Objective Design Standards for 1–4 Family and 1–3 Story Multifamily Development

Workshop #2 Summary Notes

Date: April 17, 2025. 5:00 PM – 6:30 PM

Key Topics:

Context Determination for Corner Lots

Discussion on how to determine context for corner buildings and whether buildings across side streets should be included.

OHA: Context for corner buildings should consider both facing and caddy-corner buildings. If a cross street is narrow, buildings across it should count as context.

Staff: Keeping context to the immediate block is simpler and more focused on the actual context in places where it is the strongest. Crossing side streets adds complexity, especially if zoning or context differs.

OHA Suggestion: Use a two-system approach — one for APIs/ASIs (allowing across-the-street context), and another for general areas.

Staff: this approach will increase the complexity for applicants and for staff to verify the conformance significantly, while only capturing a very small number of potential cases. ODS need to remain as simple as possible to follow and verify and cover the majority of cases. The idea behind ODs is streamlining of housing approvals. Additional complexities are inconsistent with this goal as they require more time from both applicants and staff.

PB: This should be limited only to APIs and ASIs to preserve distinctiveness.

Rhythmic Massing and Facade Articulation

Debate on 1-foot façade modulation as an optional feature among others to provide design flexibility - not a mandatory choice feature.

PB (Question): Why impose 1-foot modulation requirements for 1–3 story buildings when those were originally a solution for large 4+ story buildings?

Staff (Answer): The 1-foot modulation is **optional** and intended to provide flexibility in façade design. It doesn't impact floor plans. It's one of many design options (e.g., bay windows, porches) that allow for creative approaches for appropriate multifamily buildings such as townhomes and rowhomes,

with staff relying on examples built in Oakland. This articulation method is used widely I recent developments in Oakland and staff wants to keep this in the toolkit as an optional feature.

Blank Wall Standards

Concerns about blank upper facades at the tops of the buildings and recommendations for horizontal articulation such as cornices or moldings on tall parapets to prevent 'top-heavy' building appearance.

OHA: Top edges with blank parapets feel heavy. Even modest molding could improve them. Suggest limiting this new standard to APIs/ASIs.

Staff: It's worth a discussion. Caution against mandating traditional elements like cornices — may preclude modern cleaner more austere designs.

OHA Clarification: Not asking for ornate detailing, just a *modest* horizontal articulation (e.g., 4–6 inch band with 1–2 inch projection) to break up the mass visually.

OHA: Also recommends 25% wall transparency for residential upper floors to prevent blank facades. Why not include this in ODS?

Staff: Transparency standards are Planning Code issues, not ODS. Residential transparency isn't currently required but can be discussed as a change in Planning Code. This can be difficult for staff to verify and create more work and make ODS review more onerous and time-consuming. Every additional ODS makes the review more complex for applicants and staff. This is inconsistent with the goal of ODS to streamline project approvals, especially when we are talking about 1-4 Family buildings or smaller multifamily development. Staff is not convinced we need transparency requirements for residential uses. Windows can be closed/draped by residents.

Window Typical "Wood" Dimension and Additional Submission Requirements/Feasibility

Discussion around additional detailed window dimension requirement to match "typical wood" dimensions using a diagram.

OHA (Question): How do we define "wood-like appearance"? Suggest specifying dimensions of window features (e.g., recess depth, rail width).

Staff (Answer): Concerned about feasibility — off-the-shelf windows may not match dimensions; custom specs could increase project costs.

OHA: Diagrams can be reused in applications, minimizing design work. Flexible ranges in dimensions could address staff concerns.

Staff: Every overly detailed standard adds verification time for staff and can be onerous on inexperienced applicants. Need to balance design detail requirements with staff capacity/streamlining goals. We must consider applicant's ability.

OHA: Suggest using a diagram-based approach as in Alameda to simplify verification.

Staff: Concerned about adding more prescriptive requirements on applicants and staff. If OHA's research already found that most windows that can be purchased off the shelf match the OHA desired "typical wood" dimensions, then why require additional detailed standards?

OHA: Reuse of standard diagrams avoids extra costs. Recommends aligning with Standard 5.8C, using "typical dimensions" to define "wood-like."

Historic Detailing

OHA Recommendation to allow matching ornamentation and detailing unless restricted by federal historic preservation standards.

OHA: Historic Preservation Element allows detailing to match existing buildings unless federal oversight applies. Recommends removing any prohibition on ornamentation.

Staff to consider all comments.