Urban

~100
Dwelling units/acre



CO₂ for all uses. All figures approximate. Data: Calthorpe Associates

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proximity," resulting in less driving and more walking, cycling and transit use. Density supports transit ridership, allowing for improved service. Walkable environments also support access and independence for people with limited mobility, including the elderly, the disabled and those without access to a car.



Prosperity and Economic Development

Many of today's most dynamic firms and workers — particularly in the knowledge and innovation sectors — are favoring urban lifestyles and amenities. Attractive and memorable places become self-reinforcing, drawing new investment and sustaining long-term value.



Public Life

Compact urban neighborhoods offer public places for people to interact with one another, gather together and build community. These activities build a positive sense of place and interconnectedness. Research has shown that people living in walkable neighborhoods trust their neighbors more, participate in community projects and volunteer more than those in less-walkable areas.



Public Health

America's sedentary lifestyle and the associated epidemics of obesity and chronic disease have been repeatedly linked to the auto-dependent built environment.



Social Equity

Where suburbs are heavily privatized, urban environments rely on public amenities like transit and open space, which are available to everyone. This is not only more efficient but more inclusive. Although urban areas can be expensive, suburban settings are especially punishing for low-income people, who find

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EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE BETTER URBAN DESIGN OUTCOMES ARE FLOURISHING NOW IN SAN JOSE. IN FACT, SOUND URBAN DESIGN principles have been articulated repeatedly in San Jose's city guidelines since the 1980s. But despite great strides in the downtown and some gradual improvement elsewhere, development here has not produced the kinds of pedestrianfriendly neighborhoods that can truly support a shift away from the private car. Financial pressures and fierce competition for employment uses have hampered the city's ability to uphold the principles espoused in its plans. Efforts to implement the General Plan are promising and ambitious, and our report is issued in the spirit of supporting its success.

SIDE BAR

Design for Walkability: Key Components

Although many detailed design guidelines exist in San Jose and elsewhere, distilling the fundamentals into an accessible “cheat sheet” can help project proponents, city staff and decisionmakers focus on the decisions that matter most. The seven components below outline the fundamentals of walkable design. Each is illustrated with diagrams by the architecture firm Gensler. The “better” condition shown in each example recognizes that these principles apply even where the ideal case is not feasible.

Fine-grained pedestrian circulation

Frequent and densely interconnected pedestrian routes are fundamental to walkability, shortening both actual and perceived distances. Described as finegrained circulation, this can be accomplished through smaller block sizes or throughblock access via publicly accessible alleys, pathways or paseos, coupled with frequent crosswalks. A good rule of thumb is that a comfortable walking environment offers a choice of route about once per minute, which is 200 to 300 feet at a moderate walking pace — typical of a traditional prewar city block. This not only allows efficient access but also provides visual interest and a sense of progress as new structures and intersections come into view with reasonable frequency. Large blocks or disconnected networks can dramatically increase walking distances and discourage pedestrian activity.

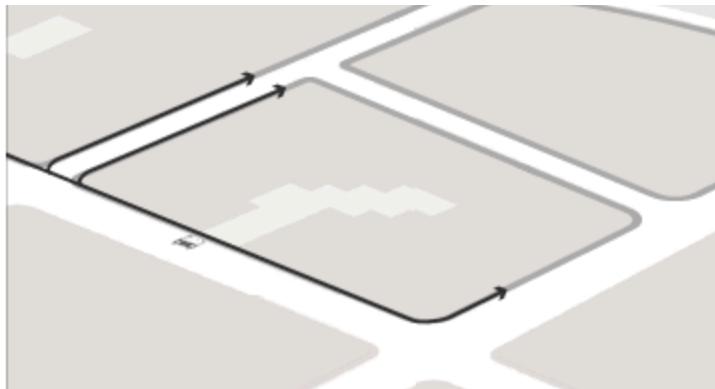
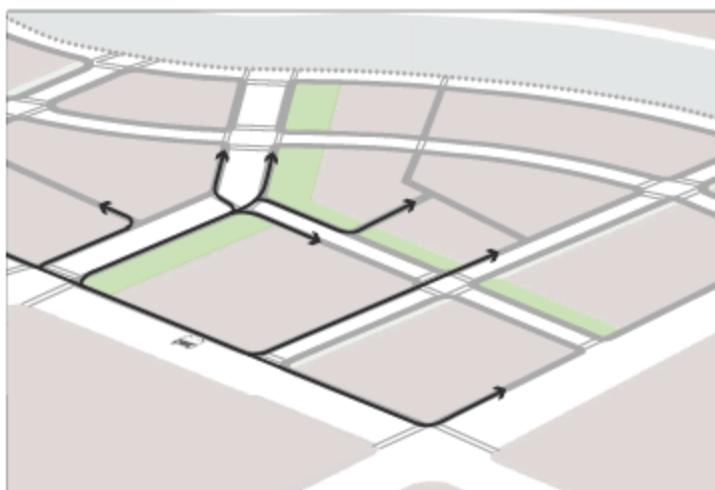
This kind of “permeability” is sometimes resisted by project proponents, who may cite security, property rights or site planning concerns. But street networks are fundamental to walking. Walking five 200-foot blocks through Portland, Oregon, is easy and comfortable. Walking the same thousand feet on a suburban commercial street, past a single distant building and no intersections, is very uncomfortable.

Not every location will reach an optimal condition, but if San Jose is to make significant progress toward its walkability and mode-share goals, this principle must be asserted broadly.

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Renderings courtesy Lewis Knight and Xiao Wu, Gensler

Buildings oriented to streets and open spaces

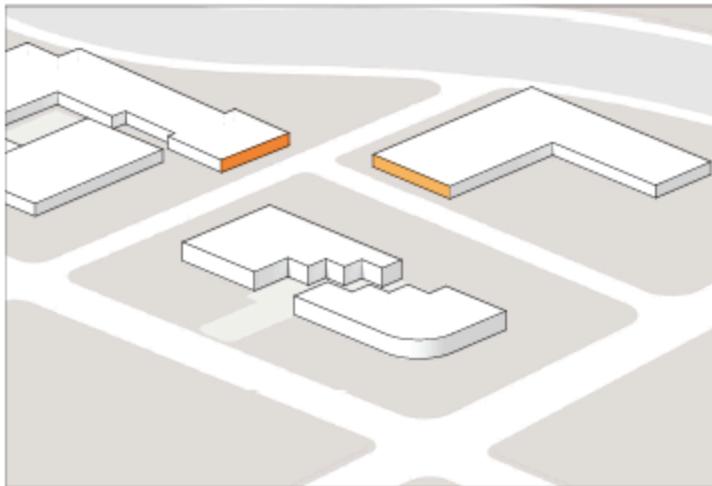
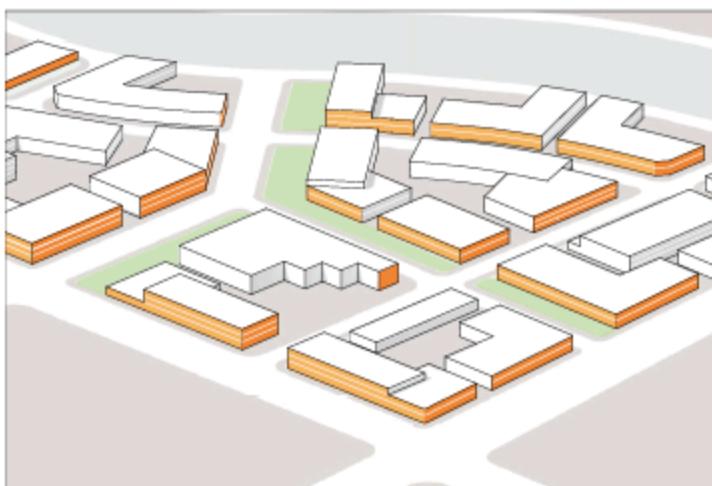
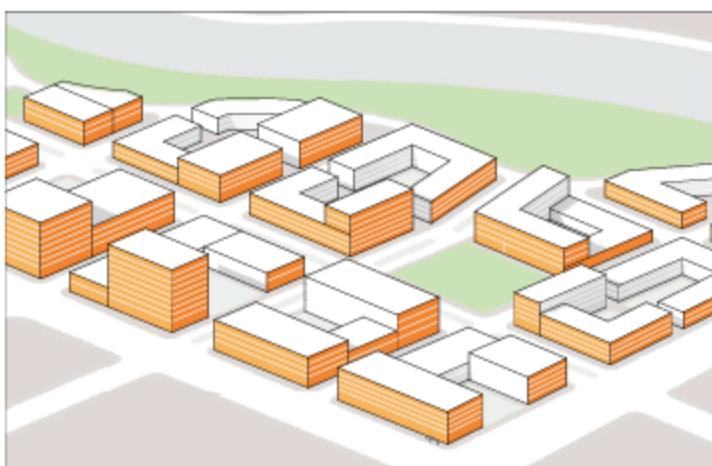
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and transit users that they are of secondary importance. Service functions, blank walls and driveways should be limited in size and placed to minimize disruption of pedestrian access.

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The way uses are arranged on a site has a major impact on the activity, vitality, security and identity of surrounding streets and spaces. Active uses such as retail, lobbies and event spaces, should be placed strategically along pedestrian routes to engage the public and should be designed for transparency and interest. Secure, private spaces can be placed at site interiors. Residential entrances should be designed to provide a graceful transition from public to private. Stoops, front porches, balconies and lobbies can all support privacy while promoting sociability and “eyes on the street.” Certain uses such as garages and cinemas, can be tucked deeply away, but their points of access can be major nodes of activity. Loading and utility spaces should be tucked away from pedestrian frontages.

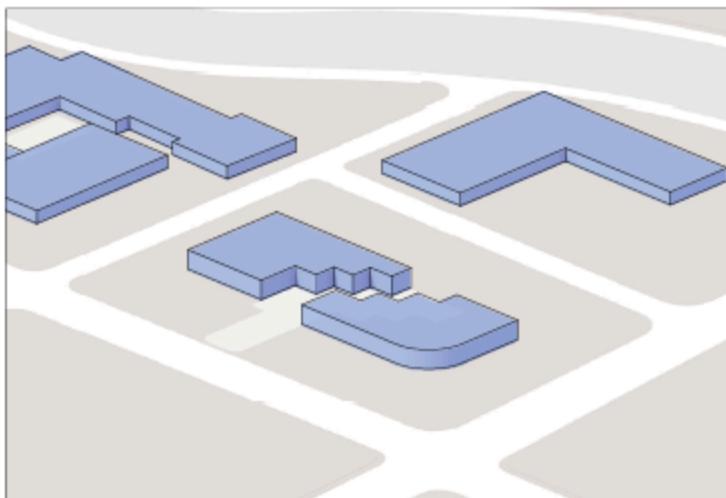
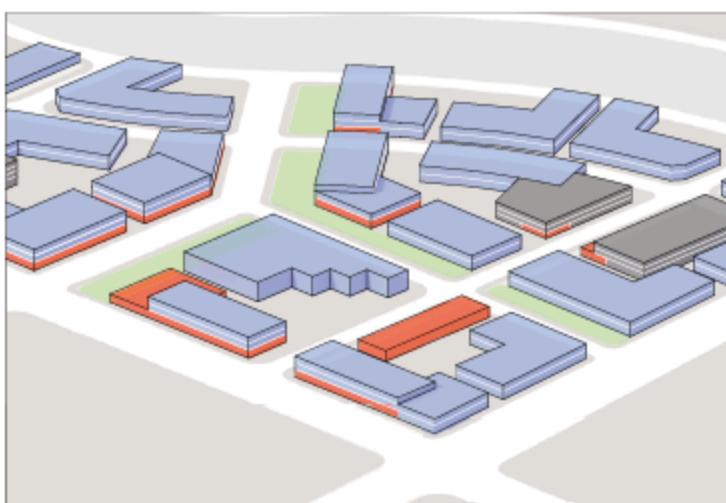
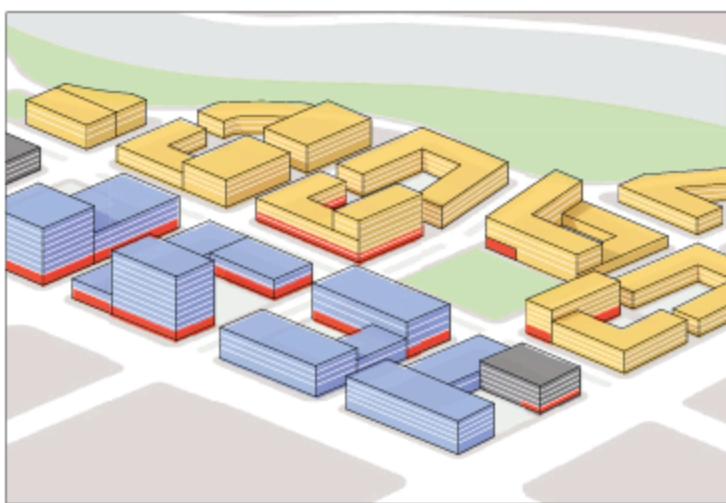
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 [Parking](#) [Public Open Space](#)**TYPICAL****BETTER****BEST**

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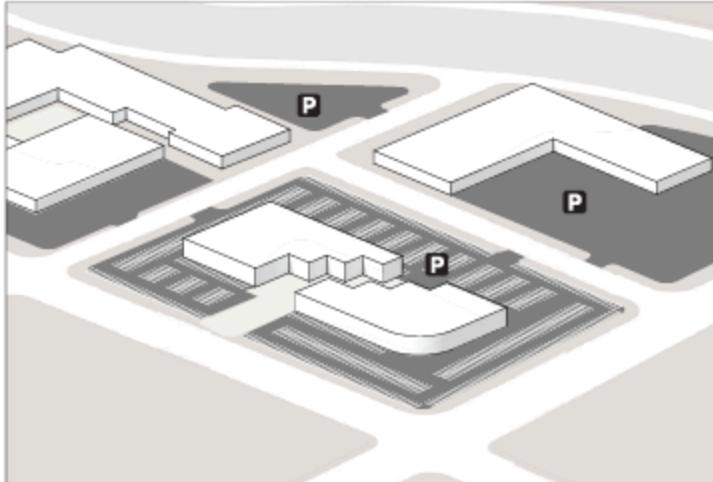
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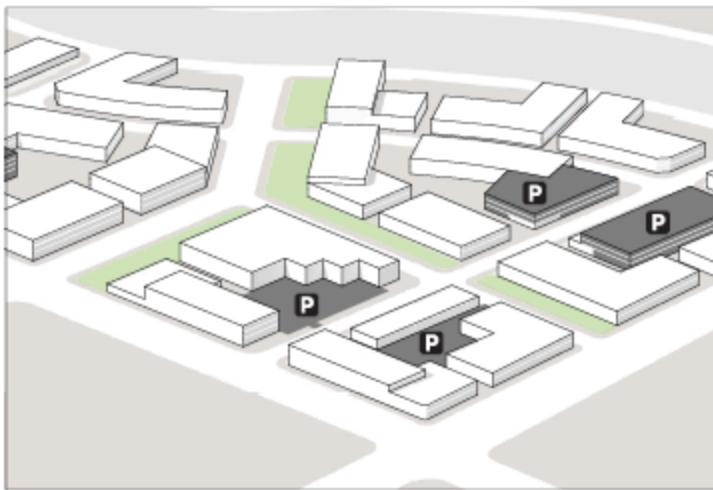
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In newer development, good places for people depend heavily on the almost accommodation of cars. Parking is an expensive, space-hungry and unattractive use, and a key driver of site planning and project finances. Parking should be structured where possible, and placed to avoid impacts on pedestrian spaces. Well-designed public or shared private garages can serve multiple buildings, draw people onto streets and allow for flexible management. Once parked, every driver becomes a pedestrian, so pedestrian garage exits should be located to support and enliven public spaces.

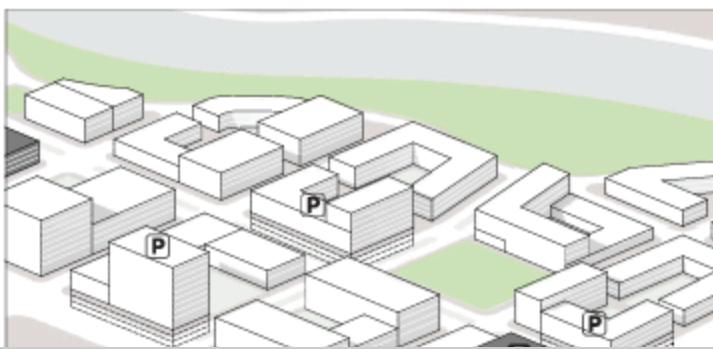
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Human-scale building and landscape detail

People experience the built environment at the scale of their own bodies in space. Buildings should meet and engage people at that scale, with awnings, facade elements, articulation, lighting, signage and other features along sidewalks. Even very large buildings can meet the human scale in a gracious and accommodating manner.

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lewis knight and Xiao Wu, Gensler

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Wide sidewalks — including elements like trees, lighting, street furniture, public art — are the city's connective tissue. In great walking cities like Barcelona and New York, sidewalks of 40 feet are not uncommon, but a well-designed 10-foot sidewalk can be adequate in some contexts. They should be arranged in a continuous network, with frequent, safe street crossings. Sidewalks, while fundamental, are only one part of a broader public realm. They should be seamlessly integrated with walkways, paseos, building entrances, transit facilities, plazas and parks. If people are to feel comfortable walking, the continuity of pedestrian access among major uses and amenities, including transit facilities, is essential.

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Streets can accommodate a variety of travel modes while also serving as public amenities, sites of commerce and green spaces. Roadways should be no bigger than necessary for their function and should apportion space safely among private vehicles, transit, bicycles and parking. If they are well designed, streets can move significant volumes of auto traffic and still support other activities. Small streets are equally important and can limit vehicular speeds and capacity in the service of other functions, from deliveries to social activity.

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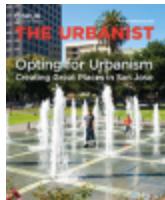
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Research assistance by Meghan Hade



Issue 528 | November 2013

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