

The City of Albany Design Guidelines for Residential Renovations and New Construction



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Table of Contents

Page

Introduction

1. Albany 'Styles' and Goals
2. Use of the Guidelines
3. Design Review by the Planning and Zoning Commission
4. Variances

The Essentials

1. The front yard is the house's "contribution to the Street
2. Every house needs a usable front porch
3. Garages should have single-car doors and attractive
4. Multi-story homes and Second-story additions
5. Dormers and bays are encouraged
6. Trim and details give a house warmth and character
7. Building materials
8. Green Building
9. Second units and Multi-family housing
10. Landscaping

Introduction

Purpose and Goals of the Guidelines

The City of Albany is a small, walkable, urban community in an urban area, approximately 1.7 square miles in size. The City was subdivided in the 1920's into 2,500-5,000 sq. ft. lots with smaller homes, many of which are nonconforming by current development standards. There is a rich and diverse range of architectural designs found in the city, for example, California Bungalows, Tudor, Mission, modern/contemporary, etc. In the late 1920's, Charles MacGregor was a predominate developer, building more than 1,500 homes in the city. His homes are today referred to as "MacGregors." There is also a warm, small city feel in Albany that is unique in the Bay Area and is also what is enjoyed by existing residents and attractive to new residents.

The design guidelines have been created to assist applicants, neighbors, staff and commissioners in understanding and applying Albany's Planning and Zoning Code while also communicating the City's design goals through explanations and examples of high quality solutions. The intent of the guidelines is to provide specific design elements that encourage thoughtful development, interaction between neighbors and a sense of community in an urban environment.

The guidelines are meant to enhance, and not restrict architectural creativity in a city where there is no one dominant architectural style. It is acknowledged that there are a variety of budgets, needs and desires by residents, which all need to be balanced to provide high quality

homes that are a pleasure to live in as well as live among. Thoughtful application of the guidelines and a sensitive design that is well detailed, using quality materials, reduces the potential for conflict. Applicants are highly encouraged to talk to neighbors about their development needs, options and design proposals.

Use of the Guidelines

The "lead dog" in development is the Planning and Zoning Code. Municipal Code Section 20.24.020 provides the development standards for all residential zoning districts, which include all setbacks, height, FAR, etc requirements. Compliance with the Code's development standards improves the likelihood of a favorable outcome in the Design Review process.

Project development proponents such as architects, designers, homeowners, contractors and developers should use the guidelines to plan additions or new development. Planning staff will rely on the guidelines as a basis for providing and supporting recommendations for design changes. The Planning and Zoning Commission will use the guidelines as a basis for approving or denying applications for design review of residential projects. Finally, neighbors of project proponents may utilize the guidelines to understand the City's design criteria and goals.

It is suggested that applicants make an appointment to meet with City planning staff early in the design process for details on the Planning and Zoning Code and these Design Guidelines. These

meetings can be used to identify solutions to design challenges and ensure the applications are processed as quickly as possible and address

Design Review by the Planning and Zoning Commission

A public hearing of the Planning and Zoning Commission is required for the review of any addition over 240 sq. ft. or any second-story addition. All public hearings are required to be noticed to neighbors of the project 10-days before the hearing date.

Municipal Code Section 20.100.050 is the legislative code section regarding "Design Review." Many different aspects of a project may be discussed during a design review hearing. The following are prevalent issues that are often discussed and applicants will want to keep in mind while designing their projects:

- Floor-Area-Ratio (FAR), which is the total building square footage (building area) divided by the site size square footage (site area). The intent of an FAR requirement is to guide the mass of buildings. Municipal Code Section 20.24.050 is the legislative code section regarding "FAR." There are several adjustments to gross square footage allowed per the code.
- Fire sprinklers are required for projects that include renovations or additions that are equal or greater than fifty percent or more of the existing floor and the new floor area is 1,500 sq. ft. or more.

- Landscape and hardscape should be complimentary and reflect the character of the home.

Variances

Variances are “exceptions” to zoning requirements that may be granted to projects with unusual or unique physical circumstances. For example, an odd shaped lot, topography constraints, etc. Findings, found in Municipal Code Section 20.100.040, must be made in order to grant a variance. The findings that must be made relate to physical circumstances on a property that distinguish the property from other nearby properties. Since most parcels in Albany have a similar size, shape, and topography, variances are seldom approved. The Planning and Zoning Code can, however, in some cases, provide flexibility in respect to parking, setbacks, building height, etc.

The 10 Essentials

The following guidelines have been deemed important elements of residential design in the City of Albany. Planning & Zoning Commissioners will be considering these as they review projects. This does not mean that every one of these is directly applicable to every project and site, but some attention paid to the spirit of each Essential is strongly recommended.

1. The Front Yard is the House's "Contribution" to the Street



- Narrow frontages create an urban environment where the streetscapes create the areas where neighbors interact.
- Short, decorative fences, arbors, and porches are all encouraged to create attractive, and inviting entrances to homes, see Municipal Code Section 20.24.110 for size limitations.
- Landscaping of the front yard dictates the character of the entire street block.
- Consider using higher quality building materials, architectural detail, or special accents in the entry area.
- Existing and proposed trees should be shown on Design Review Submittals.

2. Every House Needs a Usable Front Porch



- Porches create the transition between the public street and private home.
- Front porches can be part width or full width.

- Zoning: porches and decks are included in floor-area-ratio calculations when there are 3 or more sides, roofs count as a side). Porches can encroach 6' into the front or rear yard setbacks.
- The front elevation is the most visible façade of the home. Details such as the porch materials, railing, architectural style, etc can all contribute to the aesthetics of the front façade.
- Front porches contribute to the warmth of the street block, thus fully enclosing or removing existing porches is not encouraged.
- Stairs should be gracious and proportionate to the porch and structured stairs are not allowed to project beyond 6' into the front yard. Steps on grade may be built within the setback.

3. **Garages and Parking are Important Considerations on Albany's Small Lots**



- As a result of a voter-approved amendment to the Planning and Zoning Code, two off-street parking spaces are required for an increase of 220 sq. ft. or more of habitable space. The parking spaces can be provided in a variety of ways including tandem, open, covered or enclosed, in the side or rear yards.

A special exception is required if parking is to be provided in the front yard or to exempt a required parking space. See Municipal Code Section 20.28.030 for parking dimensions, exceptions, etc.

- Where front yard parking is permitted, it should make an aesthetic contribution to the street (pervious parking, stone, cobble pavers, or any material that improves the existing paving) and mitigate visual impacts of a vehicle parked in the front yard.
- Attached garages should not be more than 40% of the building width, single car garages are preferred and separate garage doors if a two-car garage is proposed.
- The style of the garage door should be consistent with the home. Various type of materials such as steel, glass, sculpted wood, etc are acceptable
[INSERT SAMPLE PHOTOS]
- Creative solutions to parking are encouraged!
[INSERT 843 EVELYN SITE PLAN (garage with two doors)]
- Whenever possible, pull the garage back from the front façade as much as possible.
- Minimize the width of the driveway and curb cut.

- Where feasible locate curb cuts to maintain on street parking spaces.
- See item #10 "Bay Friendly Landscaping" for more suggestions.

4. Multi-story Homes and Second-story Additions



- In designing additions and new homes neighboring homes should be considered in regards to preserving privacy and reducing overall impacts. For attic spaces within sidewalls, low-plate heights and sloping ceilings can achieve interior volumes without adding excessive height and bulk to an addition.
- Extra care should be taken when approaching floor-area-ratio limits. Projects that exceed 0.45 floor-area-ratio may be subject to extra study in the design review of the project and analysis of impacts.
- The roofline is important. Low eave lines, plate heights and sloped ceilings are all encouraged to reduce mass.
- Roof types and slopes should be consistent and complimentary with the overall character and style of home.
- The addition should be well integrated into the existing home, such that it looks like it was part of the original structure, or is a well designed, well proportioned and complimentary addition.
- Solar access (see CA state law)—[INTERPRET HERE]

- There is no rule for where a second-story shall be located; however, topography, depth, setbacks, sun orientation, etc are all important considerations in deciding the optimal location for an addition.
- Lifting a home and building habitable space on the ground floor can be a viable option in certain circumstances. Potential issues include the overall height, proportions of stairways, and seismic strength. Meeting the requirements of the Planning and Zoning Code and intent of these design guidelines is still required.

5. Dormers and Bays are Encouraged



[NEW PHOTOS—DIFFERENT TYPE OF DORMER (PEAKED?)]

- Dormers can add visual interest and reduce the bulk of a second-story while still providing increased interior space, and in some cases can be built within the existing roof framing.
- Bay windows are allowed to encroach into required setbacks (see Municipal Code 20.24.060). Bays add to the character of the home and break up wall planes.

- Dormers and bays can be an affordable way to create space without the added cost of new foundations.
- In Albany, the width of bays cannot exceed 25% of any wall plane, and may extend to the floor.

6. Trim and Details Lend a House Warmth and Character



[NEED MORE GOOD PHOTO EXAMPLES]

- Trim and details should be consistent in style, regardless, of whether the architectural style of the home is to change or remain the same. Find a charming element on home and repeat it, carry it through the design.
- Window and door placement have a huge impact on the aesthetics of building facades.

- Regarding windows: the surface of the glass shall be recessed at least 2" from the wall plane to provide an adequate shade and shadow, unless approved otherwise by the Planning Commission in Design Review.
- True divided lites or surface applied simulated muntins are strongly encouraged and required when featured on the front façade.
- Decorative architectural details that are present on the existing home can be repeated on the addition to create consistency and better integrate the addition into the home.
- Details such as eaves, brackets, awnings, trellises, decorative vents, etc are expected to add character and architectural interest to a home.
- Where traditional trim details are being utilized, actual sills (drip ledges) should be used as well.
- Handrails and guardrails should be well-proportioned and integrated into the design.
- Shutters, when used, should be sized to cover the windows they are adjacent to, and are ideally functional.

- Exterior light fixtures shall be complementary to the character of the home, shielded, and pointed downwards (per conditions of approval).
- See the recommended reading list in the Appendix for more ideas.

7. Choose Building Materials that are Durable and Attractive

[pictures of various preferable materials]

- Only quality materials, both aesthetically and environmentally, should be considered.
- The weight and finish of a building material can change the overall appearance of a home.
- Finishes contribute to the overall appearance of the house. New materials should be at least consistent with, if not better than, the original finish materials.
- Building materials do not necessarily need to match those of the existing or be consistent throughout the home. Multiple building materials can be acceptable and even desirable when proportioned and distributed well.
- Materials should not terminate at the corners of the building.

8. Green Building is a Prerequisite of Every Albany Home



- A total of at least 50 points on Built It Green's rating system are needed for every project, regardless of size. see www.greenpointrated.org.
- Passive solar design can maximize the energy efficiency of a home with simple considerations such as home placement, window coverings, overhangs, landscaping, etc.

- Solar panel placement is important. They should be located in areas that provide maximum functionality and sun exposure, and be installed in an aesthetically appropriate manner. Panels should be integrated into the overall design and parallel the roof slope when feasible. Solar installation should be shown on the Design Review Submittal.
- Insulation, quality windows, weather-stripping, etc. are all easy ways to increase the energy efficiency of the home.
- Salvaged materials support the reuse of existing resources, can be of lower cost and may provide aesthetically unique design elements.
- Say 'no' to vinyl siding. The City has a policy against the use of vinyl siding for both environmental and aesthetic reasons. No-maintenance materials are often a false economy. They cannot be repaired or maintained, and so by definition they have a limited life.
- Local Incentives Points include seismic upgrades, projects that are small or minimally increase the size of the home, planting an additional street tree, and other priorities (see the current Albany Greenpoints list).

- Note: 50 Albany Greenpoints does not necessarily earn an official 'greenpoint rated' project. Contact Build It Green to earn the certificate.



9. Second units and Multi-family housing

[NEED PHOTO]

- As a result of a voter-approved amendment to the Planning and Zoning Code, two off-street parking spaces are required for both second-units and multi-family housing units, regardless of the size or number of bedrooms.
- There are specific floor-area-ratio, height and daylight plane requirements for multi-family housing that differ than those for single-family homes.
- Second units are encouraged, and whether detached or attached, should complement the home and be integrated into the overall design.
- Smaller multi-family projects should be approached, in regards to design, like “big houses”.
- Second units are limited to 650 sq. ft. and require a parking space. See the Municipal Code on secondary residential units (20.20.080) and parking space requirements (20.28.030) for more detailed information.

10. Bay-Friendly Landscaping



[INSERT PHOTO]

- Pervious paving materials other than concrete are encouraged.
- Hollywood strip driveways are encouraged.
- Native, drought-resistant plants are encouraged.
- Consult the Bay-Friendly Landscaping Guidelines for types of plants, irrigation, and maintenance.
- Integrated Pest Management is encouraged as a way to mitigate insects, plant diseases, weeds, and other pests without the use of pesticides.

- Conservation of water can be implemented by designing on-site rainwater collection and by using recycled or graywater.

Recommended Reading List

Get Your House Right: Architectural Elements to Use & Avoid

Marianne Cusato and Ben Pentreath with Richard Sammons and Leon Krier.
Sterling Publishing Co., Inc. 2007

Field Guide to American Houses

Virginia and Lee McAlester. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1984.

Rehab Right

Helaine Kaplan Prentice and Blair Prentice. Ten Speed Press, 1986