
Objective Design Standards Basics



City of Oakland

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What are objective design standards (ODS)?

The city is undertaking an effort to develop procedures, regulations, and design criteria that more prominently feature objective design standards to streamline the approval of residential and mixed-use building types and may cover commercial buildings in the future.

The City of Oakland's design review processes currently include objective and subjective standards and guidelines that aim to ensure that new construction projects, renovations, and developments align with the city's urban planning goals, architectural character, and community needs.

Objective design standards are required, clear, and measurable criteria for how buildings should look, with no "gray area" or room for interpretation. They are different from guidelines, which can help provide direction, but are often vague and open to interpretation, which can add uncertainty, cost, and time to the development process.

ODS are required by State law and may be used by planners, developers, homeowners, designers and architects who wish to build eligible projects.

Existing Design Review Guidelines

- **Subjective:** Open to interpretation, difficult to measure, vary person to person
- Recommendations, which may not be enforceable
- Use words like "should" or "may"

New Objective Design Standards

- **Objective:** Measurable and verifiable - predictable results
- Requirements, which are enforceable
- Use language such as "shall," "must," or "is required to"

Examples of existing subjective design review guidelines translated to Objective Design Standards:

Planning Code (17.136.050)

"...the proposed design will protect, preserve, or enhance desirable neighborhood characteristics."

ODS: Roof Slope

Slope Category	Roof Pitch (vertical/horizontal)
FLAT	≤ 1/12
LOW	≤ 1/12 and ≤ 1/12
MODERATE	≤ 4/12 and ≤ 1/12
STEEP	≥ 1/12



Roof Slope. More than 50 percent of a new development's roof area shall exhibit the same slope category as:

- The historic building(s) in the Neighborhood Context Area.
- More than 50 percent of the street-fronting buildings in the Neighborhood Context Area.
- If a single slope category cannot be identified, the building shall either provide a flat roof or pick any of the slope categories from the Neighborhood Context Area.

Oakland Corridor Guidelines

4.3.2. Establish prominent and frequent entrances on facades facing the corridor. Every principal building should have at least one prominent entrance facing the corridor... Carefully design entrances to be a distinct and prominent feature of a building, particularly lobby entrances.

Primary Building Entrances



Primary Building Entrance for Lobbies.
A primary building entrance that leads to a residential or commercial lobby shall provide:

- A minimum six-foot-wide and eight-foot-tall glazing area that includes the entrance door.
- A clear vertical height of 10 feet measured from the top of landing or finished floor at the door and the bottom of the building or canopy above.

Oakland 1-2 Unit Residences Design Manual

5.1 Design vertical and horizontal elements such as wall and roof planes, chimneys, columns, terrace walls, etc. in a manner that creates visual order.

Window Alignment



Window Alignment.

A minimum of 80 percent of upper-floor windows shall be vertically aligned with either a door, windows or structural member at the ground level.

Why are they being developed?

Oakland is developing objective design standards to...



Build more housing. Oakland's housing crisis includes rising costs, increased rent burden, displacement, and widespread demographic change. This crisis primarily stems from limited housing availability, especially for moderate- and low-income residents. Simplifying the housing proposal approval process, including affordable housing, would expand housing options for those most affected by high costs.



Improve equity. Objective design standards aim to improve housing-related inequities that affect Black, Indigenous, and other Oaklanders of color. The concept of “neighborhood character” has been used in various ways to influence zoning regulations and planning decisions with the aim of maintaining the perceived identity and atmosphere of single-family neighborhoods. While the intention behind preserving neighborhood character can be legitimate, it has sometimes been used as a way to restrict the construction of apartments and multi-family buildings in these areas and effectively “keep out” communities of color. Objective design standards can help to minimize implicit or explicit bias in interpretation, streamline housing development, and expand opportunity, particularly in single-family neighborhoods that have historically excluded Black, Indigenous, and other Oaklanders of color.



Follow state laws. California recently passed legislation (**SB 35 and SB 330**) to tackle the housing shortage. These laws require cities to objectively review new multi- family and mixed-use housing projects, preventing denials based on discretionary guidelines (recommendations that may be subject to interpretation).



Address City Council action. In 2019, the City Council directed Planning staff to study incentives for transit-oriented and affordable housing, including streamlined permitting. Exploring an alternative design review process with objective standards can make it easier and quicker to get a planning permit.

Senate Bills Explained:

SB 35 creates an opt-in program for developers that allows a streamlined ministerial approval process for developments in localities that have not yet made sufficient progress toward meeting their regional housing need allocation (RHNA). The streamlined, ministerial entitlement process created by SB 35 relies on objective design standards.

SB 330 allows a housing developer to submit a “preliminary application” to a local agency for a housing development project. Submittal of a preliminary application allows a developer to provide a specific subset of information on the proposed housing development before providing the full amount of information required by the local government for a housing development application.

How will they be used? How will the process change?

Review Processes

Ministerial Review



Reviewed by government or staff

Based on clear and objective criteria

Typically straightforward and routine

Limited or no public input or hearings

According to State law, Oakland must establish a **by-right** multifamily residential development process. If a project applicant complies with the objective design standards (as well as all zoning and other related requirements), the City must approve the project through a staff-level administrative process with no public review or hearing. *By-right approvals can also be called ministerial approvals.*

Oakland's current design review procedures, established in [Chapter 17.136](#) of the Planning Code, involve multiple review bodies, exemptions, and different review processes based on project size and scope. As part of the project, the City is developing a track system that allows some projects to go **ministerial** review, with considerations for public noticing.

If an applicant prefers project design features that vary from the objective standards, they may still have the option to seek approval through the City's discretionary review process for certain projects. Please note that City Staff are working to develop program details which are not final at this time.

ODS offer the potential to create a much clearer and simplified approach for housing development that will advance racial equity and opportunity in Oakland. Because ODS are objective, they'll result in more high-quality development that can be approved by-right, or ministerially, if it meets those standards, that cannot be appealed. Because many projects require **discretionary** review where public can provide comments, development can stall because of anti-development sentiment. While public hearings and appeals may be eliminated for certain kinds of projects that comply with ODS, the City's design review tracks may still require public notification to encourage communication between the applicant and neighboring residents.

Discretionary Review



Reviewed by planning and zoning, committees, or commissions

Involves subjective judgment and discretion

More complex decisions

Involves public hearings and input

Key Terms



By-right:

A proposed project can be automatically approved without the need for discretionary review, additional approvals, or public review and input.



Ministerial:

Decisions made based on set rules and standards, without room for interpretation or a public review process.



Discretionary:

Decisions that involve subjective judgment by local authorities as well as a public review process.

What do ODS cover?

Objective Design Standards will cover residential building types, shown below, and may cover commercial buildings in the future.



1-4 Residential Units



Low Rise Residential



Mid Rise Residential



High Rise Residential




Mixed Use Residential

Photo Source: Loopnet


Each type of development will be subject to “General Standards”, common to most building types, and “Building Type Standards”, which will be unique to the type of building. Some standards are different based on a project’s context (for example, if a building is on a corner, corridor, or hillside). Context-specific standards will be incorporated as modifiers in standards within each chapter.

Standards topics include:

 Site and Surrounding Context
Site Context
Relationship to Transit

 Site Planning, Organization and Design
Building Placement and Orientation
Pedestrian Access
Bicycle Access and Parking
Vehicular Access and Surface Parking
Service and Utilities
Open Spaces
Mid-block Connections
Landscaping
Site-Lighting

 Buildings
Building Bulk
Mitigation of Blank Walls
Ground Floor Commercial Spaces
Ground Floor Residential Spaces
Building Entrances

 Building Elements
Facade Pattern and Articulation
Roofs and Parapets
Decks and Balconies
Windows and Glazing
Awnings, Sunshades and Screens
Materials and Color
Architectural Lighting
Parking Garages

How do Zoning and ODS work together?

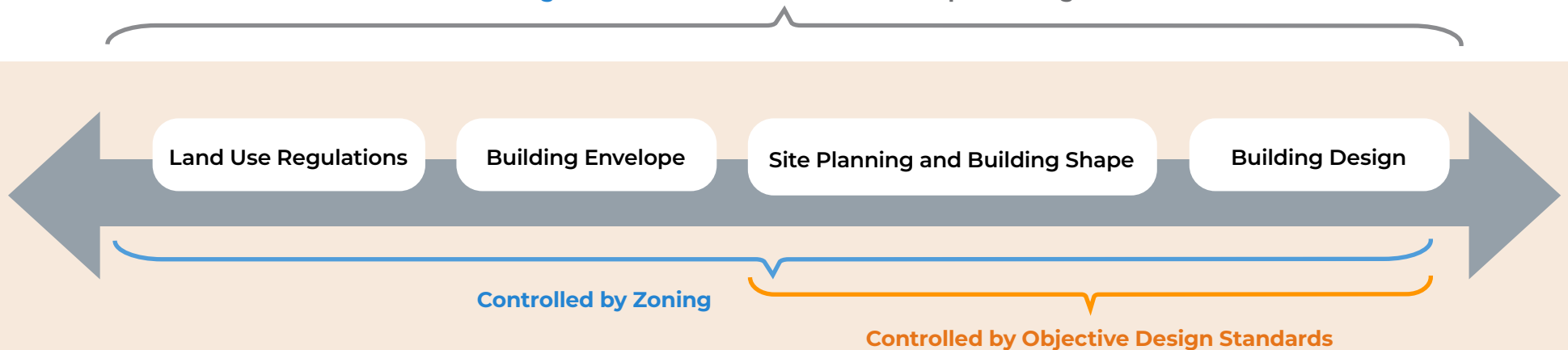
Zoning and objective design standards work hand in hand to shape buildings. **Zoning** defines land use and allowable activities in different zones and sets requirements for things like maximum building size, building height, setbacks from property lines, lot sizes, density, driveway size, required open space and more.

Objective design standards lay out clear rules on how buildings should be designed in particular areas depending on the use. They provide specific criteria for the appearance and functionality of buildings and developments within their underlying zoning districts. Zoning establishes the broad framework, while design standards add necessary detail, ensuring consistency, predictability, and specifics about how buildings should fit in with different areas of the community. Some of these include building entrance location and design, pedestrian access design, facade articulation methods, roof shapes, materials and more.

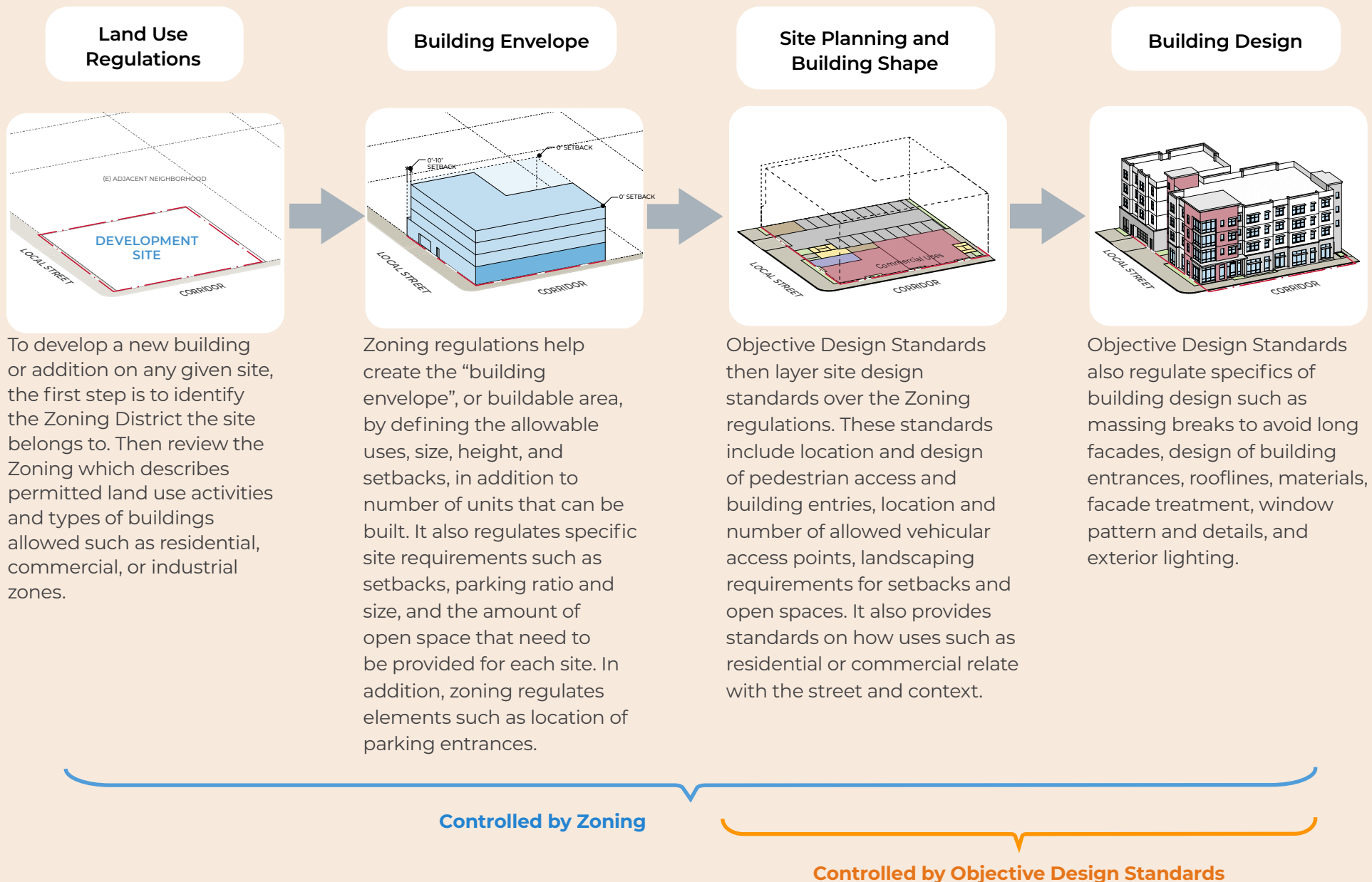
ODS is being developed alongside proposed zoning changes. A suite of changes to the Planning Code and Zoning map are proposed to encourage different housing types, allow more housing density, incentivize affordable housing, and reduce constraints on housing development. These changes include upzoning and height changes; changes to encourage duplex, triplex, and fourplex development ('Missing Middle' types); and new overlay zones, including an Affordable Housing Overlay and a Housing Sites Inventory Overlay. The ODS and proposed zoning changes are two tools that will work together to help build more housing, and faster.

The diagram on the next page shows how a parcel's zoning shapes the general building area, or "envelope," on a lot. Objective design standards then shape what the building's "form and features" look like as well as the building's relationship to the surrounding area. To understand more about how Zoning and Objective Design Standards interact, check out **ODS: Relationship between Zoning and ODS** on the project website for more details.

Zoning and ODS work hand in hand to shape buildings.



How Zoning and Objective Design Standards Shape a Project's Development and Design



What are key considerations of the ODS?

Flexibility. Providing design flexibility while still being objective is an important balance to consider. When ODS are too prescriptive, buildings can risk all looking the same. Objective standards also might not be able to accommodate unique or innovative projects that don't fit within predefined categories. To address this concern, some ODS provide built-in flexibility through different choices, or "menu of options," that a building can use to meet the criteria. An applicant will be required to meet a certain number of standards out of the choices. They are able to choose which standards they meet from the list, and the list may include exceptions. Applicants may also go through a discretionary review process as an option, in certain cases.

Equity. In order to advance racial and social equity, objective design standards must encompass the needs of people with disabilities, multi-generational households, and other kinds of cultural preferences. Standards that are too stringent could drive up development costs (for example, if they required costly materials), or could erase unique architectural elements that reflect the history and culture of a neighborhood. To avoid this, the City is engaging with the community before, during, and after objective design standards development to avoid unintended consequences and will monitor effects as the ODS are implemented.

Example of the Menu of Options for Flexibility in ODS

Hillside Developments. For developments on sites with an up-or down-slope of greater than 20 percent, at least one of the following shall be provided:

- a. Skirt walls at the sides of driveway bridges with guardrail designs
- b. Planting that will screen the skirt walls at maturity.
- c. Terraced planters with cascading vines.
- d. Attached exterior stairs.
- e. Pergolas/trellises.
- f. Variations in the wall forms and surface treatments.



Planting provided to screen skirt walls at site with slope greater than 20%.

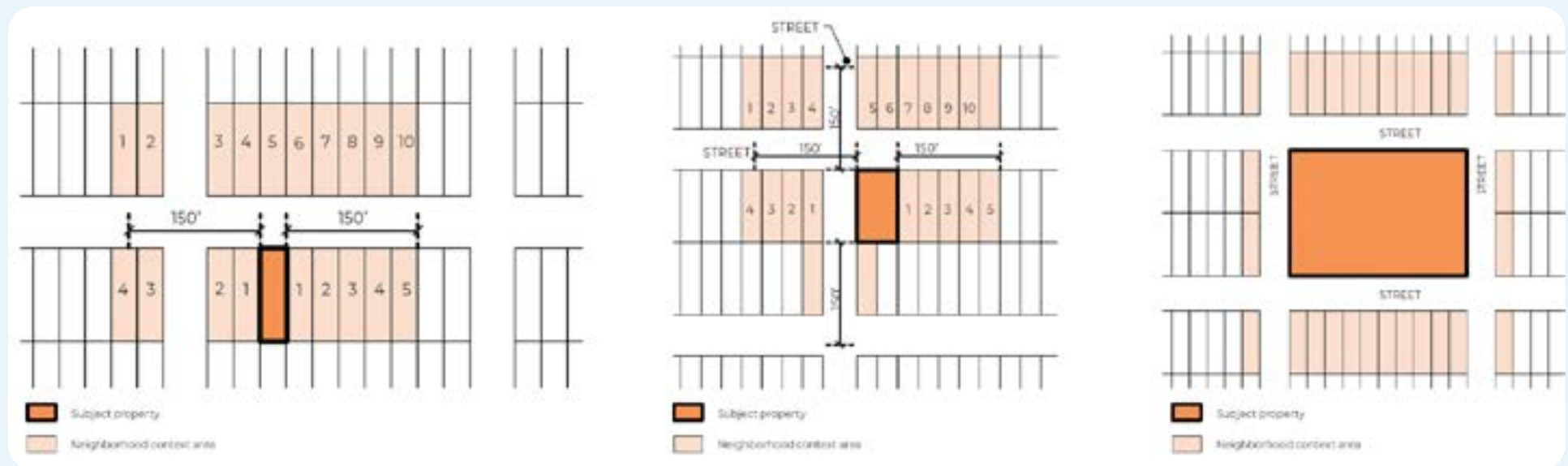


Terraced planters at site with slope greater than 20%.



Figures: Architectural Elements found in Oakland

Accounting for a diverse neighborhood context. Oakland has many unique neighborhoods with distinct characteristics. The City's goal is to develop a process that results in high-quality development that respects neighborhood context. To ensure new buildings are compatible, the ODS include some standards that relate to neighborhood context, like type of roof-line or window proportions and includes a definition of what a "Neighborhood Context Area" means (see diagram below). As such, an applicant may be required in certain cases to observe particular design criteria of properties in the 5 lots closest on each side and 10 of the closest lots across the street and propose a development that blends in with its surrounding. This is referred to as the **'5-5-10'** rule.



Interior Lots

5 lots on each side and 10 of the closest lots located directly across the street (no less than 150 feet)

Corner Lots

All parcels that front the same street intersection; no greater than 150 feet

Whole-Block Lots

All lots across the street from each side

How do I use ODS?

The City is developing a **checklist tool** for each building typology, which includes all standards relevant to a project (both from general design standards in Chapter 2 and building-specific standards in Chapter 3). Should an applicant choose to go the ODS route, this checklist will serve as a user-friendly tool to help them ensure their proposed project meets all required ODS and that the project will be approved by-right.

As illustrated in the figures below, the checklist has numbered objective design standards that correspond to the full ODS document, which includes diagrams and pictures.

City of Oakland - ODS Checklists

SITE DESIGN

CHECKLIST		PROJECT COMPLIES			
		Yes	No	N/A	Reference Sheet #
SITE AND SURROUNDING CONTEXT					
Site Context.					
X.X.XX	Site Context. Assess the surrounding character, topography, views, street patterns and types, existing land uses, General Plan land use designation, zoning, building types, and public spaces to understand the site's role in the neighborhood.				
	Existing Land Uses:				
	General Plan Land Use Designation:				
	Existing Zoning:				
	Notes:				
X.X.XX	Internal Site Circulation. In areas with grid street patterns, align new block patterns and internal circulation such as driveway aisles, alleys, private streets, and pedestrian walkways development sites from 10,000 to 75,000 square feet, with the existing surrounding street grid.				
X.X.XX	Hillside Development. Developments on sites with a greater than twenty percent (20%) slope along the street frontage, up-slope or a down-slope, the following standards apply:				
	a) Site grading outside the building footprint for new developments on hillside sites must not vary more than five feet from the existing grade				
	b) Site grading for new developments on hillside sites must be limited to 10 feet from the existing grade within the building footprint				
SITE PLANNING, ORGANIZATION, AND DESIGN					
Building Placement and Orientation					
X.X.XX	Building Placement. To create a cohesive street edge, when not specified in the underlying Zoning district, building frontage shall be located within five feet of the minimum setback, property line where there is no minimum or where the maximum setback required by Zoning is greater than five feet.				
	a) For a minimum of 75 percent of building frontage at arterial and collector streets or public open spaces.				
	b) and a minimum of 60 percent of building frontage at local streets.				
	c) When there are multiple buildings on a site, 75 percent of the sum of all the building frontages facing arterial and collector streets and public open spaces, and 60 percent of all building frontage facing local street shall be counted				
X.X.XX	Additions and Site Infill. Additions and new detached buildings on a site with existing buildings, shall be located to face a public street, public open space or interior courtyard (see Zoning for minimum dimensions).				
Pedestrian Access					

CITY OF OAKLAND

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OBJECTIVE DESIGN STANDARDS

CHECKLIST		PROJECT COMPLIES			
		Yes	No	N/A	Reference Sheet #
X.X.XX	Additions and Site Infill. Additions and new detached buildings on a site with existing buildings, shall be located to face a public street, public open space or interior courtyard (see Zoning for minimum dimensions).				
X.X.XX	Addition. Detached buildings shall be located such that they either face a public street, a public open space, or an interior courtyard with an open court of at least 10 feet by 10 feet.				
	a) When an interior courtyard is provided for access to additions, it shall be accessible from the street by a pedestrian pathway that meets standard 2.4.2.				

ODS Chapter 3: Low Rise Multifamily

x.x.xx **Additions.** Detached buildings shall be located such that they either face a public street or open space, or an interior courtyard of at least 10 feet by 10 feet

a. When an interior courtyard is provided for access to additions, it shall be accessible from the street by a pedestrian pathway that meets 2.4.2.

