



## Downtown Design Glossary: Quick Guide

### **Active Edge / Active Frontage**

A sidewalk-facing frontage with doors, windows, shops, dining, or activity. Creates a vibrant, safe, economically productive street.

### **Blank Wall / Dead Edge**

A long wall with no windows or doors. Creates unsafe, uncomfortable, and unwalkable conditions.

### **Compatibility**

How well a building fits its surroundings in terms of scale, massing, materials, rhythm, transparency, and height transitions.

### **Compatibility Zone / Context Zone**

A mapped area where certain forms, massing, or materials are expected based on the surrounding urban fabric.

### **Consistency**

The repetition of patterns that make a place feel coherent—heights, window proportions, storefront spacing, materials, cornice lines. Consistency ≠ sameness; it means harmony.

### **Contemporary-Compatible**

New construction that is clearly modern but still aligns with the scale, rhythm, and proportions of historic surroundings — not imitative, but respectful.

### **Contextual Design**

Design that responds directly to its surroundings — respecting the context of scale, massing, setbacks, materials, and street patterns.

Contextual Design does not copy historic buildings; it interprets the local pattern so new development fits seamlessly into the existing urban fabric.

### **Fine-Grained Fabric** (See: Granularity)

### **Frontage**

The portion of the building that meets the sidewalk. Determines how a building feels to pedestrians — inviting or inactive.

### **Granularity** (Fine-Grained Fabric)

The small-lot, frequent-door pattern of traditional downtowns where many narrow buildings create variety, rhythm, walkability, and support for small businesses.

**Fine grain** = many doors.

**Coarse grain** = large footprints, fewer entries.

### **Historic Fabric**

The collection of older buildings, street patterns, and block forms that define downtown character — including ordinary as well as landmark structures.



### **Human Scale**

Design that responds to a pedestrian's comfortable heights, details at eye level. Inviting and walkable.

### **Massing**

The overall shape and volume of a building before details are added. Good massing includes height transitions, step-backs, smaller façade segments, and a human-scaled ground floor.

### **Pattern Book**

A visual guide that documents recurring downtown patterns — storefront rhythms, heights, window proportions, materials, setbacks — so new development can follow local character without guesswork.

### **Permeability**

The ability to move through blocks, not just along them — alleys, passages, courtyards, and small pedestrian cut-throughs. High permeability = better walkability and more memorable experiences.

### **Rhythm**

The repeating sequence of doors, windows, bays, or pilasters along a block. Rhythm creates comfort, predictability, and walkable texture.

### **Setback**

How far a building is positioned from the sidewalk.

**Minimal setbacks** = urban feel.

**Deep setbacks** = suburban feel.

### **Step-Back**

When upper floors are positioned further back from the street to reduce the perceived height. Helps taller buildings fit historic areas.

### **Street Enclosure**

The experience of buildings framing the street like an "outdoor room." Essential for walkability and downtown comfort.

### **Street Wall**

The continuous line of building façades along the sidewalk. Strong street walls create enclosure, walkability, and visual coherence.

### **Three-Part Façade**

A traditional building composition consisting of:  
Base (ground floor storefront)  
Middle (upper stories)  
Top (cornice or roofline)  
Helps new or large buildings feel familiar in historic cores.

### **Transparency**

The percentage of ground-floor frontage made up of windows. High transparency improves safety, walkability, and economic performance.

### **Transition Zone**

An area where building scales shift — from low-rise historic blocks to larger mixed-use areas. Requires careful massing, height steps, and compatibility strategies.