Guidelines for Ground Floor Frontage Design

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

An active, safe, and comfortable public realm is one measure of a healthy urban setting. If done right, building form can contribute to the functional use and activation of streets by creating active ground floor uses that encourage the street edge as a place for casual use and interaction. These guidelines are intended to illustrate various possibilities to achieve active residential and commercial uses that engage with the street, and provide the opportunity for neighborliness. The key qualities that have worked historically are a sense of transition, a sense of habitation, and a sense of care and interest.

The Ground Floor Frontage Guidelines outline six elements found in various building types that to varying degree should be employed to impart these qualities. Some or all of these may apply depending on the particular building type, site conditions, or programmatic circumstances. There are a number of building types and solutions that may result in response to the zoning districts and height limits. The Ground Floor Frontage Guidelines encourage different means of achieving these goals. In all the elements, high quality of materials, design, and craftsmanship, is expected.

Specific dimensions in these Guidelines are considered conventional and ideal, but may be used as a target range and modified. Deviation or alternates will need to be justified by the project sponsor.
LEGAL BASIS AND APPLICABILITY

The General Plan and Planning Code contain policies and standards requiring land uses and design measures that ensure uses at ground floors engage the public street environment with active, pedestrian-friendly frontages that enhance the livability and sustainability of the public realm. For projects in RTO, NCT, DTR, and the Eastern Neighborhoods Mixed Use Districts, Planning Code Sections 144, 145.1, 145.4, 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, 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 and activation of residential and commercial uses at ground stories. They apply to all projects where ground floor commercial or residential uses face public right-of-ways and public spaces, to meet requirements for active uses per Planning Code Sections 144, 145.1, 145.4, 825, 827 and other Sections of the Code. In such buildings, active commercial space, lobbies, and individual ground floor residential units with direct pedestrian access to the sidewalk are recommended along street frontages of buildings, or portions of buildings, except where, parking and loading access, utilities, and open space are necessary or desirable and provided pursuant to the allowances and requirements of the Planning Code.
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.

PRINCIPLES

→ The historical increment development in San Francisco is a 25-30 foot wide lot. This has produced a vertically modulated streetscape that provides both unity and variety to look and feel of the street. This variety of different architectural expressions, unified by the modularity, makes an engaging pedestrian experience.

→ Greater numbers of entryways and units along a building activate more of the street frontage by increasing the points where people come-and-go as well as the number of opportunities for personalization.

GUIDELINES

(i) 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.

(ii) Structural definition of commercial frontages should break up the storefront into similar 25’-30’ wide modules, and allow for the flexibility to subdivide.
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 setback, 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 frontage.
- Functional, inviting, and safe entryways.
- Usable private space that also encourages public interaction and surveillance.

PRINCIPLES

- Building setbacks provide space for an inviting entry to the building from the sidewalk, creating a transition and gesture toward the public as well as softening and moderating the hard edge of the building walls at the sidewalk.
- Setbacks provide a physical buffer and psychological comfort between sidewalk activity and ground floor uses. A setback space with landscaped areas or stoops also can provide residents a social space to engage with street activity in a semi-public space that is more public than the internal private spaces of one’s home.
- Buildings that are set back about 10 feet from the sidewalk can help create a comfortable “urban room” in the public right-of-way. Buildings set back much more than 10 feet may tend to lose a relationship with the street and sidewalk environment; buildings built immediately up to a sidewalk edge with no transition space, particularly on streets with narrower sidewalks, reduce the habitability of ground floor residential units, the potential usability along the building edge, and diminish the comfort and richness of the pedestrian experience. Absolute consistency of building facades between adjacent buildings within a 10’-12 foot range of setbacks is not necessary to maintain an urban street wall.
- 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 buildings have multiple consecutive ground floor dwellings, separation between setback areas allows residents a sense of ownership and an opportunity to personalize the space.
- Front setbacks with generous stoops, porches, courts, terraces, or patios can provide private usable open space that enhances social interaction and safety in the public realm.
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 ground floor building facade should be set back from the street-abutting property line a minimum of three feet and not in excess of twelve feet. Where a building façade faces a public right-of-way 40 feet in width or less, the setback may be reduced to not less than 18 inches, in order to provide a landscaped strip 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, particularly in large projects, such as those subject to PUDs.

(ii) 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). Exterior steps leading from the sidewalk to the raised entrance of residential units are encouraged. Projecting garages are strongly discouraged.

(iii) A landscaped strip, which may raised, abutting the sidewalk should be provided in 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 a raised residential entry.

(v) Provide a minimum 18” wide planting strip in the sidewalk to augment the landscaped transition zone. A Sidewalk Landscaping permit may be obtained from the Department of Public Works.

(vi) Commercial storefronts should also employ setbacks to accommodate entrances and active exterior uses adjacent to the building. Setbacks are encouraged to be three feet minimum.
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 or 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.

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.

(ed: can it be higher if another ground floor unit is provided at 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.
Entries

GOALS

- Inviting entryways that celebrate the entry and provide a transition between public and private zones.
- Visual cues for way finding that identify the entry.

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 are inviting, and provide a sense of arrival and transition from public to private zones.
- Entries that are inset from the façade or are covered provide shelter from rain, wind, and sun for residents while entering and exiting the building, and provide additional transitional space from the street.
- 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.
- Recessed entries that are too low, narrow, or deep may fail to provide a usable and appealing transition between public and private spaces, and may be perceived as unsafe. Entries that are not deep enough will never be used. Narrow entries are generally not suitable in that they do not adequately provide public/private transition space.
- Entryways that are inset more than a couple feet but also provide additional width can provide adequate sight-lines from the sidewalk and daylight to the entryway, making a more inviting entry.
- Entryways that are raised little or not at all from the sidewalk, especially those without protruding front steps, can appear uninviting. 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) A private entryway should be no less than five feet wide at the building face. Grouped entryways should be ten feet wide.

(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 landing in front of the door to the underside of the ceiling or projecting element defining the entryway.

(v) A successful transition space for an entrance can be highlighted by changes of materials and details. Varying the sense of scale, enclosure, light, and path of travel can also help signify entry.

(vi) Residential lobbies should announce “entry” by a combination of wide, tall, and recessed entryways that are distinct in scale, detail, and form from the fabric of the building. Overhangs, awnings, and canopies should also signal the lobby entry.

(vii) Entries should be lighted.

(viii) Where porches or patios are not provided, projecting steps with a landing of generous depth at the top step should be provided 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, a minimum soil depth of 3 feet 6 inches should be provided. Planting beds in setback areas may be raised up to 18 inches above grade to provide additional soil depth 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.

TOP RIGHT: 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 RIGHT: 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.
Fencing, Walls, Screens, and Gates

GOALS

→ Ground floor residential units that create a strong relationship to the street and provide surveillance, yet 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 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.

GUIDELINES

(i) Fences, railings, gates, grilles, walls, or planter / retaining walls are encouraged to delineate private from public space. They may be solid up to 3’ feet high. All such features are allowed to be 6 feet high but must be 75 percent open to perpendicular view (per Planning Code Section 136 c 50). Such features taller than 3 feet 6 inches are discouraged.

(ii) The Planning Code allows railings fences, and grilles up to a height of 3 feet 6 inches 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.

(iii) Low railings, fencing, screens, hedges or walls should be provided between units to delineate the front setback space of one unit from the next. If not transparent, such features should not exceed a height of about 3 feet 6 inches.

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.
Ground Floor Frontages should adhere to the intent of the parameters illustrated in the figures that follow.

**Figure A: Exterior Stoops**

**SECTION**
Dimensions for Ground Floor Exterior Stoop Units

- A: Planting strip: 18” min.
- B: Building setback: 3’ min., 10’ max.
- C: Entry vestibule/projection: min. 1’ depth
- D: Entry/ground floor unit elevation: 3’ desirable, max. 5’
- E: Entry height: 10’ min.

**PLAN**
Dimensions for Ground Floor Exterior Stoop Units

- Min. 18” landscaping required at property line.
- 1’ min. entry vestibule depth
- 3’-10’ setback
- 5’ setback depth preferable

- All setback area landscaped except for stairs, landings, porches, or walkways.
Figure B: **Exterior Stoops**
SECTION
Dimensions for At Grade Entries

PLAN
Dimensions for At Grade Entries

Figure C: Grade Entrances
Figure D: **Outer Courts**

**SECTION**
Dimensions for Outer Courts

**PLAN**
Dimensions for Outer Courts
In addition to providing residential units at the ground floor, raised courtyards should be directly accessible and visible from the street.
Figure F: **Lobby Entries**

**ELEVATION**
Dimensions for Lobby Entries

**PLAN**
Dimensions for Lobby Entries
ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

This building is a good example of a residential entrance at grade providing a transition area. The proportions of the width to depth to height provide a comfortable and identifiable space. It could be improved with a more generous setback that could be usable and a fence that delineates the separation between private and public space.
1102A.1 Where required. Buildings or portions of buildings and facilities within the scope of this chapter shall be accessible to persons with disabilities. Each building on a building site shall be considered separately when determining the requirements contained in this chapter, except when calculating the number of units which must comply with Section 1102A.3.1. Dwelling units within a single structure separated by firewalls do not constitute separate buildings.

Newly-constructed covered multifamily dwellings as defined in this chapter, include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Apartment buildings with 3 or more dwelling units including timeshare apartments not considered a place of public accommodation or transient lodging as defined in Health and Safety Code Section 19955 (a), and Chapter 2 of the California Building Code.

2. Condominiums with 4 or more dwelling units including timeshare condominiums not considered a place of public accommodation or transient lodging as defined in Health and Safety Code Section 19955 (a), and Chapter 2 of the California Building Code.

1104A.2 Ground floors above grade. Where the first floor containing dwelling units in a building is above grade, all units on that floor shall be served by an accessible route. This floor will be considered a ground floor and all dwelling units are considered covered multifamily dwelling units.

1104A.1 General. All ground-floor dwelling units in nonelevator buildings shall be adaptable and on an accessible route, unless an accessible route is not required as determined by site impracticality provisions in Section 1150A. For buildings with elevators, see Section 1106A.

1106A.1 General. Covered multifamily dwellings with elevators shall be designed and constructed to provide at least one accessible entrance on an accessible route, regardless of terrain or unusual characteristics of the site. Covered multifamily dwellings without elevators shall be designed and constructed to provide at least one accessible entrance on an accessible route unless terrain or unusual characteristics of the site prevent an accessible route based on the conditions listed below:

1. Accessible entrance. Regardless of site considerations described in Section 1150A, an accessible entrance on an accessible route is required when there is an elevator connecting the parking area with the dwelling units on a ground floor. (In this case, those dwelling units on the ground floor served by an elevator, and at least one of each type of public- and common-use areas, would be subject to these requirements.)

2. Elevator building. When a building elevator or elevators are provided as a means of access to dwelling units other than dwelling units on a ground floor (see Section 1104A.2), the building is an elevator building. All dwelling units become covered multifamily dwellings in that building. The elevator in that building must provide accessibility to all dwelling units in the building, regardless of the slope of the natural terrain. For multistory dwelling units in buildings with one or more elevators, see Section 1102A.3.2.

Note: Where a building elevator is provided only as means of creating an accessible route to covered multifamily dwelling units on a ground floor, the building is not considered to be an elevator building, only dwelling units located on the ground floor shall be required to comply with this chapter.

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