6. **Buildings and Spaces of Human Scale**

There are many elements of buildings and spaces that contribute to the creation of a human scale environment. Heights, setbacks, spatial enclosure, front and side yards, architecture, and relationships of building heights to widths all play into the scale of development. The following design approaches address how to create an urban form that functions well for pedestrians and contributes to making livable and appealing neighborhoods. It should be noted that these design approaches are suggested ways of creating livable spaces. Use of any feature does not, in and of itself, create buildings and spaces of human scale. A human scale development depends on the thoughtful and creative application of the elements and their relationship with the other principles of the Neighborhood Model.

In general, heights of buildings should be greatest at the Centers and Cores and diminish gradually away from those areas. Where a Center or General Area abuts a rural area boundary, buildings may be fairly high up to the boundary. The important feature is that heights of buildings should relate to the rest of the neighborhood and building proportions should relate to the size of the human body. This means that combined height and width (mass) of buildings should not be overwhelming. Larger buildings can use techniques that reduce their perceived mass. For example, a change in material or texture above the first or second floor can help to reinforce the base (scaled to a human) while diminishing the portion above. This technique is used at the old Monticello Hotel in Court Square in Downtown Charlottesville. Other techniques include the use of cornice lines above the second or third floor or setbacks at the same location. Most important is the level and quality of detail at the first and second floor, the areas most within the view of the pedestrian.

**Setbacks and Yards**

Setbacks combined with architectural treatments can affect how a person feels when standing next to a building. Used in proportion to the scale of a human body, building setbacks can improve the attractiveness and functionality of a building and area.

Setbacks and yards also influence the relationship of buildings on a lot and the relationship of buildings to the street. The use of the buildings determines the appropriateness of the setback or yard. Buildings that function better closer to the street should have diminished setbacks and uses that need larger front yards will have greater setbacks. For example, a retail store may need little or no front setback to establish its streetscape and access, but a single family detached home may need a front yard with sufficient space away from the street for child or pet safety. This section on setbacks and yards should be used in conjunction with the Lot Types described with Principle 9 – Mixture of Housing Types.

The Neighborhood Model suggests that deep front yards and setbacks take eyes away from the street and create generally a less-inviting streetscape than shallow front yards. It suggests that shallower front yards than are traditionally used with conventional development are appropriate in the County’s Development Areas.
ARCHITECTURAL TREATMENTS WITH FRONT YARDS

A variety of architectural treatments with differing front yards are possible to achieve buildings and spaces of human scale. These treatments, ideally, would vary from street block to street block. Some examples are presented below; however, there are other designs that also help to achieve buildings and spaces of human scale that can and should be proposed by designers with development proposals. As the community becomes more familiar with the application of these concepts, consideration should also be given to replacing the minimum front yard requirement with a maximum “build-to” line. As a concept to help understand the techniques illustrated below, the following definition of Front Façade “Build-to” line will be useful. It is provided as one concept of a way to describe how a front yard or setback can be established.

Front Façade “Build-to” line: The front façade build-to line is the line in which the primary mass of the front façade should be set. It is measured from the edge of the right-of-way to the building. The larger the primary mass of the front façade, the greater the front yard should be. This line should be consistent within a block, unless it is intentionally varied to achieve a more picturesque effect and/or avoid unusual site conditions. Where the transect is applied, it may vary from the Fringe, General Area or Center. Porches and bay windows should be able to project from the front façade into the area between the primary mass of the building and the street.

Shop Front – Commercial Front

Definition: An architectural treatment primarily designed to promote retail activity, the shop front has a shallow front yard (0 – 10 feet). Typical of downtown buildings, this architectural treatment allows pedestrians to walk right to the edge of a building if they choose, in order to “window shop”.

Location of front façade build-to line: The front façade build-to line is at or near the edge of the right-of-way. The entrance to the building is at the grade of the sidewalk.

Features:
- It can be used for retail buildings with residences or offices on upper floors.
- It can accommodate an awning or cantilevered signage.
- It is not appropriate for single-family detached usage because its benefit is to invite large amounts of pedestrian traffic.

Suggested Locations: Centers, general, and retail areas
**Colonnade Front** – Commercial Front

**Definition:** An architectural treatment promoting retail activity, second stories of buildings overhang the sidewalk and are supported by columns. The columns enclose the space of the sidewalk within a colonnade.

**Location of front façade build-to line:** The front façade build-to line is within the right-of-way. The building is recessed on the first floor to allow for a sidewalk. The second story is located over the sidewalk. The sidewalk should be completely absorbed within the colonnade to prevent pedestrians from bypassing it. The entrance to the building is at the property line.

**Features:**
- It is appropriate for retail use and for civic buildings.
- It requires special permission for placing structures in the right-of-way.
- It is not appropriate for single-family detached residential use because its benefit is to invite large amounts of pedestrian traffic.

**Suggested Locations:** Centers, mixed-use, and retail areas

**Stoop Front** – Residential Front

**Definition:** An architectural treatment that provides an urban front yard acceptable for ground floor residential use. The “stoop” is a small staircase that provides a “walk-up” to the first floor of the residence. Privacy from pedestrians walking by the house is assured by raising the first floor, while the stoop provides an “outdoor seat” for the residents.

**Location of front façade build-to line:** The front façade build-to line is 0 – 10 feet from the right-of-way. The entrance to the building is at least 3 feet higher than the grade of the sidewalk to assure visual privacy for windows.

**Features:**
- It accommodates ground-floor residential uses including single family attached and detached homes, townhouses, and apartment buildings.
- Buildings using the Stoop Front may be intermingled with buildings using the Shop Front.
- Houses designed with Stoop Fronts generally do not provide off-street parking and are accessed from a sidewalk.
- A stoop front can be used with a “side yard” or “Charleston house”, which is entered off of a side garden. When used in this way, the front yards are generally diminished as 0 – 5 feet.

**Suggested Locations:** Centers and mixed use areas
**Dooryard Front** – Residential or Commercial Front - Uphill and Downhill

**Definition:** An architectural treatment providing for a paved or landscaped surface between the right-of-way line and front façade.

**Location of front façade build-to line:** The front façade build-to line is 10 – 15 feet from the edge of the right-of-way. Within this yard is a landscaped area. The main entrance to the building is either several feet higher than the street or several feet lower, depending on the terrain.

**Features:**
- It is appropriate for residential or commercial uses in an “urban” setting.
- It can provide an elevated lawn, garden, or terrace in the area between the street and the door on the uphill side.
- It can be effectively used for retail businesses.
- It can also be used for ground floor residences in single family houses, townhouses, or apartment buildings.
- In areas of steeply sloping terrain, it may be set as high as 4 feet above or below the sidewalk to absorb some of the grade.
- When used on the downhill side, the area can provide for a sunken “light court” between the sidewalk and the building.
- When used on the downhill side, the lower levels can provide for residential uses, retail uses, or office spaces.
- Use of the dooryard front may occur as uphill and downhill sides on opposite sides of the street

**Suggested Locations:** Centers, mixed use, and General Areas

**Porch and Fence Front** – Residential Front

**Definition:** An architectural treatment that provides a deeper front yard than a commercial use and includes a fence in the front yard and front porch on residential buildings.

**Location of front façade build-to line:** The front façade build-to line is 15 – 25 feet from the edge of the right-of-way.

**Features:**
- It provides an at-grade or moderately sloping yard, garden or terrace to separate the use from the street.
- Porches project away from the building between the house and the street.
- A fence, wall, or hedge can be placed at the right-of-way line to demarcate the yard. When used, walls and hedges should be set back 1-2 feet to accommodate footings, roots, and maintenance.
- Porches should be at least 8 feet wide in order to be useful. They may be 1-2 stories in height.

**Suggested Locations:** General areas and Fringes
Common Lawn Front – Residential Front

**Definition:** A front yard in which no special architectural treatment is applied to the front of the building. The common lawn front is the most rural front possible in the Neighborhood Model. The house is perceived as an object within space, and not as a container of space as in the other front yard conditions.

**Location of front façade build-to line:** The front façade build-to line is 25 – 40 feet from the edge of the right-of-way. When the build-to line reaches 40 feet, a front porch is not necessary.

**Features:**
- It provides a lawn, garden, or terrace in the area between the street and the door.
- It is suitable for “estate lots” or infill lots on highly trafficked roads since the larger setback provides a buffer from the traffic.
- It may be used where preservation of trees in the front yards is desired.

**Suggested Locations:** Fringes

ARCHITECTURAL TREATMENTS WITH SIDE YARDS

As front yards influence the relationship of buildings on a lot and the relationship of buildings to the street, side yards separate buildings from each other. Generally, in Centers or areas of intense activity, buildings will be closer together and sometimes give the appearance of a “downtown”. At Fringes, houses will be set farther apart. The required distance between buildings is determined by the Building Code with emphasis given to fire safety. In General Areas and Fringes, consideration of side yard standards and landscaping must be given to promote visual privacy in houses.

**Side Yards in General**

Issues with side yards relate to needs for fire safety and privacy. The Building Code mandates distances between buildings with consideration given to fire flows and building materials. As a rule, the closer the buildings are to one another, the more fire resistant they must be. Generally, the more private the use of the building, the further away the building is from its next closest building. Retail commercial buildings, may not need to be separate from one another since they may draw on the same traffic; houses, on the other hand, may need to be further away from one another to establish areas for recreation on a lot.

Rather than set a rigid “side yard setback” standard, the Neighborhood Model suggests that the Building Code dictate distances between buildings. By and large, standards to be used should promote fire safety and be large enough for plantings so that privacy can be achieved through vegetation or fencing augmented with vegetation.
Side Yards at Corners

At street corners, the public’s view of the front of buildings is very important. Since buildings are visible from two streets, two important principles are recommended for side yards at corners:

1. Side yards should allow for buildings to be set close to the street without interfering with sight distance for vehicles.
2. Buildings should be constructed with consideration of the views from both streets.

The following recommendations are made for side yards at corners:

- On the corner of two major streets, a building “front” could be constructed on both streets to provide a pleasing architectural feature, rather than the building having the appearance of being “sliced off” at the corner. (See Figure 6:58)
- On the corner of a major street and a minor street, consideration should be given to wrapping porches around the side and extending the length of the building.
- On a corner of a major street and a minor street, an ancillary structure could be added so that it also appears to front the side street (See Figure 6:59).
- Side yard setbacks on corner lots should be consistent with the front yard setbacks of other buildings on the street on which the side yard is located. In other words, if a corner house with a porch and fence front has a side yard with stoop fronts, then the side yard of the house should match the stoop front in size and will be considerably smaller than the front yard of the house.

Figure 6:58 Corner house at Celebration in Orlando, Florida. A wrap around porch assures an active facade on both the front and the side of the house facing...
Spatial Enclosure

The Neighborhood Model suggests that spatial enclosure be employed to help create buildings and spaces of human scale. Rather than regulate building heights in a neighborhood, the degree of spatial enclosure could be regulated. This method focuses on the relationships of building heights to distance between buildings.

Generally, spatial enclosure is determined by building height and tree canopy in relation to the distance between buildings or the tree line and the street. A high degree of spatial enclosure is created with shallow yards, tall buildings, and narrow streets. A low degree of spatial enclosure is the result of open, deep yards, large distances between buildings and wide streets. Too little enclosure or too much enclosure affects the feeling of comfort a person experiences in a place. For instance, a person can feel overwhelmed in a place of high rise buildings where so much enclosure reduces light, air, and the ability to see to the top of a building. Similarly, open areas with wide streets can overwhelm by producing a expansive area only suitable for cars. Building heights that relate to the distance between buildings, the addition of street trees, and building recess lines can all be used to produce spatial enclosure.

Several examples of ways to achieve spatial enclosure are offered. They illustrate ratios of building height to distance between buildings along a road. They also show how street trees and building recess lines can be used to create the appearance of more comfortable urban places.

*Figures 6:60 and 6:61: Spatial Enclosure of 1:2 as defined by buildings. In these illustrations of Charlottesville streets, the distance between the buildings is approximately twice the height of the buildings.*
Figure 6:62: Spatial Enclosure of 1:3 as defined by buildings. In this illustration of a Fredericksburg street, the distance between buildings is approximately three times the height of the buildings. Any wider distance between buildings without street trees begins to remove a sense of enclosure along the street.

Figure 6:63: Spatial Enclosure of 1:6 as defined by street trees. In this photo of Monument Avenue - Richmond, street trees reduce the perceived width of the street. The addition of trees at intervals breaks up the space so that a feeling of enclosure is created.

Figure 6:64: Spatial Enclosure of 1:2 using building recesses. In this drawing, the height and mass of buildings is diminished to the eye by using a building recess at the second story. The width to height ratio is retained by proportionate increases in distance and building height.