



SAN FRANCISCO
PLANNING
DEPARTMENT

Guidelines for Ground Floor Residential Design

A GUIDE TO GROUND FLOOR RESIDENTIAL DESIGN
IN RTO, NCT, DTR, & EASTERN NEIGHBORHOODS
MIXED USE DISTRICTS

SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING DEPARTMENT | DRAFT NOVEMBER 2008





LEGAL BASIS AND APPLICABILITY

The General Plan and Planning Code contain policies and standards for several areas of the City requiring land uses and design measures that ensure that ground floors engage the street with active, pedestrian-oriented and welcoming frontages that enhance the livability and sustainability of the public realm. For projects in RTO, NCT, DTR, and the Eastern Neighborhoods Mixed Use Districts (MUG, MUO, MUR, SPD, and UMU), Planning Code Sections 144, 145.1, 825, and 827 require off-street parking to be set back from street-facing facades or placed underground, garage entries and blank walls to be minimized, and active uses – commercial, public or residential – to be located at the ground floor and provide direct engagement with the street. These Planning Code standards are based on policies and principles established in the General Plan, including the Market & Octavia, Mission, Central Waterfront, East Soma, and Rincon Hill Area Plans.

The guidelines in this document supplement the existing policies and principles in the General Plan and the requirements and standards in the relevant Planning Code sections. In R Districts where the guidelines of this document apply (i.e. RTO districts), these Ground Floor Residential Design Guidelines supplement and build on existing guidelines in the Residential Design Guidelines, which continue to apply.

These Guidelines provide specific guidance and elaboration on the design of ground story residential units. They apply to all projects in RTO, NCT, DTR, and the Eastern Neighborhoods Mixed Use Districts where ground floor residential uses (e.g. instead of commercial, public or other active use) face public right-of-ways and public spaces to meet requirements for active uses per Planning Code Sections 144, 145.1, 825, 827 and other Sections of the Code. In such buildings, individual ground floor residential units with direct pedestrian access to the sidewalk are required along street frontages of buildings, or portions of buildings, except where active commercial space, lobbies, parking and loading access, utilities, or public space are necessary or desirable and provided pursuant to the allowances and requirements of the Planning Code. The Planning Code Sections above reference and require consistency with “...the Ground Floor Residential Design Guidelines as adopted and periodically amended by the Planning Commission.”

ORGANIZATION:

This document is divided into topical sections. Each section contains:

- **Goals**, that state the desired end condition(s);
- **Principles**, that describe physical relationships and factors informing the guidelines; and
- **Guidelines**, that lay out both the quantitative and qualitative metrics that projects must follow to achieve the Goals.

Facade Modulation

Goals

- A fine-grain rhythm of the urban environment.
- A scale of larger buildings consistent with the smaller typical lot pattern.
- A varied and changing pedestrian experience along the length of a block.
- An emphasis on the recognizable presence and delineation of individual residential units.

Guideline

Buildings should be vertically modulated at regular intervals of no greater than 30 feet to express individual ground floor residential units. Changes in vertical massing, architectural projections and recesses may be used to achieve this modulation. Exterior modulation should correspond to the delineations between units on the interior of the buildings, and should also correspond with landscaping, porch, or setback treatments along the sidewalk. Modulation should be strong and consistent with the vocabulary and coherent design of the building.

Principles

- Typical San Francisco residential lots are 25-30 feet in width, and generally do not exceed 30 feet. This produces a vertically modulated streetscape with a syncopated rhythm and variety that provides a constantly changing and engaging pedestrian experience along the street.
- Greater numbers of entryways and units along a building activate more of the street frontage by increasing the points where residents come-and-go as well as the number of opportunities for personalization.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES



LEFT: This building is an example of how a taller and larger building can provide modulation and identity to ground floor units, while maintaining an overall coherent design. This also illustrates how lower floor units can be articulated by being inset into the building face (up to at least two stories) combined with a lesser setback of the entire building.



ABOVE LEFT & RIGHT: This building follows all of the principles of these Guidelines. The building is modulated to express individual units. Units are raised about three feet from sidewalk. The main building façade is set back approximately 3 feet, with a bay window that extends to the ground in the set back, which is otherwise filled with landscaping, including a strip along the sidewalk edge of about 18 inches. Protruding stairs rise up from the sidewalk to inviting, modestly recessed entries. Low railings delineate private and public space.

Setbacks

Goals

- Adequate private/public transition space from the public sidewalk to the ground floor residential units.
- Functional, inviting, and safe stoops and entryways.
- Usable private space that also encourages public interaction and surveillance.

Principles

- Building setbacks provide space for entry steps to project from the building toward the sidewalk, creating an inviting entry and gesture toward the public as well as softening and moderating the hard edge of the building walls at the sidewalk.
- Steps and stoops that are recessed into building faces built right to the property line often create dark and narrow spaces with hidden corners that can be seen as security issues, as well as failing to provide an appealing transition between public and private spaces.
- Setbacks provide a physical and psychological comfort buffer between sidewalk activity and residential uses at lower levels.
- Buildings that are set back not more than 10 feet from the sidewalk frame the street, provide “eyes on the street” and create a comfortable

“urban room” in the public right-of-way. Absolute consistency of building facades between adjacent buildings within this 10-foot range of setbacks is not necessary to maintain an urban street wall. Buildings set back more than 10 feet tend to lose a relationship with the street and sidewalk environment; buildings built immediately up to a sidewalk edge with no transition or buffer space, particularly on streets with narrower sidewalks, reduce the habitability of ground floor residential units and diminish the comfort and richness of the pedestrian experience.

- Lesser setbacks in mixed-use buildings with commercial space on the same frontage or on frontages facing narrow streets or alleys with very low vehicular and pedestrian traffic may be appropriate.
- Where longer buildings have multiple consecutive ground floor units, setback areas that are physically delineated according to the facing units provide a sense of ownership over that space to residents and an opportunity for residents to personalize the space, such as by personalized landscaping or ornamentation.
- Front setback areas with generous stoops, porches, or patios can provide supplementary usable private open space for residents of the adjacent units in a way that also enhances public neighborhood social interaction and surveillance of neighborhood activity.

Guidelines

Front building setbacks should create a transitional space between the public realm of the street and the private realm of the individual dwelling unit. The setback should adhere to the following specifications, and as illustrated in Figures A and B:

- (i) The entire building facade should be set back from the street-abutting property line a minimum of three feet and not in excess of ten feet. Where a building façade faces a public right-of-way 40 feet in width or less, or in other special cases, the setback may be reduced appropriately, but not to the detriment of meeting the goals and principles of these Guidelines, such as providing projecting steps and entry features, transitional space at the sidewalk edge, and a minimum landscaping strip of not less than 18 inches per (iii) below.

A partial setback of the entire building façade may be acceptable provided that the setback extends vertically through at least the first two stories or approximately 20 feet from grade.

Where a front setback is provided, an equivalent reduction of the required rear yard may be warranted based on the condition of adjacent buildings and rear yard patterns.

- (ii) All projections allowed by Planning Code Section 136 permitted in front setbacks are permitted in these setbacks, except projecting garages are strongly discouraged. In all cases, front steps leading to the sidewalk from the front door of residential units at the lowest level are encouraged to project from the building face. Architectural projections, such as bay windows, are encouraged and may extend down to the ground provided they do not encroach within the 18-inch landscaping strip described in subsection (iii).
- (iii) A landscaped strip abutting the sidewalk should be provided for the first 18 inches of the setback depth, for at least half of the width of each residential unit.
- (iv) Setbacks greater than five feet are encouraged to provide a porch or landscape area at grade with the raised residential entry.

FIGURE A.
Dimensions for Ground Floor Units

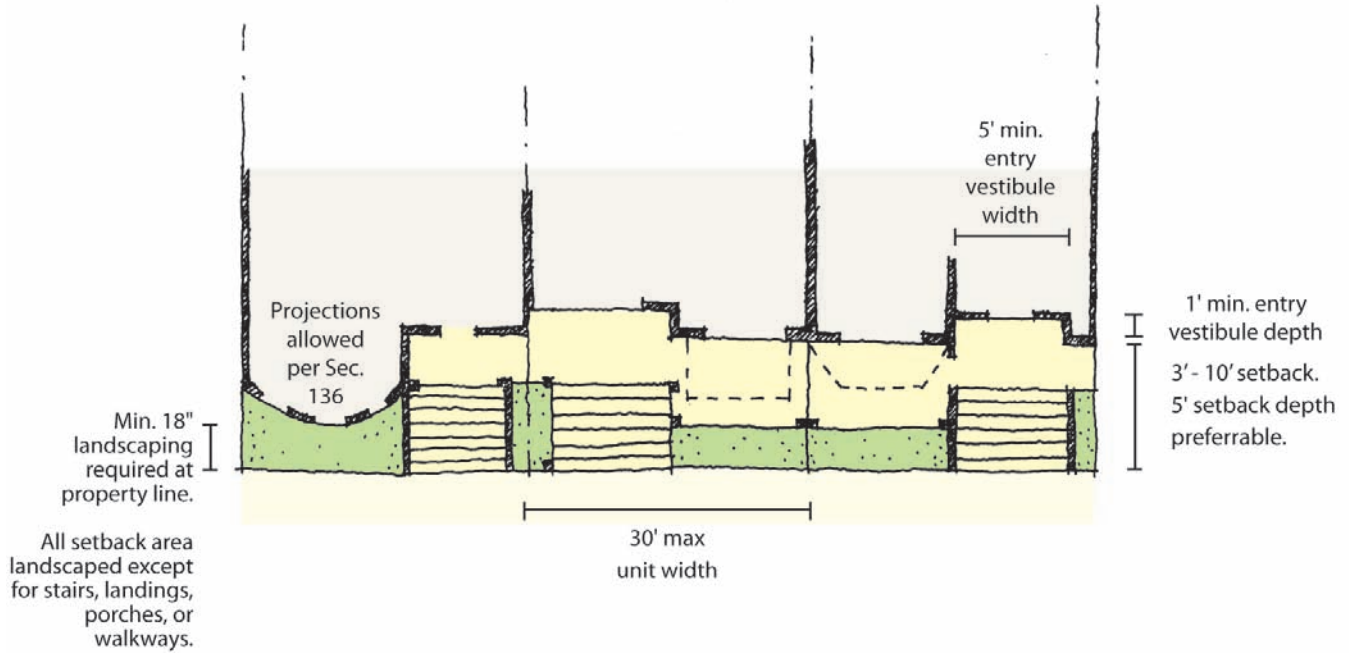
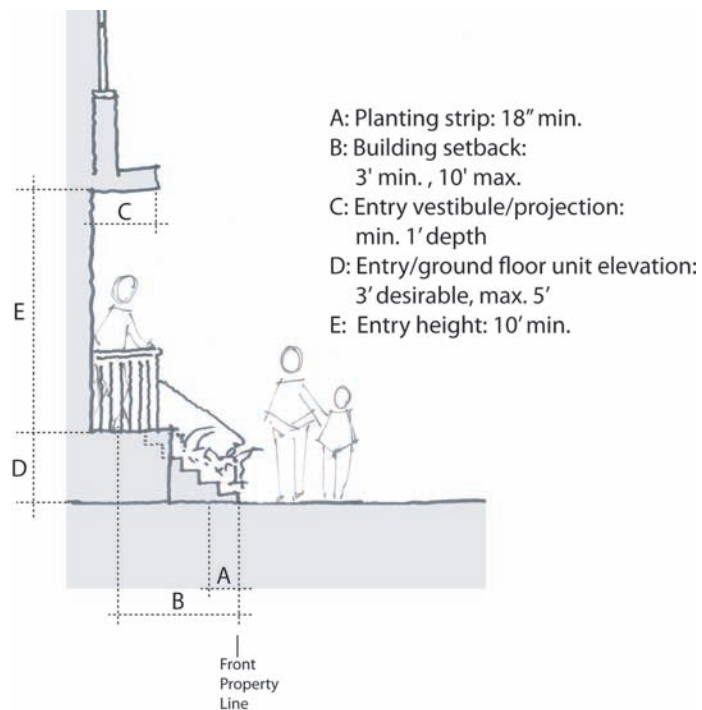


FIGURE B.
Dimensions for Ground Floor Units



Residential Unit Floor Level

Goals

- Habitable and sufficiently private ground floor units.
- Adequate private/public transition space from the public sidewalk to the residential unit.

Principles

- Ground-level residential units are important for offering surveillance to the street environment, but the units should not be so physically proximate as to create an uncomfortable situation for residents within their homes.
- The ability of pedestrians to look horizontally at eye level directly into the window of a residential unit at sidewalk grade will reduce the privacy of the unit and the usability of the abutting rooms. Windows below eye level of pedestrians will tend always to be shuttered.
- Three feet is the general minimum height above sidewalk grade of the floor of residential units that keeps pedestrian eye level below the sill of the windows of the units, which typically are about two feet above the floor. The eye level of the average adult is approximately 5 feet above grade.
- Where units are unable to be raised at least 3 feet above grade due to irreconcilable unique constraints of a site, greater setbacks with intervening landscaping and taller clear ceiling heights (10 feet or greater) can partially compensate. However, greater setbacks and tall ceiling heights do not provide the same privacy benefits as raising a unit above sidewalk grade.

Additional Info

Where it is not physically possible to raise residential units at least 3 feet above sidewalk grade (see **Residential Unit Floor Level**), additional care must be taken to ensure the habitability of the units and provide a sufficient public/private buffer. First, the setback should be at the upper range of the desired setback to provide adequate buffer and transition space between the sidewalk and the unit. Where units are not raised, there is increasing tendency to protect privacy by installing taller and more opaque fencing at the sidewalk. Per Planning Code standards, fencing at the sidewalk must be at least 75% transparent to perpendicular view; however the 25% non-transparent portion may be strategically placed at eye-level of pedestrians to prevent direct viewing into ground floor windows, while permitting upward and downward views toward the building façade and setback area. Additionally, landscaping within the setback area may provide additional filtering of views from sidewalk space to ground floor windows that are not raised from grade.



Guideline

The floor of ground story residential units in a building should be raised approximately three feet above the grade of the immediately abutting sidewalk, but typically not more than five feet.

Entries

Goal

Inviting entryways that celebrate and demarcate the entry to individual units and provide an additional zone of transition between public and private zones.

Principles

- Entryways that feature prominently on the building façade through a combination of generous headroom and width, recessed and projecting elements, and elevation from sidewalk grade are inviting, and provide a sense of arrival and transition from public to private zones.
- A doorway that is inset from the façade or is otherwise covered provides shelter from rain, wind, and sun for residents while entering and exiting the building, and provides additional transitional space from the street. A completely-inset entryway, particularly a narrow one, without any projecting steps, is generally not a suitable substitute for projecting steps and a front setback, in that the former does not adequately provide public/private transition space and does not enhance the street edge of the building.
- A doorway that is moderately inset from the façade provides visual relief and articulation on the façade and focuses attention on the active human aspects of the building.
- Steps, stoops and doorways that are recessed *deeply* into building faces built right to the property line often create dark and narrow spaces with hidden corners which can be perceived as security concerns, especially if they are also narrow. These spaces often lead residents to erect full-height security gates that further degrade the public-private interface and reduce public visibility of entryways.
- Entryways that are inset more than a couple feet and that also provide off-setting additional width can provide adequate sight-lines from the sidewalk and daylight to the entryway, making for a more inviting entry.
- Entryways that are raised little or not at all from sidewalk grade, especially those without protruding front steps, can appear uninviting and can create a low, dark “mouse hole” portal into the building that suggests a service door or secondary exit. This can be offset by providing a taller and more spacious entryway.

Guidelines

- (i) Each doorway or entry should be recessed from the building façade or provide a projecting overhead covering totaling at least one foot in depth.
- (ii) The entryway should be no less than five feet wide at the building face.
- (iii) Where the front door is recessed more than three feet from the building façade, the entryway should be increased in width, preferably by at least one foot for every additional two feet in recess depth. (For example, if the doorway is recessed five feet from the building face, the entryway should be at least six feet wide at the building face.)
- (iv) Entryways should be at least 10 feet in clear height as measured from the grade of the landing in front of the door to the underside of the ceiling or projecting element defining the entryway.
- (v) Where porches or patios are not provided, projecting steps should feature a landing of generous depth at the top step to enable social use by residents.

Landscaping

Goals

- Adequate private/public transition space from the public sidewalk to the residential unit.
- A softening of the interface of the building and sidewalk.
- An increase in greening and the amount of permeable surface in the public realm.

Principles

- Landscaping at the front of a building softens the public face of a building and creates a greener, more informal, and relaxed neighborhood environment.
- Landscaping is an effective buffer from the activity of the sidewalk for ground floor residential units.
- Landscaped areas with permeable surfaces slow and reduce stormwater runoff into the sewer system, helping reduce the demands on the public stormwater treatment system and the frequency of overflows into the Bay.
- Front setback landscaped areas provide opportunities for residents to personalize the public face of their residences and to provide seasonal or intermittent changes.
- Plants, and trees in particular, need sufficient soil depth in order to grow to maturity.

Guidelines

- (i) Setback areas not occupied by steps, porches, patios, landings or walkways should be landscaped with permeable surfaces. Setbacks should be designed to provide access to landscaped areas, encouraging gardening and other uses by residents.
- (ii) To allow for landscaping at street grade, parking should be located far enough below the surface of the setback to provide a minimum soil depth of 3 feet. Planting beds in setback areas may be raised up above grade to provide additional soil depth and protection for plantings as needed.
- (iii) A continuous soil trough should be provided between landscaped areas to provide sufficient room for root growth as well as ability for surface water to percolate throughout the ground.
- (iv) Landscaping should be drought-tolerant and be designed to filter, store, and/or slow on-site and sidewalk-related stormwater runoff. To facilitate ease of maintenance, drip irrigation systems should be built into the landscaping areas.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES



ABOVE: This building shows how an entryway covered with a projecting element, combined with a modest setback, can create a more inviting and notable entryway for a doorway that is otherwise not inset into the building space. Most of the setback is used for a usable porch space elevated at the level of the unit.



RECOMMENDED

LEFT: This building meets some of the guidelines, but illustrates some violations of the principles which lead to less successful units, streetscape, and public/private interface. The ground floor units are located directly at grade, and there is minimal setback to compensate. As a result the windows will likely always be shuttered. Additionally, the entry, while featuring a projecting element, is not welcoming or prominent on the façade and does not provide any public-private transition space: it has low headroom, is located directly at grade, is subservient to and tucked out of sight against the adjacent bay, and little more than a simple door set flush on the building face.

MIDDLE & BOTTOM LEFT: This building meets all of the Guidelines. It features slightly greater setbacks (approximately 8 feet), with more significant landscaping to provide greater privacy. Note the decorative, low gates at the sidewalk edge which identify each individual unit.



RECOMMENDED

Fencing, Walls, Screens, and Gates

Goals

- Ground floor units that maintain a relationship to the street environment and provide surveillance, but that maintain a distinct sense of ownership, security, and delineation between public and private space.
- A sense of individual ownership and use of setback space by the fronting residential unit, as well as individuality between units.

Principles

- Delineation of the line between public and private space is essential to making a functional and appealing transition zone.
- Low walls, fencing, gates or hedges at the sidewalk edge effectively delineate private and public spaces, and provide an interesting and welcoming interface of buildings and public streets. Tall and solid fencing or gates have the opposite effect.
- Low fencing, walls, or hedges can effectively delineate front setback space from one unit to the next, establishing a sense of ownership and identity for the space and encouraging its use and ongoing care.
- Fencing and gates that are solid or block views between sidewalk and entryway or setback area break the relationship between the building and the public street, deaden the building's interface with the street and prevent surveillance of public areas.



This building illustrates that modest elevation and low, transparent fencing can create a usable space where residents feel comfortable using the front porch. Additionally, the windows at the front room need only be covered at the lower portions due to the combination of elevation from street grade and modest setback.

Guidelines

- Fences, gates, grilles, walls, or railings up to waist height are encouraged where setback areas meet the sidewalk so as to delineate private and public space and maintain a consistent street edge for properties along the block. Above a height of 3 feet from sidewalk grade, all such features must be 75 percent open to perpendicular view (as required by Planning Code Section 136) in all cases. Features taller than waist height as measured from sidewalk grade are discouraged.
- Per Planning Code allowances, railings, fences, and grilles up to a height of 3 feet 6 inches are permitted on top of a landing or porch, regardless of the combined total height of the railing and porch from street grade. Such railings should be at least 75 percent transparent.
- Low railings, fencing, screens, hedges or walls should be provided between units to delineate the front setback space of unit from the next. If not transparent, such features should not exceed a height of about 3 feet 6 inches from grade.

NOTES



**SAN FRANCISCO
PLANNING
DEPARTMENT**

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Call or visit the San Francisco Planning Department

Central Reception

1650 Mission Street, Suite 400
San Francisco CA 94103-2479

TEL: **415.558.6378**
FAX: **415 558-6409**
WEB: **<http://www.sfplanning.org>**

Planning Information Center (PIC)

1660 Mission Street, First Floor
San Francisco CA 94103-2479

TEL: **415.558.6377**

*Planning staff are available by phone and at the PIC counter.
No appointment is necessary.*