

## Chapter 22

# Urban Design and Historic Preservation



"Architecture is a continuing dialogue  
between generations which creates an  
environment across time."

Vincent Scully



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## 22.1 COMMUNITY CHARACTER

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Our community's character is the collective idea of what Spokane looks and feels like. It is Spokane's visual personality comprised of our more common buildings, streets, parks, and suburban developments, as well as our exceptional historic buildings, established neighborhoods, and tree-lined boulevards. It is the feeling that we get walking, driving, working, playing, and shopping in our streets, parks, businesses, and homes.

There is no one "character" of a city. A vibrant and exciting community has many places or areas of individual and unique character. All are special in their own right, and most deserve to be preserved because of historic significance, natural features, or the lifestyle of the occupants.

During the citizen participation process two major elements that contribute to the character of an urban community were identified: the neighborhoods and the downtown area.

### Neighborhoods

Spokane's neighborhoods are crucial to the city's livability and identity. They have experienced tremendous growth-related pressures, including increased traffic, crime, and encroaching, incompatible development. Newer neighborhoods have been built on the periphery of the city, often without essential commercial services for the residents, such as shopping, dining, and personal care services. Residents' reliance on the automobile to obtain services has increased traffic in the older neighborhoods. This increased traffic is detrimental to the character of those neighborhoods, causing damage to the pedestrian-oriented residential and commercial areas and making the streets congested and unsafe for the residents.

### Downtown Spokane

The character of the downtown area establishes the overall character of the whole city. The sites, sounds, smells, and textures all contribute to its character. A key issue facing Spokane is the need and method to revitalize the downtown area. The preservation of historic sites and structures and the incorporation of exemplary design principles into new development are tremendous opportunities for the revitalization of downtown Spokane. Citizens have voiced concerns about the current trend of demolishing existing buildings in order to build surface parking lots or quick and cheap "disposable" buildings with no enduring value or aesthetics. However, the opportunity still exists to reverse this trend. During the planning process, Dan Solomon, professor and urban design author, observed:

"I have 'historic envy' of Spokane. Across the country, architects and designers, like myself, are saying: 'I wish I was in Portland 10 years ago.' or, 'I wish I could have been in on the revitalization of Pike Place Market or San Francisco.' - I wish I could be in Spokane because you have all of the components for the same revitalization as these cities."

People are concerned that as new developments occur, traditional community character will be neglected or sacrificed, resulting in a decline in livability and quality of life. Many feel that new development needs to be appropriately located and designed to be compatible with the existing context and architecture of a particular area.

## 22.2 PRESERVING SPOKANE'S HISTORIC AREAS

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Preservation refers to the conservation of Spokane's cultural resources: the historic buildings, structures, and sites. Preservation helps the community maintain the things it values while accommodating growth. People who participated in the formulation of this plan told us they especially value our authentic, home-grown cultural resources that set us apart from other cities. We identify Spokane by the clock tower, the Monroe Street Bridge, the tree-lined streets in our older neighborhoods, Patsy Clark's, the Davenport, and many other reminders of our individuality. Cultural resources remind us of who we were, reveal who we are, and challenge us to consider who we want to become.

Cultural resources help us understand and value the legacy of our past but in many cases, they also provide cost effective construction. When Spokane encourages the recycling of homes and commercial buildings, we save money by not having to build new roads, sewers, or utilities. Preservation is not an obstruction to development or an indulgent nostalgia but a way to strengthen and revitalize the community. Preservation can involve using public policy to raise the awareness of our unique homes and neighborhoods and to save historic structures by offering incentives to private developers for renovation and development.

Spokane residents who helped develop this element of the plan spoke eloquently and from the heart about why cultural resources are important to the life of the city. They said:

*“Spokane has some fabulous architecture and great old buildings. We would be fools to not preserve them and enjoy them.”*

*“Spokane needs much more attention, focus, dedication of funds and energy to historic preservation in all areas.”*

*“With the falls and river, we have a very unique setting. We must maintain and preserve Spokane.”*

*“The public and policy makers do not yet understand the economic benefits of preservation and they need to be educated.”*

## 22.3 COMPATIBILITY OF DESIGN

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While change is inevitable, how that change occurs can make a great difference. Uncontrolled, unregulated change could damage the character of Spokane, its livable neighborhoods, and the general high quality of life. Ensuring that new development is designed to be compatible with its surroundings, both architecturally and functionally, lends to acceptance by the established residents while helping prevent degradation of the character of the particular area.

Compatibility of design refers to the appearance and use of the space or facility. Appearance relates to issues such as landscaping, signage, bulk, scale, siting, detailing, and materials. The use of space refers not only to its actual land use but also includes how the users experience the space, how it relates to surrounding buildings and facilities, and how circulation to and from the facility is accomplished.

In a direct way, compatible design helps to enable the cost effective use of existing infrastructure. Higher density of development allows the utilization of infrastructure capacity without the expense of the expansion of the street system, utility lines, and maintenance operations. Buildings and structures that are compatible, both aesthetically and functionally with their surrounding context, are more acceptable to the public than the “shoe box” architecture that obviously pays more attention to the “bottom line” than to being a good neighbor. It’s a way to increase the density and intensity of development in a manner that does not adversely impact the neighboring areas and character.

In the past, local architects and builders took the proximate buildings and developments into consideration when making their designs. Their buildings were intended to last the “test of time” and often bore the names of the owners as testament to their pride. It was quite apparent to the participants in the Horizons process that good design is lacking in many new developments and that new development needs to be more compatible and something in which we all can take pride.

The regulation of design issues is not an overreaction by local government nor an infringement upon individual property rights. It is permissible as an appropriate exercise of the regulatory powers of local government related to the issues of public health, safety, and welfare. Good design is not an indulgence but is important if we are to maintain the small town character, livable neighborhoods, and high quality of life of our community.

## 22.4 MAPS

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DP 1 Surveyed Historical Areas

DP 2 Historical Districts