Urban Design Review Processes and Practices: Lessons from Other Jurisdictions

The City of Calgary Urban Design & Heritage Team has undertaken extensive research into the urban design review processes in other North American cities as a means to identify potential gaps in our own processes, and opportunities to improve Administration's role in incorporating design review to achieve great outcomes.

Case Studies
The cities were selected based on:
1. Perceived quality of built environment;
2. Similar age and development pressures;
3. Comparable population.

The cities considered relevant to Calgary and included in this report are: Edmonton; Vancouver; Mississauga; Toronto; Ottawa; Victoria; Winnipeg; Halifax; Seattle and Portland.

Research Highlights
- Most have both an internal urban design team and an external peer review panel or committee.
- In most cases, the external panel is advisory to staff, not to a separate decision-making body. In some cases, staff is the decision-making body.
- Internal urban design team often guides the conversations with the external panel through preparation of specific questions.
- Urban design guidance is often either mandatory or "strongly encouraged" at early stages before the formal development permit process begins. In Calgary, the administrative processes already in place that could accommodate these early conversations are Explore and LOC.
- In many places, urban design recommendations have some measure of authority. Applications moving forward to decision without support from urban design review bodies are at significant risk of refusal.
- Many cities are currently reviewing their urban design review processes and referring to the processes of others to improve their position in achieving better urban design outcomes.

Objectives
The objectives that have been identified for the Urban Design Review Framework are recurring themes in many other jurisdictions, and echo concerns raised through engagement on past programs, as a means to create a clearer, more efficient decision framework to produce consistent outcomes faster and with greater certainty earlier in the process within an overall mandate of *achieving urban design excellence* (MDP). These objectives are:

- Provide for design input at the most effective points in process;
- Make the best use of local design expertise;

- Support informed design decision-making

The benefits of achieving these objectives are:

- Early and consistent design guidance saves time, money and frustration in the long run. Innovative proposals and good design can be supported and encouraged, and weaker schemes can be identified and improved at an early stage, when significant changes can be made with a minimum of wasted time and effort.
- Collaboration among related subject matter experts improves efficiency and capitalizes on the strengths that each group provides. The internal urban design team has the ability to work with applicants, planning and development staff, council and specific subject matter experts throughout the project on all application types, with an understanding of all municipal policies that affect a particular development. The expertise of the external Urban Design Review Panel builds on the skills of the design team with a focus on best practice and related professional practice. Currently, the expertise of the external Panel is requested once in the development permit review process.
- Provides assurance to planners, developers and decision-makers that they have had the best advice on design quality. In some cases, the subject matter experts themselves make the final design recommendation or design decision, rather than a general group with a varied skill set.

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Selected Summary of Cities Reviewed:

| City | Early Input | Use of Design Expertise | | | | | Decision Making |
	Early Design Input	Internal Urban Design Team	Role	External Panel/ Committee	Scope	Role	Body
Calgary	optional	yes	independent	Urban Design Review Panel (UDRP)	Private + public; specific; best practice	advisory to CPC; 1 review	single – Calgary Planning Commission
Edmonton	strongly encouraged	*currently re-building*	*under review*	Edmonton Design Committee	Private + public; specific; policy + best practice	advisory to staff; application does not move forward until EDC is satisfied; 2 reviews	separate – Development Officer (DO); Executive Committee of Council (ECC)
Vancouver	encouraged	yes	collaborative	Urban Design Panel	Private + public; City-wide; Policy + best practice if policy void	advisory to Council, the Director of Planning AND Development Permit Board; 2+ reviews	separate – Development Permit Board (staff); Vancouver Planning Commission — also Development Permit Advisory Board
Ottawa	mandatory internal UD review, optional UDRP review	yes	collaborative	Urban Design Review Panel	Private + public; specific; best practice	advisory to Planning Department; 2 reviews	Committee; Council

Role: Relationship with external group
Scope: Private or public; Policy-bound or best practice focus; Specific areas or city-wide
Decision making body: Single or separate

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Toronto	strongly encouraged	yes	collaborative	Design Review Panel	Public - City-wide; Private - specific; policy + best practice	advisory to staff; 2 reviews. Can recommend re-design to emphasise need for design excellence in public realm	City Council; Committee of Adjustment
Portland	mandatory internal urban design review, optional consult with Design Commission	yes	focus on creating urban design strategies and Design Guidelines (mandatory); engages design professional	Urban Design Panel	policy	advisory to Design Commission	separate – Design Commission; Planning Commission; Historic Landmarks Commission
Seattle	required – 3 alternative design concepts presented	yes	collaborative	Design Review Board	Private - specific; policy + best practice *under review*	decision making authority on private projects	Private work: Department of Construction and Inspections Director Public work: separate (both advisory to Council): Design Commission; Planning Commission

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Mississauga	required	yes	collaborative	Urban Design Advisory Panel	Specific; private + public; best practice	advisory to staff; multiple reviews if significant changes requested	Planning and Development Committee
Victoria	no	yes	collaborative	Advisory Design Panel. Also Heritage Advisory Committee and Advisory Planning Commission	Public - City-wide; Private - specific; best practice	Advisory to Council and Standing Committee	City Council
Winnipeg	yes	yes	Independent with distinct mandates; architectural design review by external committee only	Urban Design Advisory Committee	Private + public; specific; best practice. Recommendations are appealable	Advisory to Director of Planning regarding whether or not to grant urban design approval	Director, Standing Policy Committee of Council
Halifax	Initial inquiry meeting, followed by pre-application meeting	yes	collaborative	Design Review Committee (HRM by Design)	Private - specific; policy + best practice	Approving Authority for projects within defined area, bonusing	Design Review Committee
				Planning Advisory Committee	Private - specific	Advisory to Community Council	Community Council

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Decision making body: Single or separate