

A Recap of the AIA Denver Housing Committee's Involvement in the Zoning Code Review Process – submitted by Paul Brady, AIA

Over the last 14 months, members of the AIA Denver Housing Committee (often with the Urban Design Committee) took the lead in the design and development community to review, test, and help improve the new formed base zoning code for the city of Denver. During that time, nearly 40 members actively contributed in various ways, including applying the new code to previously built and other test projects, reading and reviewing the code, and attending meetings and other working sessions with the Denver Community Planning Department (CPD). During these working sessions, members worked directly with staff members from CPD, and with an open dialogue, had productive discussions that directly informed and influenced the subsequent drafts.

One of the biggest fears and complaints our group had while reviewing the code was the worry that the code would limit design freedom and too closely dictate form. In the early drafts, there were many provisions, such as a regulated finished floor height, maximum wall plate height, specified front and side wall offsets and the unspecified but graphically depicted intended forms that would have added additional design limitations. For instance, the specified maximum wall plate height eliminated the option to have raised entry features that would fit within the previous code's permitted bulk. The AIA Denver Housing Committee's Working Group communicated this concern to CPD, and they changed the later versions by removing many of those restrictions and choosing to continue using the bulk plane with little regulation to what happens within.

Another large part of the group's review of the zoning code focused on calibrating the specifics of the code, to ensure that it worked as intended and didn't place over-burdensome or nonsensical restrictions on development within the city. Two examples of the group's efforts are the suburban height restriction and the side yard setback on the small urban lots less than 6000 square feet. First, CPD and the Planning Board had observed there was a difference in structures height between the Urban and Suburban contexts and intended the code to respond appropriately; it was with great help from the members of the AIA Denver Housing Committee that CPD staff finally settled on a bulk plane requirement that did such. The side yard setback example again started with an observation that, in the oldest neighborhoods in Denver, the side yard setback was almost always less than 5'. This observation by members of the AIA Denver Housing Committee found support with CPD staff on the newly permitted small lots less than 6000 sf.

While there were many issues where the working group and CPD staff found common ground, there were some that caused disagreement. For instance, the issues of solar access and density were issues where no clear consensus was formed. With regard to solar access, many wanted to see a means for greater solar access designed into the code; however this would require additional restrictions on height and design freedom, something most of the group were very resistant to. Everyone realized the importance of sustainable design for the future of Denver. Achieving greater solar access could also result in less density, another key part of a sustainable future. Furthermore, the group was somewhat divided on the issue of density. Some wanted to preserve and increase the allowed density in the city, while others were concerned that the existing context in some neighborhoods didn't support the maximum potential of the current zoning, and didn't want to see that preserved or increased in the new code. In the end, while the group didn't reach consensus on these issues, our exploration of both sides and the discussions with CPD staff helped bring awareness to the issues and allowed the CPD staff to make a fully informed compromise.

The zoning code is a complex tool that has far reaching, long term impacts. Issues like solar access, density and others are often interrelated and ever evolving. Another important aspect of the code is the zoning maps: they identify how the individual parts of the city are classified, and their proper application is essential to the success of the code. While members of the AIA Denver Housing Committee had an opinion on the application of the zone districts, they were not given the opportunity to review the maps.

Besides being an integral partner with the CPD staff, members of the Housing Committee worked with other groups in the city, including the Home Builders Association, the Realtors Association, Friends of Granny, the Inter Neighborhood Council and neighborhoods themselves to share with them our observations and lead a coordinated response to the city. As the main users of the zoning code, architects are the best professionals to analyze and interpret the code and share with these other individuals the changes and impacts it will have. As a result of this coordination, these associations have been able to be involved in the process and with their input, the code has become stronger. Finally, the Housing Committee has held two separate learning sessions open to all members of AIA Denver and provided 2.5 continuing education credits.

Moving forward, the members who have lead this review now find themselves as experts in the new code and continue with AIA Denver to lead in the communities understanding and future use of the new code. Also, the Community and Planning Department expects that during the first year of the new code, issues will arise and AIA Denver will continue to work with the professionals at CPD to modify and update the zoning code.