

8. Design, Arts and Culture

Issues and Challenges

Montgomery County is home to one of the most diverse populations in the nation. The county's diversity, however, is not fully represented in its arts and cultural institutions. This deficiency excludes those who have been historically underrepresented based on race and ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status and religion.

The 1964 Plan envisioned a variety of living environments and encouraged "imaginative urban design" to avoid sterile suburban sprawl. As we try to retrofit our existing neighborhoods to be complete communities, good urban design will help resolve conflicts and concerns about the changes in our built environment. These design changes include introducing new housing types in our single-family neighborhoods and creating a more resilient infrastructure in the face of climate change. Major corridors within the county have become auto-dominated traffic arteries, devoid of a sense of place, mostly as a result of poor design decisions regarding land use and urban design. As the county strives to create more places with an emphasis on walkability and opportunities for social interaction, the design of every part of our built environment—buildings, streets, parks and open spaces, public facilities and infrastructure—will need careful attention.

Vision for Design, Arts and Culture

In 2050, Montgomery County is home to diverse cultures and is a leader in new ideas and emerging trends in culture, arts and entertainment. A comprehensive urban design vision strengthens and creates a collection of great towns, cities and rural villages, each with neighborhoods built around a walkable center.

Montgomery County's buildings, public spaces, streets and infrastructure are designed to meet the needs of a changing population and combat climate change. Beautiful buildings frame walkable streets and welcoming public spaces that engage residents in activities that build relationships. All buildings and infrastructure contribute positively to the environment and improve the physical and mental health of users by encouraging an active lifestyle and exposure to nature at various scales. Streets are designed as a part of the public space network, offering a reliable and delightful journey that encourages people to walk, bike or take transit. Public buildings and major infrastructure projects are conceived by world-class designers who work directly with residents to integrate art, showcase local cultures and set a high bar for innovative design.

All residents have a say in how their neighborhoods look and everyone benefits equally from good design. Opportunities to experience art and culture as a part of daily life are equitably distributed. The county celebrates its heritage while welcoming newcomers.

Urban design and planning policies protect vulnerable communities against gentrification and displacement, and the planning process engages all residents in decision making about the future of their communities. Architecture is a problem-solving tool to encourage innovation, increase affordability and provide access to well-designed buildings for everyone.

A strong emphasis on design, arts and culture in Montgomery County makes our communities welcoming, inspiring, connected and fun. Residents, visitors and workers are attracted to the area and support economic development.

Good Design, Art & Culture Build Resilient Places

Montgomery County is one of the most livable places in the country with a high per capita income. It has a wealth of cultural, economic and natural resources. However, these assets that make Montgomery County a great place to live are not equitably accessible to all its residents. In addition, we are facing increased competition regionally to attract jobs and are projected to add 200,000 residents over the next thirty years. All this is set to unfold in a period likely to be marked by increased disruption caused by climate change, technological advancement and a higher frequency of unforeseen events such as the current pandemic.

The way we design our communities will have a great impact on how they fare in this uncertain future. Good design is not a luxury. It must be considered as a critical tool to create resilient places that can adapt to change, be attractive to workers and businesses and house residents in diverse neighborhoods with welcoming public spaces that build social trust.

Design is not just about architecture. It affects all aspects of the built environment—overall land use pattern, infrastructure, public facilities, buildings, open spaces and physical accessibility. We need good design to reflect the cultural diversity of the county in its built environment, provide communal beauty in the public realm and create great places that address the varied needs of a diverse population and bring people together.

As the county strives to emphasize walking, biking and accessibility for people with disabilities and opportunities for social interaction, the design of every part of our built environment—buildings, streets, parks and open spaces, public facilities and infrastructure—will need careful attention. Redevelopment will put pressure on the county’s historic resources and require a greater emphasis on preserving them for future generations.

Montgomery County is also home to cultures and people of various ethnicities, races and backgrounds. We must use our diversity to attract talent, spur innovation through exchange of ideas and create a robust creative economy. Not only do arts and cultural organizations enrich the lives of county residents, they can also become significant contributors to the county’s economy. As parts of the county become denser, we must use good design and the arts to create distinct identities for these places that reflect their culture and history. Supporting locally based artists, and offering a variety of music and other entertainment venues will attract patrons and visitors of all ages.

Goals, Policies and Actions

Goal 8.1: Use design to shape Montgomery County as a collection of world class towns, cities and rural villages, with neighborhoods that celebrate their history, geography and culture.

Policy 8.1.1: Use form-based codes, design guidelines and other innovative regulatory tools to ensure future developments across the county respond to their context through massing, architecture, public spaces, landscape and street design.

Action 8.1.1.a: Create a county-wide urban design vision to guide future growth and provide design guidance based on a rural-to-urban transect.

Action 8.1.1.b: Use design competitions for major new civic facilities such as schools, libraries, post offices and fire stations to create the highest-quality public structures that are a source of civic pride. Retrofit existing civic buildings with a goal of design excellence and less dependence on cars.

Goal 8.2: Create and preserve great places with attractive streets and public spaces, inspired urban design and high-quality architecture that delivers lasting beauty.

Policy 8.2.1: Ensure high-quality design for all public and private architecture, infrastructure and open space projects through the use of design guidelines, design advisory panels, design competitions and other tools. Make design excellence a priority, even when cost saving measures are considered.

Policy 8.2.2: Create county-wide or area-specific design guidelines that facilitate the construction of well-designed, accessible, cost-efficient housing at various price points.

Action 8.2.2.a: Create design guidelines focused on projects that deliver high levels of affordable housing. Guidelines should illustrate how great architecture can be achieved at an affordable price point through simple design and new construction technologies that reduce costs.

Policy 8.2.3: Use a variety of existing and new parks and trails to support communities with compact development and sustainable design.

Action 8.2.3.a: Within complete communities, assure that there is a strategic real estate development framework that relates new development to nearby parks and trails.

Action 8.2.3.b: Create design guidelines for high-density sustainable development near parks and trails.

Action 8.2.3.c: Implement the [Energized Public Spaces Functional Master Plan](#)'s analysis tool and implementation framework. Promote an integrated system of parks and public spaces where every resident is within walking distance of an appropriate space for community gathering, physical activity and events.

Policy 8.2.4: Through the regulatory process, incorporate accessible design features such as a no-step entrance, wider doors and barrier-free entrances. These and other improvements in housing will help people age in place, assist those living with a temporary or permanent disability and accommodate populations with mobility limitations.

Policy 8.2.5: Use placemaking activities to engage residents in higher levels of social interaction in public spaces. Create public spaces that are welcoming and encourage all residents to gather and interact in ways that builds a sense of community.

Action 8.2.5.a: Develop placemaking plans that define and highlight distinctive identities for all neighborhoods based on local history and culture. Establish and fund a program that invites communities to submit applications to implement their placemaking ideas within their neighborhoods.

Action 8.2.5.b: Integrate on-the-ground placemaking activities as a part of community engagement for master plans intended to transform infill and redevelopment sites. Include placemaking recommendations in new sector plans, functional plans and studies when appropriate.

Policy 8.2.6: Maximize use of county and state-owned rights-of-way to create more opportunities for active transportation and public use spaces.

Action 8.2.6.a: Encourage walking and bicycling through smaller blocks, narrower streets, buffered bike lanes and sidewalks, the lowest possible auto speeds, and no new surface parking.

Action 8.2.6.b: Adopt a Vision Zero approach with regard to public service vehicles (e.g., purchasing

smaller fire engines) so that street safety improvements, quality urban design and public safety are not compromised.

Action 8.2.6.c: Adopt the 8-80 Principle as official county policy. This policy promotes the idea that if all buildings, streets and public spaces are safe and easily accessible for an 8- year-old and an 80- year-old, then they will function well for all people.

Action 8.2.6.d: Create a “Ciclovia” or “open streets” program for the county that facilitates temporary and long-term closures of streets for community events, recreation and play.

Action 8.2.6.e: Create a Parklet program for the county that facilitates the creation of small- scale public spaces to support retail businesses and provide gathering places within rights- of-way.

Goal 8.3: Use design as a tool to avoid and mitigate the negative effects of climate change.

Policy 8.3.1: Maximize the environmental benefits of transit-oriented development by increasing density and removing regulatory barriers such as parking requirements within one-half mile of Metro and Purple Line stations.

Policy 8.3.2: Retrofit the design of single-use commercial developments and car-oriented residential communities to reduce their energy consumption. Promote walking and biking to reduce reliance on single-occupancy vehicles and minimize disruptions caused by a changing climate.

Action 8.3.2.a: Develop a sprawl repair manual for the county that highlights strategies to retrofit the design and mix of uses for single-use commercial areas and car-oriented residential communities. Apply the strategies outlined in the manual on a neighborhood scale. Use the manual as a guide to prioritize capital improvement projects and to implement new and existing master plans and studies.

Policy 8.3.3: Make high-impact sustainability features such as net-zero buildings and district- level energy generation a top priority for the design of structures, blocks and neighborhoods across the county.

Action 8.3.3.a: Create design guidelines, regulations and incentives that help achieve the goal of having all new and retrofitted buildings and projects in the county be net-zero by 2035.

Action 8.3.3.b: Create a funding stream that provides incentives for upgrading existing buildings to minimize their energy consumption.

Action 8.3.3.c: Create an Urban Tree Canopy Assessment and analyze trends from 1990 to 2020. Establish policies to regain and exceed 1990 tree canopy levels. Ensure a countywide net-zero loss of tree canopy through a robust street tree planting program in coordination with bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

Goal 8.4: Make buildings in the county more resilient to disruption through flexible design and high adaptive reuse potential.

Policy 8.4.1: Prioritize the reuse of existing structures where possible through incentives to maintain building diversity, preserve naturally occurring affordable space and retain embodied energy of structures.

Action 8.4.1.a: Partner with DPS and other county agencies to update the County Code to fast track

and create incentives for projects that adaptively reuse at least 50% of an existing structure or preserve at least 50% of all existing building materials on site.

Action 8.4.1.b: Update and strengthen the Historic Preservation Ordinance to prioritize adaptively reusing or repurposing existing buildings. Require mitigation and other offsets to benefit arts and cultural uses in the community when demolition is required.

Action 8.4.1.c: Create a program that periodically catalogs building types in the county with a high risk of obsolescence such as suburban office buildings and shopping malls. Promote their conversion and adaptive reuse through design guidelines and ideas competitions.

Action 8.4.1.d: Conduct a study exploring future uses for parking and automobile related transportation infrastructure in the context of impending automation and shared mobility trends.

Policy 8.4.2: Design all buildings and parking structures to be adaptable to changing demographics, technologies, generational and program needs over time. Prioritize resilient design for all buildings and promote ideas through design guidelines that enable buildings and communities to function well during periods of disruption. For example, encourage residential building types in the county to incorporate semi-public spaces such as porches, stoops and balconies that can function well during periods requiring social distancing.

Policy 8.4.3: Encourage trade organizations, colleges and high schools to teach building trades and connect them with local businesses that repair structures and reuse building materials.

Goal 8.5: Montgomery County is nationally recognized as a home to people of diverse cultures and a leader in new ideas and emerging trends in arts and entertainment.

Policy 8.5.1: Celebrate the county's arts, cultural institutions, and sports and entertainment related businesses as a part of the county's identity and economy.

Action 8.5.1.a: Create a Cultural Plan that leverages the county's diversity and promotes the arts to attract talent and spur economic development.

Policy 8.5.2 Partner with private property owners, nonprofit groups, and county agencies to maximize the economic potential of parks and public spaces through programming, activation, placemaking events and updates to operating procedures.

Policy 8.5.3: Create affordable space for artists and cultural uses by including them in public facilities such as schools, libraries, and community centers, and through other types of public/private partnerships.

Action 8.5.3.a: Update the county's zoning ordinance to further incentivize the provision of affordable space for arts and cultural uses and eliminate regulatory barriers to live-work, home studios, galleries, and other small-scale artmaking activities and creative businesses.

Policy 8.5.4: Ensure that the county's design, heritage, arts and institutions are inclusive and representative of its cultural diversity. Engage underrepresented groups, including youth, in planning for and making public art.

Action 8.5.4.a: Partner with the Arts and Humanities Council and Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC) to create incentives for the creation of small-scale museums

and cultural centers throughout the county. Make them low-cost and accessible ways to highlight local history and culture.

Action 8.5.4.b: Partner with the Arts and Humanities Council, schools, nonprofits and other community groups to create youth art installations in parks, open spaces and public buildings. Develop programs that foster love of art and creativity among the county's future residents.

Policy 8.5.5: Provide every resident in the county opportunities to experience art and culture daily by making public art an integral part of the public realm and physical infrastructure. Integrate art and interactive design into parks, public spaces and civic facilities like libraries, post offices and schools. Use art and design to reflect the history and unique characteristics of the place, stimulate the mind and encourage physical activity. Add public art to bridges, noise barriers, bike racks, streetscape elements, etc.

Action 8.5.5.a: Partner with the Arts and Humanities Council to reinstate the "Art in Architecture" program. Allocate 0.5% of construction costs in all public buildings for public art projects.

Action 8.5.5.b: Partner with the Arts and Humanities Council to create and fund programs that provide grants and opportunities for local artists and residents to share their works in public spaces and along streets.

Action 8.5.5.c: Amend the zoning ordinance to make public art a prerequisite of receiving incentive density within the Commercial/Residential and Employment Zones.

Action 8.5.5.d: Host competitions for the design of countywide streetscape elements.

Goal 8.6: Ensure all communities benefit equitably from good design, regardless of their location or demographics.

Policy 8.6.1: Develop and implement tools and strategies to ensure that the quality of design of public and private buildings, streets and public spaces in all parts of the county are equitable and respond to the needs of local residents.

Action 8.6.1.a: Create a design literacy campaign for the county, with a focus on educating residents regarding the positive impacts of equitable and innovative design.

Action 8.6.1.b: Partner with Montgomery County Public Schools to introduce all students to the Thrive Montgomery 2050 vision as a part of the standard educational curriculum.

Action 8.6.1.c: Establish a neighborhood design center within the Planning Department that equitably supports citizens through community-engaged design and planning services for projects identified by neighborhood residents.