The Department of City Planning’s mission is to plan the future of the city of New York. One of the core values of the mission is a concern for the livability of New York City’s neighborhoods and quality of the urban design that shapes them. As the department works to advance comprehensive neighborhood planning and the review of land use applications, the urban design office is charged with providing a clear and consistent perspective and advocacy in all matters that will affect the public realm. Through a series of workshops and evaluation of successful recent projects in the five boroughs, the urban design office has distilled a set of principles for good urban design. The principles are intended to be a resource internally for department staff and externally for those who are working to improve the livability of New York City’s neighborhoods and those who share our commitment to expand, protect and promote our public realm.
New Yorkers love neighborhoods with a sense of identity and authenticity. Great urban design incorporates and celebrates a neighborhood’s history, the culture of those who call it home, and the natural systems that underlie and surround it. Iconic buildings, vibrant public spaces, and natural areas can generate a powerful and unique sense of place. Those elements of urban design that are familiar throughout the city—recognizable building types, well-ordered streets, and waterfront esplanades—create a rich and welcoming urban environment.

The City uses policy and zoning tools to improve every New Yorker’s access to affordable housing, fresh healthy food, quality open space, and other essential neighborhood services. Urban design coordinates how these policy objectives work together on the ground. For instance, access to quality open space can be limited when cars are given priority over pedestrians and bicycles. Urban design improves accessibility and openness by designing places that encourage public use, ensuring that privately owned public spaces and waterfronts are both visible and welcoming to passersby, and that affordable housing enjoys the same standard of urban design as its neighbors.

Good urban design spans multiple scales, from benches and planters to large-scale planning and policy initiatives. It requires attention to detail at every step in the planning and design process. With urban design leadership and vision, an abandoned rail line can become a world class park and a dilapidated streetscape can emerge as a village commons. Good urban design does not have to cost more or take more time, but is most effective when initiated at the beginning of a project rather than as an afterthought.

In 1916 New York City’s first zoning regulations were established to ensure universal access to light and air. This core idea remains integral to every urban design decision, even as urban designers now address a broader set of questions of public health, comfort, and enjoyment across the public realm. Urban design supports the creation of vital street-life by promoting diverse and active ground floor uses. People feel a sense of security and comfort walking through a well-knit fabric of buildings and public spaces. Urban design not only gives a neighborhood shape, it reflects a diversity of ways of living, promoting inclusivity and comfort as the bedrock of a successful place.
1. SITE  
Get to Know the Place

The first priority of an urban designer on a project is to fully understand, appreciate, and document the site and context. This means walking a site at different times and getting to know the people and places in the area. Understanding the history of planning and development in an area, as well as ongoing initiatives, provides a foundation for sensible design thinking. Urban designers need to be sensitive to the social and economic context of a neighborhood, especially where legacies of racial or environmental injustice are prevalent. A thorough site analysis requires intensive sketching, measuring site conditions, and mapping data to inform the public conversation and inspire urban design strategies.

2. ENGAGE  
Engage through Visualization

Like good planning, good urban design depends on a diversity of voices. Getting people involved early in the process is critical. Urban design plays an essential role in coordinating complex urban projects, ensuring a level of transparency through visualization and documentation, and thereby creating a platform for sustained collaboration among multiple stakeholders. By working with clear visualizations and direct engagement, urban designers can build the understanding and trust that makes productive collaboration possible.

3. SCALE  
Think Across Scales

Elements of urban design are typically perceived at three scales. From a citywide perspective, urban design consists of the standards and regulations that govern private development and public investment in infrastructure and services. From a neighborhood perspective, urban design includes blocks and streets, building fabric and infrastructure, open space and public buildings. From the pedestrian’s perspective, the scale at which we can best judge the success of urban design, fine grained elements of buildings, streets, sidewalks, plantings, seating, lighting and other details help create an intimate human experience and contribute to the character and identity of a particular neighborhood.

4. ANTICIPATE  
Think Long Term and Short Term

Designers use scenarios to test ideas. Scenarios prompt critical questions about implementation, phasing, maintenance, and funding. How is this place going to be used over time, who is going to maintain it, and how will it impact the surrounding area over the coming years? When scenarios are inconclusive and a project’s impacts are not fully understood, pilot projects and short-term interventions can be employed to observe and evaluate design strategies in real time.

5. PROJECT  
Question the Status Quo

Finally, like all design, urban design must question the status quo. By examining global issues—climate change, housing affordability, transportation equity, public health—and through our local context, urban designers help to shape the City’s long term policies. By understanding precedents from around the world, we challenge ourselves and our stakeholders to look at the public realm from a different perspective. We must continuously improve our practices of planning and design in order to ensure that the public realm and physical form of the city continue to reflect the extraordinary diversity of its people, while improving their overall quality of life.