



CHAPTER 2

DESIGNING FOR THE REGION

San Diego County is a unique region in California, with a range of climatic and topographical conditions and a culturally diverse population. The region has a larger land area than some states and contains varied natural environments, from coastal bluffs and mesas to interior mountains and deserts. It is a region with diverse types of places, in which a metropolitan tourist destination is a one-hour drive from a rural, alpine-style town. While the basic principles of high-quality design apply in all of these different places, developers must also be responsive to the region's varying built, natural and cultural contexts.

2.1 Components of Great Places

Some components of the built and natural environment are present in almost all truly great places, including those in the San Diego region.

2.1.1 Well-Defined Neighborhoods

Great places are made up of walkable neighborhoods that include homes, parks, schools and local-serving retail and commercial uses. Each neighborhood has well-defined edges and its own distinctive character. Each neighborhood also includes a focal point, such as an important park or civic building, which is within a short walk of most homes in the neighborhood.



A walkable street in San Diego helps to create great places.



Small shops in Coronado are around the corner from residences.



Mixed-use development improves the walkability of San Diego's Uptown neighborhood.

2.1.2 Mixed Land Uses

A mixture of stores, services, restaurants and homes is another component that contributes to the creation of a great place. Mixed-use development intensifies activity and interaction among people. The availability of stores, offices and residences in close proximity allows residents to work and shop close to home, and it creates “single visit” destinations that reduce the length and frequency of daily trips between home, work and services. These qualities can contribute to reductions in vehicle trips, automobile dependence and infrastructure costs.

In the context of SANDAG's Smart Growth Areas, the mix of uses should reflect the transit investment in each area and facilitate greater pedestrian activity, rather than being primarily automobile-oriented. The mix of uses should also include everyday destinations such as grocery stores, restaurants, coffee shops, day care centers and pharmacies.

2.1.3 High-Quality Architecture

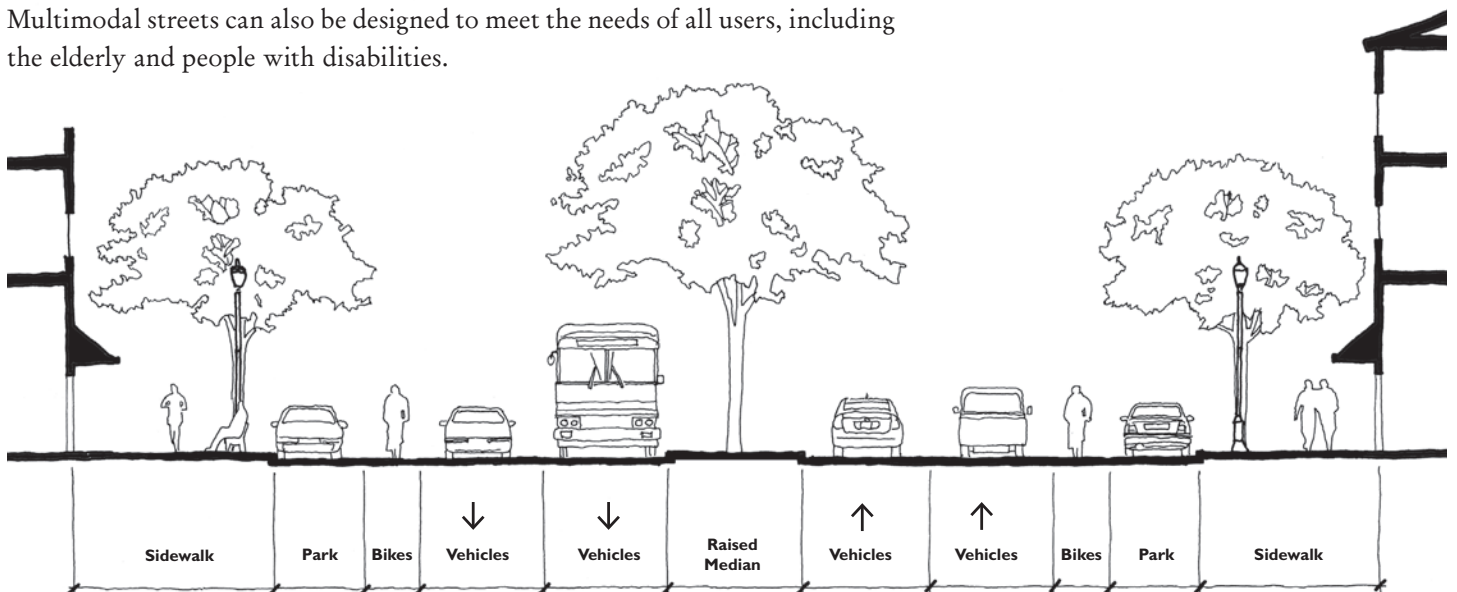
The architectural character of buildings must be visually interesting in order to create a great place. The architecture of buildings should be scaled to the pedestrian, with façades that contribute to appealing street frontages. Architectural design should also contribute to sustainability by orienting buildings to the sun, providing low-water landscaping and fixtures, and adhering to other principles of green building. All buildings should also be well maintained, which contributes to community pride.



Setbacks, façade articulation and thoughtful use of color make this residential building in La Jolla visually distinctive.

2.1.4 Multimodal Streets

Great places include streets that safely accommodate all modes of transportation, including pedestrians, bicyclists, automobiles and public transit. On a multimodal street, tree-lined sidewalks create an enjoyable, comfortable and safe place to walk, and buildings help to define the edges of the street. Multimodal streets can also be designed to meet the needs of all users, including the elderly and people with disabilities.



All modes of transportation and all users are accommodated on multimodal streets, one example of which is shown here.



Parks such as this one in San Diego create places for communities to come together.

2.1.5 Parks and Civic Space

Great places include public spaces that provide opportunities for passive and active recreation. All great places contain parks, plazas and a variety of open spaces for social gathering as well as community-wide recreation. When designed effectively, these spaces are accessible, secure and attractive, and they are located within a short walk of workers and residents. They also contribute to public health by providing places where people can exercise as well as relax.

2.1.6 Public Art

Public artwork that celebrates the local context is an important component of great places. Public art can transform everyday utility infrastructure into appealing public amenities, or it can express a community’s values through the work of a local artist. Public art can contribute to personal involvement in a place and increase community pride.



Umbrella structures and tiled seats add a whimsical touch to this bus stop in San Diego.



A mural enlivens a pedestrian passage in La Mesa.

2.2 Distinctive Qualities of the Region

The San Diego region's topography, climatic conditions and international cultural setting combine to create a distinctive context for community design and placemaking.

2.2.1 Beaches and Coastline

The San Diego region includes over 70 miles of shoreline. Beaches, bays and wetlands define the region for residents and visitors alike. This large coastal zone has many features that influence local community character, including Pacific viewsheds, ocean sunsets, moderate air and water temperatures and numerous recreational options. Buildings can be sited and designed to take advantage of these unique features, and to preserve public access to the coast.



Visitors and residents alike associate the San Diego region with its beaches and coastline.

2.2.2 Mesas and Canyons

Owing to a unique geologic history and profile, much of the San Diego region lies atop exposed marine terraces of increasing elevation and distance from the coast. These mesas are divided by extensive canyon systems, many of which are important natural habitat areas that also help to give form to surrounding neighborhoods. Buildings and neighborhoods can be designed to respond to the unique topographic features that the mesas and canyons present.



Canyons such as Maple Canyon, in San Diego, contribute to the region's unique geography.



A view of distant mountains from La Mesa.



Pleasant weather and blue skies are characteristic of Coronado and the San Diego region.



San Diego residents enjoy the City Heights Farmers' Market.

2.2.3 Mountain Ranges

Rising above San Diego's coastal terraces is the Peninsular Range, which is characterized by rocky mountains and canyons carved by rainwater runoff. From the Laguna Mountains to the Cuyumaca Mountains, this environment contains steep ranges and deep river valleys, all of which work to define the rugged character of inland areas in the San Diego region. The region's mountain environment, which is shaped by numerous microclimates, provides unique features that define local communities. A thoughtfully designed site can preserve public views of these natural features and respond to the distinct topography they create.

2.2.4 Climate and Precipitation

The San Diego region's mild climate is one of the many qualities that attract visitors and new residents to the region. On average, the sun shines in the San Diego region for more than 70 percent of the total possible daylight hours each year. Nearly all rainstorms occur between October and March. Subtropical high pressure systems and coastal humidity combine to mitigate temperature extremes and contribute to the region's Mediterranean climate. The mild climate is interrupted by dry, hot Santa Ana winds from the east during late summer and early fall. The size and topography of the region contribute to significant climate variations between coastal and inland areas. Temperatures become more extreme inland, characterized by warmer summers and colder winters. On a daily basis, summer temperatures can vary by as much as 20 degrees between the coast and inland valleys. The design of landscaping should respond to these climatic conditions by making use of native and drought-tolerant species.

2.2.5 Multicultural Population

The diverse ethnic makeup of the San Diego region's approximately 3 million residents has been shaped by the region's Native American legacy, its historic role as a military base and its position on an international border. The region is home to more Native American reservations than any other county in the United States, and members of four tribal groups currently populate the region. Since 1990, migration from Mexico and the Pacific Rim has driven regional population growth. The regional and sub-regional cultural backgrounds of the community provide opportunities for architectural and design solutions that reflect those cultures.

San Diego's historic settlement patterns as a Spanish and Mexican territory, as well as recent immigration patterns, have left a diverse legacy of neighborhood development in the region. Moreover, the region shares over 60 miles of border with Mexico, resulting in one of the largest international metropolitan border regions in the world.

2.3 High-Quality Design in the Region

SANDAG has worked with local jurisdictions to identify Smart Growth Opportunity Areas throughout the region, where smart growth currently exists or where there are opportunities for future development that supports the principles of smart growth. SANDAG has also developed a set of “Smart Growth Place Types” that describe the desired nature and scale of development in each Smart Growth Area. New development in these areas can take cues from many examples of existing high-quality design in the San Diego region.

2.3.1 Smart Growth Areas and Place Types

SANDAG’s *Regional Comprehensive Plan* recognizes that smart growth is not a “one size fits all” approach. It identifies seven Smart Growth Place Types, which are briefly described below. Each Place Type is served by a level of transit that is appropriate to its scale.

- ◆ **Metropolitan Center.** The Metropolitan Center is the region’s primary business, commercial, civic and cultural destination with a regional draw and a highly interconnected network of transit services. It also provides a variety of residential uses and high levels of mixed uses.
- ◆ **Urban Center.** Urban Centers provide region-serving employment uses in combination with civic and cultural facilities, served by regional rail and local bus services. They also provide a range of residential communities that benefit from close proximity to transit and adjacent transit-serving uses.
- ◆ **Town Center.** Town Centers are areas with a mix of office and commercial development, including residential mixed-use, that draw from their subregional areas and are served by regional or corridor transit lines, local bus services or shuttle services.
- ◆ **Community Center.** These are areas with residential, commercial and mixed-use development that serve the surrounding neighborhoods, with high-frequency local bus service. They sometimes contain civic buildings.
- ◆ **Rural Village.** A Rural Village is an area with residential and commercial development that is concentrated in a village core in the County’s unincorporated areas, allowing for local bus service.
- ◆ **Mixed-Use Transit Corridor.** This is a major linear transit corridor with residential, commercial and mixed-use development along the corridor, as well as similar development within one or two blocks of the arterial. A Mixed-Use Transit Corridor is served by high-frequency bus service.
- ◆ **Special Use Center.** These are areas dominated by employment uses with a regional draw, such as medical institutions or educational facilities. Special Use Centers generate trips throughout the day, are served by regional transit service and may have the potential for residential development.

See Also

Regional Comprehensive Plan
Smart Growth Concept Map



The Gaslamp Quarter in San Diego is part of the region’s Metropolitan Center.



Ramona is an example of a lower-intensity Rural Village.



The Smart Growth Concept Map shows opportunity areas that have been identified by local jurisdictions.

As shown in Table 2-1, each Place Type has guidelines for the appropriate scale of development. Along with targets for residential and employment densities, this helps to determine appropriate public transit service levels for each Place Type. While the scale and scope of the development potential differs between Place Types, all are defined by a high potential for diversity and activity, pedestrian accessibility and transit-oriented design. By coordinating transportation investment with land use and development decisions, the Smart Growth Place Types facilitate the creation of walkable communities, with more housing and transportation choices and better access to everyday places like jobs, entertainment and public spaces.

SANDAG has worked with local jurisdictions to apply the Place Types to a variety of Smart Growth Areas throughout the San Diego region. Some of these Smart Growth Areas are “existing/planned” areas that already meet SANDAG’s targets or have adopted plans to achieve them. Others are “potential” areas that could meet these targets in the future. The RCP’s Smart Growth Concept Map shows the location of each Smart Growth Area.

Table 2-1 Smart Growth Place Types

Place Type	General Character
Metropolitan Center	Mid- to high-rise residential, office, commercial, civic and cultural facilities
Urban Center	Mid- to high-rise employment centers with civic and cultural facilities
Town Center	Low- to mid-rise office, commercial and mixed-use
Community Center	Low- to mid-rise residential, commercial and mixed-use
Rural Village	Low-rise commercial and residential village core in unincorporated areas
Mixed-Use Transit Corridor	Low-, mid- and high-rise residential, commercial and mixed-use
Special Use Center	Low-, mid- and high-rise development with varied uses

Global Warming

Transportation accounts for 46 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions in the San Diego region—particularly carbon dioxide—that are responsible for global warming. In response to the threat of global warming, which will have significant negative impacts on California’s environment and economy, the State of California is pioneering the effort to fight global warming with the passage of the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 (AB 32) and the recently passed Senate Bill 375. One important strategy that will help achieve the goals in this legislation is to shift development patterns from sprawling, automobile-dependent suburbs to compact communities. A natural result of this shift is decreased local dependence on the automobile.

This major transition from auto-centric development to walkable, transit-friendly neighborhoods can succeed only if new development helps to create vibrant, functional and safe places. Buildings, streets and public places must be located and designed to encourage pedestrian activity and support bicycle and transit ridership. The quality of their design must be high enough to create a truly desirable alternative to auto-oriented sprawl. *Designing for Smart Growth* identifies the fundamental principles of urban design that can help the San Diego region achieve these goals, creating long-term shifts in development patterns that will reduce the region’s transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions.

2.3.2 Examples of High-Quality Design

The following pages show examples of places throughout the San Diego region that are defined by their high-quality, smart growth-oriented design. Older examples of development in these areas have helped establish the character of the San Diego region, while newer development is defining the future of sustainability and community design in the region. *Designing for Smart Growth* contains many additional images of high-quality design that already exists throughout the San Diego region.

Little Italy, City of San Diego (Metropolitan Center)

The Little Italy neighborhood of San Diego incorporates a number of new mixed-use and housing developments into the fabric of the neighborhood.



New buildings are designed to fit gracefully with one another.



Entrances to new housing face the street.



The use of color adds visual interest to a building.



High-quality architecture strengthens the identity of the neighborhood.



Large street trees help to create a pleasant and comfortable pedestrian realm.



Color accentuates and highlights a new building with underground parking.

Hillcrest, City of San Diego (Urban Center)

The Hillcrest area, with a mixture of high-quality new and old buildings, is a dynamic, pedestrian-oriented core of commercial and entertainment activity.



Gateway signage contributes to community identity.



Wide sidewalks provide ample space for outdoor restaurant seating and create a walkable environment.

Downtown El Cajon (Town Center)

Streetscape improvements and redevelopment of a number of office and retail buildings have reinvigorated El Cajon's Main Street.



Arcades provide a comfortable public space.



Sensitive new development and façade improvements reflect the existing character of El Cajon.

Downtown Oceanside (Town Center)

A beautiful location, convenient transit connections, plentiful public space and carefully designed new development make Downtown Oceanside a lively and active place.



The Oceanside Pier provides public access to the ocean.



A downtown multimodal transit station encourages the use of public transportation.



A dedicated pedestrian path creates connections and enhances the character of the community.

Fallbrook, San Diego County (Rural Village)

The village core in Fallbrook reflects many of the same characteristics of high-quality design as larger and more urbanized places in the San Diego region.



This appealing public space provides a place for the community to gather.



Active storefronts and attractive landscaping contribute to an engaging pedestrian realm.



Architectural detail of new and renovated buildings reflects the village's character.

Bird Rock Neighborhood, La Jolla, City of San Diego (Mixed-Use Transit Corridor)

The Bird Rock neighborhood includes retail and housing along newly-redeigned La Jolla Boulevard, which provides bus service.



Recent streetscape improvements have been funded by a combination of SANDAG grants, city funds and developer fees.



The new design for La Jolla Boulevard meets the needs of bicyclists, pedestrians, buses and cars.



New development in the Bird Rock neighborhood contributes to an attractive public realm by providing pedestrian amenities such as outdoor seating.



Well-marked crosswalks and pedestrian refuge islands improve pedestrian safety and comfort.

2.4 Transformation of Existing Places

The San Diego region has many communities that are designed well and reflect the principles of smart growth. However, other places would benefit from new development and public improvements that would enhance their character while creating more walkable places. The following visual simulations show how eight existing places in the San Diego region could be transformed. These places are included in SANDAG's Smart Growth Concept Map. They were chosen by local planners and policy makers as places with significant potential for smart growth development.

2.4.1 Alpine Boulevard, Alpine (Rural Village)



Existing: Many commercial businesses line Alpine Boulevard, the primary commercial center for residents of Alpine and nearby rural communities. Currently, the street edge along Alpine Boulevard is often interrupted by vehicle entrances and parking. In addition, existing sidewalks stop and start, and crosswalks are not always present where they are needed.



Potential: The street edge has been defined by attractive buildings that face widened sidewalks. A dedicated bike lane has been added, along with clearly marked crosswalks, bulbouts and pedestrian refuge islands. Outdoor seating is also provided, creating a more welcoming pedestrian environment. The net effect is a commercial environment with more synergy between businesses because of their close proximity and pedestrian linkages.

2.4.2 El Cajon Transit Center (Community Center)



Existing: Today, parking lots are a dominant feature of the landscape around the El Cajon Transit Center. A bicycle lane is present, but only in the northbound direction, and overly narrow sidewalks are crossed by many driveways.



Potential: In the constrained space between the street and the bus stops behind it, a small transit building with an arcade over the sidewalk and a pergola helps to enclose the street as a public space, yet affords views of the transit center behind. Other buildings oriented toward the sidewalks invite pedestrian activity. Bicycle lanes are present in both directions.

2.4.3 Barrio Logan, San Diego (Community Center)



Existing: Part of the Barrio Logan redevelopment project, Main Street, which intersects Cesar Chavez Parkway, is within a block of the Barrio Logan trolley stop, but serves neither as a commercial main street nor as a place that invites trolley ridership. A vacant lot at this prominent corner, along with the low-rise, nondescript industrial design, contribute to a relatively uninviting pedestrian environment.



Potential: Street narrowing creates space for attractive street trees and wide sidewalks, encouraging pedestrian activity. Inviting street lamps and outdoor seating further enhance the pedestrian experience. Buildings now face onto sidewalks, often with wide storefront windows and appealing architectural details.

2.4.4 Old Palm Avenue and Second Street, Imperial Beach (Mixed-Use Transit Corridor)



Existing: This underperforming commercial street has many shallow lots, making it essential to provide on-street parking. However, frequent curb cuts for driveways limit the amount of on-street parking and create a gap-toothed pattern of buildings along the street.



Potential: Corner bulbouts, distinctive paving treatments, widened sidewalks and palm trees add visual appeal while creating a better place to walk. Fewer curb cuts means safer sidewalks and space for more on-street parking. Two- and three-story buildings oriented to the sidewalk help to frame this walkable, mixed-use corridor.

2.4.5 Palm Avenue between Ninth and Tenth Streets, Imperial Beach (Community Center)



Existing: This portion of Palm Avenue is a wide, automobile-oriented arterial street, with three lanes of traffic in each direction. The street has no street trees along its edges, and many buildings are set back behind parking lots. Deep parcels create opportunities for increased density.



Potential: Palm Avenue is reconfigured as a multiway boulevard, with through traffic in the center lanes; side medians separate this faster-moving traffic from local access lanes, which also provide on-street parking and are comfortable for bicyclists. New development supports pedestrian activity. A forecourt provides an opportunity for outdoor dining.

2.4.6 Lemon Avenue, La Mesa (Town Center)



Existing: This area, located two blocks from the walkable main street of La Mesa Boulevard, has a mix of appealing historic buildings and undistinguished, low-slung 1960s buildings. Surface parking lots provide parking but occupy too much valuable land.



Potential: A new mixed-use parking structure consolidates dispersed parking lots, but has the appearance of a traditional mixed-use building. Ground-floor retail adds to the effect as well as unglazed window openings that ventilate parking decks on the upper floors. Street trees, pedestrian-scaled lighting and clearly marked crosswalks further enhance the street.

2.4.7 Escondido Transit Center (Town Center)



Existing: The area around the Escondido Transit Center, which faces Valley Parkway, is dominated by surface parking lots that do not support pedestrian activity. This one-way street also lacks a sidewalk on one side and does not have clear places for pedestrians to cross.



Potential: Higher-density development is provided to increase transit ridership and transform the Transit Center into a destination. A new plaza, fountain and outdoor seating, along with clearly-marked crosswalks, create a more appealing space for pedestrians.

2.4.8 E Street, Chula Vista (Urban Center)



Existing: This wide, auto-oriented street with narrow sidewalks and no on-street parking puts pedestrians uncomfortably close to moving cars. Crosswalks are not clearly marked, and the street has very little landscaping. The low-rise commercial development does not support transit ridership, even though a trolley station is nearby.



Potential: Higher-density, mixed-use development increases ridership at the nearby trolley station. In addition to retail storefronts that encourage pedestrian activity, street trees and attractive lighting have been provided. Pedestrian refuges in the street median, along with wider sidewalks with landscaping between pedestrians and cars, add to pedestrian comfort and safety. An elevated rail line allows trolley service to operate more efficiently.