



June 19, 2019

Design Perspectives: Seattle Design Commission at 50: A design town gets its due

For 50 years, the Seattle Design Commission has been here to support bold ideas and look out for the public interest, all at the same time. All in the open. It's a little unlikely, but it works for us.

The list of iconic places the SDC has helped along includes Gas Works Park (opened 1975), Freeway Park (1976), Downtown Seattle Transit Tunnel (1990), Seattle City Hall (2003), Central Library (2004), the Olympic Sculpture Park (2007) and the Denny Substation near South Lake Union (2019). These are projects that put Seattle on the map as a design town, garnering multiple awards and international attention.

Design Perspectives
By Clair Enlow

The SDC celebrates its first 50 years today from 3 to 5 p.m. in the Bertha Knight Landes Room at Seattle City Hall, 600 Fourth Ave. Speakers include Leonard Garfield, director of the Museum of History & Industry, and Colleen Echohawk, director of the Chief Seattle Club.

How important is this? One way of looking at it: Revisions to any of the landmarks listed above would trigger the need for another SDC review. The Space Needle itself came before the SDC when revisions were made recently. Seattle's most emblematic structure was actually built in 1962, six years before the commission was established.

As a quasi-independent review panel that oversees design of public buildings and civic infrastructure, the SDC is pretty unique. Director Michael Jenkins could think of only one similar commission, in New York.

Advocating for public value

Former SDC chair Barbara Swift, a landscape architect, thinks it's significant that the SDC was created on the tailwinds of Forward Thrust, a package of wide-ranging public investments that included the Lake Washington cleanup and the Seattle World's Fair. Civic pride ran high.

Populist suspicion is never far behind civic pride. Swift pointed out that boards and commissions like the SDC help to mitigate mistrust in government, because they are perceived as advocates for public value.

Perhaps the SDC's saving feature, according Swift, is that it plays an advisory role and not a regulatory one. The values and criteria applied to projects are general in nature, subject to interpretation.



Rendering provided by NBBJ [\[enlarge\]](#)

Denny Substation, designed by NBBJ, was contested by neighbors. In order to move a backlot-type city facility downtown and make it a more welcome addition, the substation's working parts are corralled inside a large, low structure and coupled with park-like amenities, viewing opportunities and meeting rooms.

But the public exposure and the process is sometimes frustrating to design teams and development partners. It's the ultimate Seattle Process. It's not efficient. But that's how distinctive public places get done. For instance, Gas Works Park, now almost universally loved, sparked a great deal of controversy at the time it was proposed, and it's easy to imagine that the idea of reusing an industrial hulk (an abandoned coal gasification plant) in a city park might have died early if not for the support of the commission.

In its first 50 years, the SDC has reviewed over 1,200 projects, including all buildings funded completely or in part by the city of Seattle. It has vetted city parks and community centers, citywide policies, master plans and transportation infrastructure. Smaller project types include skate parks, skybridges and public art installations.

The commission must review private developments like the recent Amazon projects if they cover or “vacate” a street or alley. In a street vacation the public right of way passes into private ownership, and it must deliver public benefit in return. It's up to the SDC to decide if it does, and if it provides enough.



Photo courtesy of city of Seattle [\[enlarge\]](#)

Seattle Central Library, designed by OMA with LMN Architects, was the centerpiece of the 1998 Libraries for All levy.

Ten commissioners serve two-year terms, sometimes consecutively. As set by the founding legislation, there are two architects, one urban planner, one landscape architect, one artist and two engineers on the SDC. There is also an at-large member. They are all ultimately appointed by the mayor, but recommendations are solicited from professional organizations like the American Institute of Architects. Some are principals in large design firms, yet they spend about 15 hours a month in SDC work, which includes two review meetings. The commission is supported by four city staff members, including the director. There are no openings at this time, according to Jenkins.

City's 'design consultant'

Formally, the SDC simply advises the Seattle City Council on projects that require its approval. Ordinarily, it is up to project teams to decide when to get on the SDC calendar for review, but most choose the end of the concept phase, before working drawings are created.

Seattle's system of voluntary review panels is confusing. There are neighborhood Design Review Boards for private buildings, the Seattle Planning Commission for reviewing systemic projects like changes to the Comprehensive Plan, and the Seattle Arts Commission, to oversee public art.

But it's the Seattle Design Commission that has been called “the city's design consultant.” As an example, according to former chair and architect Mary Johnston, it has been convened more than once by city staff to consider public infrastructure projects at the very beginning of design.

SDC chairs have shaped the review process over time. For instance, former chair Ed Weinstein said that in the 1980s commissioners were accused of holding projects hostage to whims, as in “we like it or we don't like it.” Weinstein, an architect, pushed the SDC process to be more legible and apply agreed-upon criteria, he said. The SDC website lists broad values like accessibility and equitability, but those values are still subject to interpretation.

Jescelle Major sat on the SDC for one year in 2016 through Get Engaged, sponsored by the YMCA. The program aims to get people under 30 into positions where they can serve and influence the city.

Major saw everything from the addition to the Washington State Convention Center to small parks in Greenwood. She likes the fact that the commission is made up of volunteers independent of city government, but also practicing design professionals, for the most part. That gives them a lot of range for considering the merits and shortcomings of designs, and how projects fit into the communities around the site, she said. It also makes commissioners big contributors to the city. “The reality is this is public space and a public process,” she said. “We are forced to step outside our professional bounds.”



Seattle Municipal Archives photo [\[enlarge\]](#)

Gas Works Park, designed by Richard Haag, is the home of a former coal gasification plant for Seattle Gas Light Co. The site was converted into a park in 1975.

She would like Seattle to know that the SDC is organized to get input from anyone who would like to register comments on projects under review, or just watch. According to Major, it works well to email because members receive all comments and typically study them ahead of meetings. The best thing, she said, is to send comments and show up.

But there are some heavy users of open space and public projects that don't get heard much at all. It's kind of a tired story, said Major, but the homeless have no voice. One remedy for that would be to create a position on the SDC specifically for an advocate for the homeless, in the same way the commission was able to accommodate Get Engaged. This could make for a very interesting dialogue, according to Major.

Former chair Osama Quotah, an architect, served part of his term in the past five years, a time of prolific change in Seattle. Reviews included parts of the light rail system, many decisions about the future of the Seattle waterfront, and three Amazon projects with street vacations.

Always, according to Quotah, commissioners have to think about the big picture and all the ways Seattle may be changing and also preserving elements of the past. And that brings them to the biggest question of all. It's what they should be asking about everything that comes to them, said Quotah: “How is this project going to contribute to the city 50 years from now?”

Clair Enlow can be reached at clair@clairenlow.com.

Previous columns:

- [Design Perspectives: Will the 3rd & Cherry tower plaza be public enough?](#), 04-24-2019
- [Design Perspectives: Elegant solution? Selig offers \\$10M to help fund bridge in exchange for taller waterfront building](#), 01-30-2019
- [Design Perspectives: The Marion Street Bridge still falls short](#), 01-16-2019
- [Will we really have a 'Waterfront for All'?](#), 12-05-2018
- [Design Perspectives: Battery Street group looks to other cities for ideas](#), 09-12-2018
- [Design Perspectives: The Marion Street bridge design falls short](#), 08-08-2018
- [Big changes in Seattle waterfront design merge Overlook Walk with Ocean Pavilion](#), 05-02-2018
- [Design Perspectives: The real work along the waterfront is what you don't see](#), 03-14-2018

