



CHAPTER 7

CIVIC BUILDINGS

Schools, libraries, police and fire stations and recreation centers are the interface between government and the communities they serve. Civic buildings house the many activities that facilitate daily life, provide safety and security, encourage health and happiness and provide opportunities for civic participation. Civic buildings that demonstrate significant levels of investment and care communicate that a community values civic life and encourages people to become an active part of the greater community.

7.1 Civic Buildings as Community Assets

Civic buildings have the potential to function as the “heart” of a neighborhood. The planning and design of civic buildings is an opportunity to reflect the values and character of a community and create enjoyable gathering places.

7.1.1 Civic Buildings as Gathering Places

Civic buildings can create opportunities for all members of a community to come together. To encourage civic participation and greater opportunities for interactions between people, civic buildings should provide community gathering places.

- ◆ Incorporate opportunities for community gathering into a variety of civic buildings, especially civic buildings that are located within neighborhoods, such as schools, fire stations and libraries.
- ◆ Create welcoming entries and comfortable waiting areas in all civic buildings.
- ◆ Incorporate limited types of retail, such as cafés, into civic buildings that have numerous visitors, such as museums and city halls.

7.1.2 Civic Buildings and Public Open Spaces

There is a synergistic relationship between civic buildings and public open spaces, such as parks and plazas. Both are civic spaces that foster community participation. Civic buildings, especially schools and recreation centers, should incorporate outdoor public spaces, such as playgrounds, parks and plazas. Coordinating the siting and design of parks and civic buildings can create memorable civic spaces that function as the heart of a community. Liability issues and jurisdictional or interagency conflicts can make this coordination process difficult, but the benefits can be significant, particularly in places that are underserved by open space.

- ◆ Locate public open spaces adjacent to civic buildings to promote community gatherings and emphasize the importance of civic buildings.
- ◆ Where feasible, facilitate public access to school fields and recreation areas after hours.



A pool and plaza mark this entrance to the Oceanside Public Library.

See Also

Chapter 8: Parks and Civic Space



The City Heights library in San Diego is located adjacent to a community park.

7.1.3 High-Quality Design

Civic buildings and institutions are a great source of pride for communities. Their design should reflect a high level of care and investment. Security measures should not detract from the building's welcoming character, quality of design or attractiveness. Involving community members in the design process can help to create a sense of ownership and produce buildings that convey a community's character and values.

See Also

Chapter 4: Building Design

- ◆ Involve community members in the design of new civic buildings.
- ◆ Design any safety barriers around civic buildings so as not to detract from accessibility, visibility or aesthetic quality.
- ◆ Design civic buildings to respect the massing, setback and height of neighboring buildings.



The Natural History Museum in San Diego's Balboa Park exhibits high-quality design.

7.2 Civic Buildings in the Community

In the early 1920s, Clarence Perry developed the idea of the neighborhood unit, a planning concept that envisioned the neighborhood as the basic planning unit of towns and cities. The neighborhood unit concept influenced the design of many American “new towns” but was largely lost with the advent of automobile-dependent suburban sprawl. Perry’s concept includes many elements that are precursors to the principles of smart growth. A neighborhood is defined as an area that is contained within a comfortable walking distance, includes housing and local retail and is centered on an important civic building, such as a school. The integration of accessible civic buildings creates attractive, efficient and walkable neighborhoods where people want to live.

- ◆ Locate civic buildings with a community-wide purpose in a central location that is well served by public transportation, so that they are easily accessible to all community members.
- ◆ Locate schools, fire stations and other neighborhood-serving civic buildings within the neighborhoods they are intended to serve.
- ◆ Prioritize street and sidewalk improvements near civic buildings to provide safe routes amenable to walking and biking.
- ◆ Locate civic buildings close to other community amenities, such as commercial and employment centers, to allow users to combine trips.



This library is located within a residential neighborhood in San Diego.

7.3 Universal Design

Civic buildings should incorporate principles of universal design so that all members of the community can access services. Rather than relying on separate entries for people with reduced mobility, universal design encourages integrated solutions that make civic buildings usable and equally accessible for all.

- ◆ Use building articulation or other architectural design solutions to identify the primary entrance to a civic building.
- ◆ Provide a single point of entry that is accessible for everyone regardless of their level of mobility.
- ◆ Orient the primary entrance of a civic building towards a public street or plaza.



Community members of all physical abilities can use and enjoy public buildings, such as this library in Encinitas, when they are designed with universal access.

See Also

Chapter 4: Building Design

7.4 Signage

Signage and wayfinding tools help community members to locate and use civic buildings.

- ◆ Use clear signage to identify civic buildings and the amenities they include.
- ◆ Create a network of clear wayfinding signs to guide people to the location of civic buildings.
- ◆ Clearly distinguish paths and locations where the public is welcomed and where access is limited.



The entrance to an elementary school in Berkeley, California, is identified by clear signage.