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Community Sensitive Design

In today's complex regulatory environment, obtaining special zoning approvals and variances for large scale projects can often seem like a daunting and seemingly endless process. This is especially true within large municipalities where there are layers of review by various governmental agencies intertwined with public scrutiny and political input. Even as-of-right developments involving new buildings or additions to existing buildings are now being made subject to increased public scrutiny. For example, in some cases, architects are now required to "upload" diagrammatic drawings of proposed buildings or additions onto Building Department websites where they are subject to public/community review and comment. Concerned parties can object to a posted project over a 30 day period and the Building Department must review and respond to these community objections. Only after this public vetting period, can a project proceed into the normal examination and approval process.



In the case of variances and special permits, the key to success is to view the community as a partner in the project and to "bring them on board early" in the design process. When requesting a special permit to build more floor area than permitted on a given site or even to change a zoning district, you are usually making an application before a Planning Board. Applications for variances such as building taller than permitted might also be the purview of a Board of Appeals. Although each of these agencies have somewhat different criteria in evaluating an application before them, they both rely heavily on the input and support of the local community planning board in the district within which a given project is located. This is why designing with the community in mind is so crucial.



A community friendly design is sensitive to the character of the existing neighborhood and will seek to respect local contextual elements especially with regard to scale. The incorporation of ample landscaped buffers at adjacent lot lines along with façade setbacks give a project some "breathing room" relative to its neighbors. Understandably, most communities are particularly concerned with the potential for increased car and truck traffic on local streets that may result from a new development. Community friendly buildings have covered off-street parking and loading areas which visually screen vehicles from surrounding properties and greatly reduce the potential for truck congestion from double parking. If possible, trash and service areas should also be screened from the street and neighboring properties.

Where the site plan allows, a project should open its arms to the surrounding neighborhood by incorporating public amenities such as seating areas and gardens. These amenities along with street tree planting will ensure a softer streetscape that is both easier on the eye and on the environment. As an architect, I firmly believe that there is no substitute for good design. An attractive building, intelligently designed to be a good neighbor is the surest route to gain vital community support and ultimately, agency approval.