1999 COMMUNITY CENTER LEVY PROGRAM

Design Principles

For Community Center Designs

Belltown Community Center
High Point Community Center Addition
International District Community Center
Jefferson Park Community Center Addition
Laurelhurst Community Center Addition & Renovation
Montlake Community Center Renovation
Northgate Community Center
Sand Point Community Center Renovation
Southwest Community Center Addition
Van Asselt Community Center Addition
Yesler Community Center

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The City of Seattle Parks and Recreation Department (SPR) Community Centers are year-round gathering places that welcome every member of each community in Seattle. Their spaces—both inside and out—are part of the public realm, supporting activities of all types, appealing to all ages and inclinations. A community center is more than a collection of rooms: parents hold impromptu conferences in its lobby, adolescents throw balls against its walls in games of skill or boredom, and young children play in the protected alcoves formed by its intersecting volumes.

Community centers are frequently located in public parks. Yet, as Seattle develops more urban neighborhoods and its density increases, some community centers will be built within larger developments of housing or commercial space. Singular buildings set within large open spaces or landscapes are fundamentally different than public spaces embedded within highly urban development. The Community Center Design Principles (Design Principles) developed by the City of Seattle Parks and Recreation Department (SPR) will apply primarily to these single buildings located in the landscape. Community centers inserted into the urban fabric—those located in larger buildings or co-located with other public institutions—will likely follow design guidelines and principles developed by Seattle's Department of Planning & Development (DPD/City Design) and the Seattle Design Commission for public building types requiring high levels of access and identity that are located in high-density developments.

SPR's Design Principles are intended to guide both designers and those reviewing proposed designs in thinking about:

- how a community center should serve its community,
- the character of the places and spaces that compose it, and
- the values it should embody.

These Design Principles have been developed in response to requests from both project designers and the Seattle Design Commission for written guidelines governing the broader issues of design for community centers. Two other documents will guide other aspects of the design of Parks' community centers:

- The 1999 Building Program Template describes the types, number, and sizes of the various rooms in a community center and their relationships to one another, as well as the various systems that will serve the building and its users.
- The Community Center Design Standards give designers technical direction in specifying materials, finishes, systems, and products by referencing specific Parks Standards for these items.

The three documents, taken together with input from the community and the Project Advisory Team's members, should provide guidance in addressing design issues of all sorts—big-picture principles to narrow-scope specifics—for users, reviewers, designers, and interested citizens.

Public parks are places for renewal, refreshment, and replenishment of the self; parks are also places that should demonstrate our care for the environment and its restoration, its preservation. A public park is an aggregation of public places, both in the landscape and within built structures. A community center should create spaces for public use both inside and outside, in the way the building meets the surrounding landscape.

Typically, community center buildings have been object buildings set in the landscape. In this case, the building itself should serve as a sign that here is a place for community gathering. The building should organize the spaces around it, and might well provide a focal point for activities in the landscape of the park as well as in the surrounding neighborhood. The community center building and its surrounding garden and landscaped areas should represent the institution of the city in its forms and materials:

- shapes and configurations of building masses that welcome the approaching visitor as one of the community
- materials that endure, yet show the passage of time
- plantings that grow and develop through the years, paralleling the succession of human generations, each one nurturing its successor through the years.

Add paragraph on relationship to neighborhood, incl access:

The community center building's siting should develop potential relationships of the site to the immediate neighborhood and to other areas and aspects of the city by means of physical and views. Physical connections should knit the building into the structure of the neighborhood's fabric, while its architectural character should make clear that it welcomes all residents of the city. Functionally, connections should provide easy access to the community center for visitors who arrive by bus, car, or bicycle, and for those who come there on foot. Access for emergency vehicles should be straightforward. While meeting all requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) legislation, our community centers should reflect the spirit of universal access in developing specific design solutions: allow all building users to move through space with dignity, providing equivalent means of access for those who are disabled in one way or another.

Views from the community center are one way in which the institution's connection to other aspects of the city are made visible, as well as being a simple delight to the viewer. Views of the building from afar should also be considered by the designers for they create the civic image of the institution for many who may never actually enter the building.

Up close, the community center building's interior spaces should be indicated on the exterior, revealing—by means of openings, material detailing, and literal transparency—the human activity within. The building's articulation and its placement within the landscape should create outdoor "rooms.". The designers should give character to these exterior spaces by means of their degree of enclosure, the textures and tones of the building's exterior materials, and the choice of plantings that meet the building's edge.

Inside the building, space should be developed in a way that places are made for the individual, for the group, and for the larger meeting of the community. A chair placed in an alcove with a window nearby might make a place for the individual to read in the daylight and to feel at home. The group plays 3-on-3 basketball in the community center's gymnasium. The community gathers to share potluck dinner in the largest meeting room, served by the well-equipped kitchen.

The community center building and surrounding outdoor areas should engage all the senses of the visitor, recognizing and honoring the diversity of such a building's users:

- Our sense of spatiality should be engaged by a play and counter-play of spaces: high and low, extensive and contained, plushly-fitted and of a spare economy.
- Our capacity for reading the thermal environment should be addressed by outdoor spaces that trap the sun's heat on cool spring and fall days, spaces that give welcome shade in summer, and indoor spaces of temperate comfort juxtaposed to the wet winds of the Northwest winter immediately outside.
- Our perceptions of sound should be pleasurably stimulated by careful design of the acoustic environment: rooms of quiet in which sound quickly decays, rooms alive with sounds of games and play, and outdoor spaces enclosed with surfaces that capture the more distant sounds of play and work.
- The plantings around the community center should reward us with their scents and flavors, especially with fruiting trees and shrubs. Underfoot, we might crush the leaves of the wooly thyme, releasing its pungent scent. Overhead, the autumn-yellow leaves of the gingko might remind us of the season with their freshly-baked-sugar-cookie aroma.

In summary, these design principles offer a way to develop the community center site and the community center building built upon it so as to serve and delight those who use them, and to model and embody appropriate relationships between people and between humankind and the earth's other inhabitants.

Additional resources that may aid the designer or reviewer of a community center project have been developed by other departments and groups within city government. The Seattle Design Commission's Handbook (version 10.01) offers a number of useful design principles for capital improvement projects undertaken by the City. They include the following:

- Projects shall have a civic scale and character.
- Projects shall express the city's socio-cultural identity and diversity.

- Projects shall be sustainable over time.

Designers and reviewers alike should refer to the Handbook for more detailed explanations of these principles.

DPD contains within its organization the City Design group that supports the work of the Design Commission and the neighborhood Design Review Boards. City Design has developed Design Review: Guidelines for Multifamily & Commercial Buildings (rev. November 1998, and herein after referred to as Guidelines) to guide the review of private-sector projects. Nevertheless, a number of these design guidelines are applicable to the design of Parks' community centers. Of particular application are the following guidelines, arranged in the order in which they appear in the Guidelines:

A. Site Planning:
   - A-1: Responding to Site Characteristics
   - A-7: Residential [*or* Public] Open Space

C. Architectural Elements and Materials
   - C-1: Architectural Context
   - C-2: Architectural Concept and Consistency
   - C-3: Human Scale
   - C-4: Exterior Finish Materials

D. Pedestrian Environment
   - D-1: Pedestrian Open Spaces and Entrances
   - D-3: Retaining Walls
   - D-4: Design of Parking Lots near Sidewalks
   - D-6: Screening of Dumpsters, Utilities and Service Areas
   - D-7: Personal Safety and Security

E. Landscaping
   - E-1: Landscaping to Reinforce Design Continuity with Adjacent Sites
   - E-2: Landscaping to Enhance the Building and/or Site
   - E-3: Landscape Design to Address Special Site Conditions

Designers and reviewers alike should refer to the Guidelines for more detailed explanations of these guidelines for good design.