



Search:

Advanced

Browse By Topic

[Home](#) » [Planning & Community Environment](#)

- [Home](#)
- [Purpose](#)
- [Board Members](#)
- [Types of Applications](#)
- [Online Forms](#)
- [Application Review Process](#)
- [ARB Meeting Procedures](#)
- [Sustainable Resources](#)
- [FAQs](#)
- [Agenda](#)
- [City Meeting Schedule](#)

ARB architectural review board

FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

1. [What projects require architectural review?](#)
2. [How long does the architectural review process take?](#)
3. [What is required for an architectural review application?](#)
4. [What does the ARB look for in a project?](#)
5. [Who are the members of the ARB?](#)
6. [What happens after I submit my application?](#)
7. [My application has been deemed 'incomplete'. Why?](#)
8. [What happens at the ARB meeting?](#)
9. [What should I present to the ARB at my review?](#)
10. [When can I submit my plans for a building permit?](#)
11. [What is the 'appeal period' and how will that affect my project?](#)
12. [Should I communicate my project plans to the neighborhood?](#)
13. [How can I use public art in my project?](#)

1. What projects require architectural review?

Any project involving alterations to the exterior of an existing building (e.g. fences, signs, awnings, mechanical equipment, landscaping, facade changes) and the construction of new buildings, require an architectural review. Single-family residences and duplexes are excluded from the architectural review process.

[Return to Top](#)

2. How long does the architectural review process take?

The time required to process an application will vary with the size of the project. Once the application has been deemed complete, the architectural review process can take between four weeks to six months to complete.

[Return to Top](#)

3. What is required for an architectural review application?

A complete architectural review application contains all forms requested on the [Application Checklist](#). In addition, projects requiring a Use permit, a Variance, or a Parcel Map can obtain approval via the Director's hearing process concurrently with the filing of the architectural review application. Major Planned Community (PC) zone changes and major Site and Design proposals are reviewed by both the Planning & Transportation Commission and City Council, in addition to the Architectural Review Board. Applicants should verify with City Staff to see if any additional reviews/ items are required.

[Return to Top](#)

4. What does the ARB look for in a project?

The ARB is looking for a combination of things when reviewing a project, including:

- Integral architectural concepts (design concept should be cohesive, composition coherent)
- Green Building or sustainable design (see the Green Building recommendations list for more information)
- Entry/ exits/ ADA access, pedestrian appropriateness
- Landscaping - incorporate at the beginning of design process and add wherever possible (base of freestanding signs, recess windows to provide more planting, in-ground plantings encouraged)
- Lighting and photometric plan - sconces on pilasters not usually approved
- Hardscape - special paving for pedestrian experience, permeable surfaces
- Awnings and sun shading systems
- Materials - use authentic finishes (real stone, etc.)
- Signage program - consistent with uses
- Colors - need to work with adjacent buildings, keep number limited, carefully select color palette
- Mechanical screening and attention to downspout placement and design
- Sections that describe improvements to existing buildings
- Buildings should relate to entire block - compatibility - drawings showing street trees and streetscape to be provided and consider streetscape in design concept
- 3 - dimensional look at building helps (models good)
- Alignment with building lines on adjoining properties, modulation of mass, and use should create harmony
(See the PAMC; Section 16.48.120 (a) for specific standards)

[Return to Top](#)

5. Who are the members of the ARB?

The Board is composed of five members; at least three of whom are architects, landscape architects, building designers or other design professionals. Terms are for three years and commence on October 1. [Click here](#) for more Board Member Information.

[Return to Top](#)

6. What happens after I submit my application?

After an application is submitted, a Staff member will review it for its completeness. The Staff will notify the applicant within 30 days if the application is complete. If the application is incomplete, Staff will request the missing materials from the applicant. If it is complete, the application will continue with the ARB process.

[Return to Top](#)

7. My application has been deemed 'incomplete'. Why?

An application is deemed incomplete if any items on the submittal Checklist have not been received. If the Checklist was completed, additional information requested from a Staff member could be missing. The Staff member requesting the information will notify the applicant of the necessary

information to complete the application.

[Return to Top](#)

8. What happens at the ARB meeting?

The ARB meeting is held so that the Board can review development projects that require a decision by the Director of Planning and Community Environment. The ARB does not make the decision on a project. They make a recommendation to the Director, who makes the final decision on each project.

Since the ARB meeting is a public meeting, there are opportunities for members of the public to speak on any item, whether it is on the agenda or not.

All projects that are discussed at the meeting generally follow the same [meeting procedures](#). The ARB Chair announces the item to be discussed and city staff (usually the project manager for the item) gives a short presentation and staff recommendation. Next, the applicant makes a presentation, introducing the Board to the project and highlighting significant aspects of the design. The ARB then asks questions of the applicant and staff about the project. The Chair then opens the public comment period, and any member of the public may speak to the item. Speaker's time is limited to three minutes. After the public comment period, the applicant is allowed to make a final presentation of up to three minutes. The Chair closes the public hearing and the Board discusses the project. During this time, motions may be made and a final vote is taken and recorded.

Other types of applications, such as [consent calendar](#) items and [study sessions](#) are handled slightly differently.

[Return to Top](#)

9. What should I present to the ARB at my review?

Depending on the type of project you have, you will be limited to a specific amount of time to make your presentation. For [Major projects](#), the applicant is allowed a ten-minute presentation. For a [Minor project](#), five minutes is allowed. You should use this time wisely.

You should present a brief overview of the project, the site, and the architecture, of course, but the Board is also interested in how you settled on your preferred design. What alternatives did you consider? Why did you choose not to use those discarded designs? By showing the Board your thought and design processes, the Board will gain a better understanding of what you are trying to achieve with this project. So don't throw away those old sketches yet. Bring them to the meeting.

Depending on the nature of your project, you'll want to speak briefly to the landscaping features, parking and circulation, lighting, signage, and trash enclosures. Be prepared to discuss delivery routes (FedEx and UPS truck access), drainage, public art locations, colors, materials, and trees to be saved or removed. For larger development projects, be able to discuss traffic impacts.

The Board is also very interested in your efforts towards [sustainable or "green" building](#). For many projects, such as new buildings, you'll have to demonstrate that these concepts have been incorporated into your design.

There are many resources available in the design community to assist you with the addition of sustainable products, systems and methods into your design.

Finally, the Council Chambers is equipped with tools to assist you with your presentation. Easels, wireless microphones, and a PC with projector and overhead capabilities are available for your use. Most applicants find that plans and drawings mounted on foam core make presentations easier.

[Return to Top](#)

10. When can I submit my plans for a building permit?

Once a project has been recommended for approval, The Director of Planning and Community Environment will review the project. The Director will consider the ARB's recommendations and approve or disapprove a project. If the project is approved, the applicant can apply for a building permit.

[Return to Top](#)

11. What is the 'appeal period' and how will that affect my project?

The decision on a project, made by the Director of Planning and Community Environment, can be appealed by any person aggrieved by the decision, including the applicant. Appeals are filed with the City Clerk or staff at the Development Center by payment of a fee and by providing a written documentation outlining the basis for the appeal. Once an appeal has been filed, the application will be scheduled for a hearing by the City Council within 31 working days of the date of the appeal. This affects the project because no further action may be made with the project until the City council has made a decision. Appeal periods for approved projects are as follows:

- [Minor projects and Signs](#): appeals must be filed by the close of business on the fourth working day following the date of the decision of the Planning Director.
- [Major projects](#): appeals must be filled by the close of business on the eighth working day following the date of the decision of the Planning Director

[Return to Top](#)

12. Should I communicate my project plans to the neighborhood?

A community outreach program can be an effective tool to communicate with the neighborhood where the project will be located. Palo Alto residents actively participate in their community and development projects of all sizes and types typically generate a high level of interest. A small investment in a community outreach plan may prove valuable at each stage of your project.

There is not a set formula or checklist for a community outreach plan. However, there are a number of elements that have proven to be successful. Your first action may be to contact the local neighborhood association where the project will be located. Many neighborhood associations have zoning subcommittees that review projects. You may offer to send preliminary plans and data to the association's subcommittee. In return, their response will provide you with an idea of the level of interest in the neighborhood and specific issues they would like to have addressed. The association may also invite you to make a presentation at one of their

meetings. Face-to-face contact with members of the neighborhood may help to solidify relationships with residents. You may also want to designate a representative within your organization who can answer questions from residents. A simple rule of thumb is to contact the neighborhood leadership early and often throughout the process. To obtain names and telephone numbers of neighborhood associations, please call the Planning Division at (650) 329-2441.

[Return to Top](#)

13. How can I use public art in my project?

The City of Palo Alto strongly encourages the use of art in architectural projects in order to enrich the built environment and bring an artist's perspective to the work. The [Palo Alto Public Art Commission](#) has a pamphlet, Guidelines for Developers, which is available at the Development Center, and can provide assistance in locating artists, arranging competitions and providing preliminary review of design direction.

[Return to Top](#)

[Top](#)

[Acceptable Use Policy](#)

[Accessibility Guidelines](#)

[Site Guide](#)

[Search](#)

[Home](#)

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