

June 10, 2020

To: City of Berkeley Design Review Committee
From: Steven Finacom, DRC member

Re: Design Implications of Pandemics and other regional or national crises

At the last meeting I raised the issue of how the numerous current and evolving crises in the world may affect design. Consider, for example, the importance of livability in new buildings. This is incredibly significant now because of the stresses that global and national crises place on daily local life.

What seemed unthinkable a few years ago is now “normal”—Berkeley residents have spent months largely confined to their homes, not leaving except for essential errands, and can annually expect to spend days at a time without power, or anticipating a power shutdown.

The impact of these conditions falls especially hard on the economically vulnerable in the community and on those in crowded living accommodations. For example, those “sheltering” for months in a tiny studio apartment in a several story building, or living two or three to a bedroom in shared housing, clearly have a much different experience than those fortunate enough to be “sheltering” in a single family home with garden.

In the time I’ve been on DRC, and attending DRC meetings, I recall a number of meetings in which some project developers / designers of large residential buildings essentially talked about outsourcing livability. Does a proposed unit not have a complete or fully functional kitchen? DRC has sometimes been told that’s not necessary since renters these days prefer to eat out or get takeout. Does a unit minimize or almost eliminate internal common space—living rooms, dining areas, etc—and basically only provide bedrooms and bathrooms? Not to worry, we’ve been told. Today’s tenants, especially in Berkeley, are going to be away from home most of the time—working, studying, commuting, and socializing—and their “living rooms” are cafes, restaurants, classrooms, and other shared spaces.

None of this is true any longer, if it ever was. Under the conditions Berkeley faces now and in the future it is essential that all residential environments be truly “livable” and have maximum resiliency to crisis. Berkeley has an opportunity and obligation to make sure new developments are designed accordingly.

This is also something that will be beneficial in the long run for developers and building owners. If Berkeley and the region are subject to repeated bouts of “shelter in place” and power shutdowns, renters and buyers with a choice are likely to shun units that can’t work well for them under those circumstances.

Accordingly, I would like to see us begin a discussion of livability and survivability issues that would affect design of new buildings. Here are some of my suggestions, to open the debate.

A goal would be coming up with some specific recommendations that could go forward to the City Council to make changes in the Design Review Ordinance and building codes. Ideas include, but are not limited to:

Circulation and Distancing:

1. new multi-unit / multi-floor residential buildings should contain at least one staircase that connects directly to, or adjacent to, the main residential lobby of the building and the street and can be easily and legibly used by residents to access upper floors. This would allow residents to avoid using a cramped, shared, elevator, and also provide easier access during power outages;
2. lobbies, particularly elevator lobbies, should be somewhat enlarged so residents and visitors can physically “social distance” within the spaces while entering, leaving, checking mail and package delivery, and waiting for elevators;
3. sidewalks adjacent to commercial spaces should be designed for a minimum six feet of clear, useable width (not four, as is the requirement today). This would help ensure, among other things, that a line to a business can form without blocking pedestrians from passing.

Commercial spaces:

4. commercial spaces on the ground floor of multi-use buildings should be designed so there are opportunities for multiple exterior doorways (in larger spaces). These modifications might make the difference between a business remaining closed, or being able to quickly re-open and function in a modified way during a prolonged crisis. In essence, most storefront bays in a building should be designed to have a functional door to the street, even if, in actual use, not all the doors are needed because one business rents multiple bays;
5. Commercial space design should also be thought through to provide a location—and, ideally, an already built in capacity—for a “take out window” so a business can immediately begin modified operations during distancing restrictions. This could be as simple as designing an “extra” door to the exterior so it can have a Dutch door arrangement and serve for take-out / pick-up;
6. Commercial spaces should be designed so they can be easily made resistant to vandalism during a prolonged closure. For example, how might storefronts be most effectively and attractively “boarded-up”? There are probably design modifications that could be easily made, such as determining / providing where temporary panels could be anchored;
7. air handling design should be examined in light of spread of virus within and between commercial and common area spaces;

On-site open space and other open space issues:

8. usability of on-site open / outdoor space for residents should be maximized, with design of outdoor spaces (terraces, courtyards, etc.) providing opportunities for both individual and group use; onsite greenery should be maximized, such as opportunities for window boxes, plantings, and resident gardening spaces. If Berkeley aspires to be a “green” city it should be one in terms of plantings and open space;
9. individual residential units should have maximum natural air and natural light exposure to improve livability during lengthy shelter-in-place situations;
10. street tree and perimeter plantings should be maximized to provide greenery around, and visible from, large new buildings;
11. maximizing actually useable balconies in new buildings should be considered. We should no longer be afraid of having many well-engineered private balconies on buildings.

Energy / Power issues:

12. On-site energy generation (solar, back-up batteries, etc.) should no longer be a “nice to do sometime in the future” option but strongly encouraged or even mandated;
13. as noted above (#8) natural light and air access should be maximized in design. Living and commercial spaces should not be made entirely unusable by shut down of power and mechanical systems.