

# Working Together for Quality Public Design

## DDC | PDC Design Review Recommendations

December 2023

The NYC Public Design Commission (PDC) and the Department of Design and Construction (DDC) are committed to delivering high-quality public buildings and infrastructure to communities across New York City. Working together, we have identified opportunities to improve the City's design review process to streamline capital project delivery while building on our joint legacy of innovation and excellence in design.

These recommendations are the result of a year of in-depth engagement between the agencies. A dedicated working group comprised of DDC staff, PDC staff, PDC commissioners, and Deputy Mayor teams undertook an intensive series of workshops to better understand the process and experience of design review from multiple perspectives, to identify what is working well and where challenges lie, and to brainstorm ways to improve. Complementing this effort was the release of a comprehensive survey to NYC design professionals and DDC staff. The result is six overarching recommendations that our teams will work to implement in 2024 and beyond in partnership with the City's capital agencies.

### 1. Establish a recurring process for evidence-based evaluation and change.

*We will regularly review and evaluate the project review process with our agency partners.*

#### The Issue:

The current design review process is complex. PDC reviews hundreds of project submissions every year on a strict monthly schedule to support effective design reviews. PDC has a regimented set of requirements for submitting City agencies. Currently there is no formalized process in which PDC and City agencies regularly review and revise these procedures. This can make it difficult to incorporate feedback, lessons learned, or changing conditions, such as the piloting of alternative project delivery methods.

#### Recommendations:

- PDC will establish a recurring, interagency exchange to discuss capital agencies' quantitative and qualitative data on how design review processes are working, allowing future opportunities to simplify or refine parts of the process where needed.
- PDC will consider the benefits of incorporating technology solutions into the design review process and explore how these may make certain tasks quicker and easier.

### 2. Make the design review process clear and accessible.

*PDC will improve the public materials on its website to further clarify the design review process.*

#### The Issue:

The design review process can feel unclear, as the steps for project submission and review are not always obvious to designers and agency staff. This makes it hard to know when feedback and approval will happen and what design changes may be required, creating a perception of risk to project schedules and budgets.

Recommendations:

- PDC will update application forms, project submission checklists, and other guides and resources to better explain the design review process.
- At public meetings, PDC will communicate its core mission of achieving quality public design to remind people what design review aims to achieve.

### 3. Clarify the approval path for different project types.

*PDC will clarify the approval paths for different project types.*

Issue:

PDC reviews projects at different points and stages within the design cycle depending on the type and complexity of the project, but the submission pathway for a given project is not always clear to agencies and applicants.

Recommendations:

- PDC will clarify the different approval paths, distinguishing between complex projects that require multiple points of design review and less complex projects that require a single design review.

### 4. Streamline the process for non-complex projects.

*PDC will continue to streamline the review process for simple projects.*

Issue:

Each design review submission takes time and resources to prepare and advance through the approval process, including by the design team, agency staff, PDC staff and commissioners.

Recommendations:

- PDC will explain and standardize submission requirements for simple (non-complex) projects.
- PDC will raise awareness about its staff-level delegated review process and citywide blanket approvals to expedite design review for simple projects.
- PDC will create a process to analyze submission data and identify if any opportunities exist to expand projects that can be reviewed by staff without requiring additional time for commissioner review.
- PDC and agencies will clarify the faster timeframes to review simpler projects.

### 5. Ease the approval path for complex projects.

*For complex projects, PDC and DDC will improve coordination, offer early guidance, and provide flexible options to get feedback incorporated within timeline constraints.*

Issue: Large projects have many approval steps with different stakeholders, including other City agencies, technical experts, and community boards. Capital agency project timelines do not always line up well with PDC submission deadlines or other milestones. In addition, many applicants do not know that PDC can provide early or informal guidance to ensure a smoother process.

### Recommendations:

- PDC will offer teams the option of addressing feedback within one review cycle, by inviting more teams to present projects in early stages of development as part of the monthly public meetings, thereby increasing dialogue and transparency with the Commission.
- PDC and DDC will review opportunities to expand informal touchpoints and will communicate more broadly about pre-submission services, including informal reviews to give initial feedback, workshops to guide projects in early development, and opportunities to debrief comments and discuss design changes when needed.
- DDC, and other agencies, will formalize forecasting meetings with PDC, to communicate upcoming priority projects, and share what's in the pipeline of projects.
- DDC, and other agencies, will update their submission materials to include information about aspects of the design and scope of the project that are flexible vs. fixed, to guide PDC staff in communicating project parameters to commissioners.
- DDC, and other agencies, will evaluate how they can further align their milestones and requirements with PDC's monthly public meetings, so stakeholder agencies can make timely decisions.
- PDC, DDC and other agencies will communicate to applicants that design changes are to be achieved within the overall project scope, schedule, and budget, and will highlight the opportunities to ask clarifying questions of PDC staff via agency liaisons.

## **6. Amplify opportunities for public input during the design process.**

*PDC and DDC will communicate all options for public input and make sure community board feedback is incorporated early in the design process.*

### Issue:

PDC meetings allow members of the public a guaranteed opportunity to provide input on project designs via public testimony. However, other chances for public engagement through Community Boards (CBs) are not always clear or may occur too late in the process. This can occasionally extend review timelines.

### Recommendations:

- PDC, DDC, and other agencies will better explain the ways that members of the public can give design feedback by clearly outlining community engagement opportunities.
- DDC and other agencies will schedule Community Board reviews earlier in the design timeline and will communicate subsequent design changes to the Community Board and schedule follow-up meetings, as necessary.
- PDC, DDC, and other agencies will clarify for applicants that Community Board meeting notes from the agency can be substituted for formal Community Board letters or be provided in addition to the CB letter if the CB wishes to provide one.
- DDC and other submitting agencies will document all significant community feedback, including outside of formal community board engagement, and include those materials within their PDC submissions.

## DDC | PDC Design Review Reform Recommendations

### Team List

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