Confessions of a Design Reviewer:

Ten Guidelines for Coming Out as an Architect

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First, let me admit that my appointment to the Lower Downtown Design and Demolition Review Board of Denver, Colorado was, at least initially, like going undercover. Having faced Review Boards myself—designs and ego up there on the dartboard of public review—I jumped at the opportunity to take a seat on the other side of the table. I would adopt a persona befitting a city commissioner, keep my architectural allegiance to myself, and learn all the secrets to keeping one's best design work intact through a public review process.

The LDDDRB meets for the mandatory review of 200 sq. ft. penthouse pop-ups, the adaptive reuse of existing 1900s-era industrial warehouses, and the new construction of mixed-use buildings on huge 266- by 400-foot city blocks. The review is intended to safeguard and guide the development of one of the most extensive warehouse districts in the country. Nothing can be built in Lower Downtown Denver without this Board's approval.

I listened respectfully behind my name sign for the first several meetings, as the approval of truly horrific building designs stumbled over minute details, like the material expression of the driveway bollards. Interesting contemporary gestures were universally mocked as "totally incompatible" with the historic context. Architects were cut off mid-sentence with "we really must move on." I began having grad school flashbacks. Members of the public, usually the neighbors, read repetitive arguments over increased traffic and blocked views. "This is reality," I kept telling myself. "This is your chance to argue for good design, for diversity, for cities." But something blocked my arguments inside my head, and they expressed themselves publicly only as hot red cheeks and sweat pouring from my temples, as I was later, embarrassingly, told.

I was amazed to observe that no one in the room was impartial; in each meeting, every single speaker had an agenda. City staff wanted the Board to uphold their internal review and definitively to address any controversial item. Developers, for whom timeframe was fundamental, wanted, first, maximum envelope approval and, then, predictability—no complicated design

roadblocks to slow down construction. Individual Board members' agendas ranged from actively promoting "olde tyme" architecture, to consistently preventing any explicit design critique or advice (which might be construed as a "hint" to the architects) from entering the record. And the public looked to the Board to keep their neighborhood exactly as it looked right now, outside the boardroom window.

As I began to comment, I realized that I had an agenda too. This meant I couldn't keep my cover, forced me to come out. Like the architect applicants across the table, I needed to be able to talk about architecture as a proponent of the power of design and invention, without being dismissed as grandiose, ethereal, or naive.

I was fascinated by the additive effect of the Board's decisions: we were incremental urban designers. Although the design guidelines explicitly stated that no single decision could be cited as precedent for future decisions, it was clear that if our decisions were haphazard, the city's most active and valuable historic precinct would become a jumble.

Therefore, my agenda was to broadly construe the idea of "compatibility" (which appeared in the design guidelines like a nervous tic, even several times a sentence). I considered every submittal for its resounding effect on the shape of the city. Does this design promote an enriched and vital urban life for this neighborhood 50 to 100 years into the future?

Often, initially, I was chided by other Board members "We are not here to discuss philosophy." It took some time for me to figure out how, without burying all the passion, imagination, and persistence architecture practice breeds in us, to respond to such objections. But the ongoing melee of architectural presentations and their dissection by the Design Review Board finally led me to a conviction.

The key to facing design review as an architect, from either side of the table? Learn how to be an architect in public. It can require different techniques from the work of making buildings, giving lectures and presentations, wooing and working with clients. By the time I finished my term, I looked forward to design review meetings as intensely meaningful, collegial, and powerful discussions of what I most care about: shaping our constructed environment. And I seriously respected my colleagues on the Board.

Here are my top ten guidelines for coming out as an architect in the public realm of design review:

1. Watch your mouth. You risk alienating your audience merely by using the word *"parti."* While a Design Review Board may be responsible for approving your *parti,* neighborhood residents and at-large members often sit on review boards, and they don't feel especially confident with design-speak. Don't waste good will by making your audience work too hard to understand you. Your goal should be to talk architecture in plain language. (It might help to pretend you haven't been to design school.)

2. State your design intention and principles early on. At best, the design review process can be collaborative; at worst, adversarial and contentious. One of the greatest pitfalls is the Board's rejection of fundamental design assumptions late in the design process.

   The most successful approval I witnessed won universal buy-in from the Board at the very first meeting. The architects outlined their analysis of the site and design issues, presented their basic diagram as a direct response to this analysis, and asked the Board to comment on their "reading" of the city. Throughout the ensuing review sessions, Board members evaluated the design development for its faith to the initial principles—just as did the architects.

3. Don't pander. It's worth understanding the multiple agendas at work, but group discussion is dynamic. As a Board member,
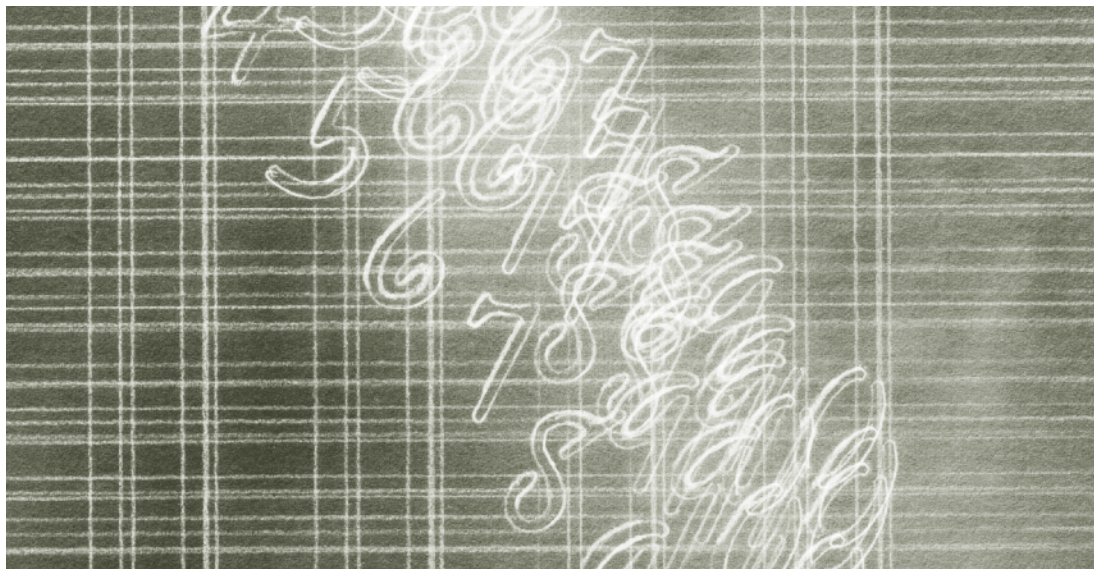
I rarely made a motion that hadn't been influenced by the arguments presented. And remember: Past performance doesn't guarantee future results. It's not the stock market, but the Board's focus does shift based upon the previous meeting, politicking in-between meetings, political currents in the city at-large, financial pressures from developers and public agencies, an empty coffee mug, or a rumbling stomach.

4. Frame the agenda. Your presentation should lead with a clear statement of what approvals you are seeking in that session, what guidelines you have identified as applicable to that design scope, and where you are asking the Board for interpretation or exceptions. You stand to gain from a focused discussion, initiated by you.

5. Respect time limits. Practice making the big, important points in the time specified. Once time's up, do not go on. Courtesy goes a long way during long meetings. If limits are unstated, confer with city staff in advance.

6. Stick to your submittal. Last-minute "updates" of the work you've already put before the committee often backfire. Board members and city staff have studied your submittal carefully, or at least have tried to digest it quickly during your presentation. A freak blizzard of design information disorients everyone—and looks like a snow job.

7. READ THE GUIDELINES. Most guideline documents display all the literary tricks of classical poetry. Read them for metaphor, paradox, tautology, and innuendo. You should know the sections applicable to your design submittal—and the opportunities for interpretation—better than the review board when you present your work.

8. Don't bury the evidence. Make drawings that specifically address the guidelines, and clearly identify how your design conforms and where you are asking the Board to grant exceptions. Make diagrams and other drawings to highlight conformance to relevant regulations. It is tempting to downplay what you foresee as the sticking points. But if you try to camouflage the issues, you'll appear untrustworthy. If you do slip something by the Board, at best you risk costing your client in delays when the oversight is caught later; at worst, you risk the great expense and hassle of a rescinded or appealed approval.

9. Confer early and often. Seek an advance meeting with city staff to review your proposed design direction, identify applicable design guidelines, and flag potential zoning issues. In most cases, city staff can give you an extremely accurate sense of where to place your effort in preparing for the review process.

It's also a good idea to attend at least one Board meeting prior to your first submittal. See what the Board is currently focusing on; appraise the most effective presentation methods for the space, room size, and attention spans; observe the nature of Board discussion and questions put to applicants.

10. Respect the process. It can be arduous and annoying, but in most cases design review is an honest attempt to improve the quality of the places we design and inhabit. It requires a partnership between the applicant and the Board, and the respect you show your potential partners will likely be reciprocated. Do the Board the courtesy of making a polished, professional presentation. Do yourself the courtesy of rehearsing the review session and preparing your responses to predictable criticisms. Ideally, design review will not be design defense, but an extended work session with an expanded client group—the public. ◉