Design Standards as Urban Planning: From Technical Specification to Community ‘Look’

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Design standards, an urban and municipal branding device that originated as a practice in the United States some two decades ago, have become one of the most powerful place-making forces currently operating in U.S. suburbs. This article addresses how these standards work to shape development decisions by various stakeholders in localities in Cook County, Illinois. Drawing on observations from several 2010 public architectural review commission hearings in nine different suburbs, I argue that design standards are forward-looking and ideology-based practices that are open to negotiation over the short run but ultimately end up shaping the “look” of the community over the long run. Implicit in such strategies is a reliance on an imputed agency of design in the built environment.

Keywords Branding; Built environment; Design review; Material agency; Suburbs

The charge of this commission is to make a recommendation to the Village Board on the appearance of the proposed statue, and if it meets the village’s standards for excellence. Section 2-8-5C of the village code states that a public building should set a standard for excellence; no building, gate, fence, lamp, or ornamentation should be erected or remodeled upon land belonging to the village or upon any public grounds under the jurisdiction of the village without first obtaining recommendation from the commission.

With these words the village planner in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, began her summary of a petition to the village's architecture review commission. The standards of excellence to which she refers are not explicitly spelled out in the local building code. Although the code describes design features such as building and sign heights, the setback position of the building from the street, distances from lot lines, conformity to historical styles, massing (the amount of space a building appears to occupy in relation to nearby structures), and illumination, it is the commissioners' sensibilities and lived experiences that ultimately inform decisions of whether public buildings reach a level of excellence within these design standards.

An appearance code represents a means of regulating buildings’ outward appearances to achieve a specific urban form. These codes help create predictable streetscapes primarily through city or county regulations that control physical forms, with a lesser focus on land use. In this article, I explore questions of how design standards figure into an overall urban planning strategy, specifically, how they contribute to a community brand or “look” in various Cook County suburbs. Such questions are important in understanding contemporary place making in U.S. suburbs and other localities whose governments have
embraced design review as part of their planning process. Place making is the social process through which a bounded space takes on recognizable meanings and values for a group of people. Political economy is commonly associated with the production of social space, including places, in our literature. It is a process that is observable across all societies. Here, I focus on the flip side of that process, namely, the possibility that social space “produces” certain kinds of human actions toward political–economic ends. Any time someone associates a performative verb, like produces, with an abstraction, like “space,” we are in dangerous theoretical territory. How exactly can an abstraction perform actions? I intend to show that conversations about taste during architectural design review in Chicago’s suburbs permit us to observe the structurational recursion of political economy and space through a belief in spatial agency.

Appearance codes are a recent response to the modern challenges of urban sprawl, deteriorating historic neighborhoods, and lax pedestrian safety in new developments. These measures, especially a particular standards regime known as form-based codes, are primarily associated with the New Urbanism, an international urban development regime that influenced developers across North America during the 1990s and early 2000s (Katz, Scully, & Bressi, 1994). The New Urbanism asserts that tradition no longer has to guide development patterns. The widespread adoption by cities of the century-old, single-use zoning regulations has discouraged compact, “walkable” urban neighborhoods and commercial districts. Design codes have emerged as a tool to address these past errors, giving local governments the regulatory means to more precisely achieve their planning objectives. However, such efforts to improve local living conditions often involve some conflicts of interest among stakeholders as well as contests over whose design vision will prevail. Design codes bring these conflicts and contests into a public forum where they can be effectively mitigated.

Municipal building codes began around the turn of the century as a way to reduce the risk of fire and sanitation hazards that emerged in the aftermath of major disasters such as the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire of 1911, and the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Although today’s building codes are governed by national and international conventions, including those promulgated by the International Code Council and the International Building Council, these systems of standards do not address the outward appearance of buildings. Influenced by the success of historical preservation efforts that commenced in the United States during the mid-1960s (National Historic Preservation Act of 1966; Public Law 89-665, 16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.), local municipalities have long sought to stabilize property values by incorporating design standards into their building codes. Local governments have increasingly embraced design standards in an effort to create a built environment of commercial strips, residential streets, and commercial signage that is visually consistent. The Illinois legislature amended the Municipal Code in 2007 to authorize design review ordinances “establishing local standards solely for the review of exterior design of buildings and structures, excluding utility facilities and outdoor off-premises advertising signs, and designate a board or commission to implement the review process” (65 ILCS 5/11-13-1). These standards primarily focus on facades and streetscapes and say little or nothing about interior spaces or nonpublic views. In some communities, the standards are strongly recommended preferences for property owners to consider, without the force of law. In others, the standards are ordinances, and review boards are empowered to deny building permits and force revisions. In all of these communities, the enforcement of design standards is a political act that is subject to the sensibilities and coalitions that hold elected office at a given point in time.

Efforts to create and enforce design standards envision three basic outcomes: (a) to preserve the historical character of downtowns or similar residential districts; (b) to improve a town’s street-level
urban fabric as seen from the perspective of an automobile; and (c) to establish and maintain a consistent community “look” along arterial streets. These outcomes directly inform attempts by local communities to brand themselves. As one developer I interviewed expressed it to me, his company was compelled to build something in the village of Arlington Heights because they recognized “a strong sense of community, fine schools, parks and recreation, a vibrant downtown, close to public transportation, and close to employment centers.” Because municipalities are essentially like corporations funded by taxes, revenues can only increase when the underlying value of a town’s taxable parcels increase in value. If the supply of such parcels is limited by a town’s built area or physical boundaries, as is the case in many U.S. municipalities, then only increased demand for local property can enrich city coffers. A distinctive urban design scheme that distinguishes local towns from one another, especially in the minds of prospective property owners, is largely communicated through design standards.

Unlike health, safety, and fire standards, design standards are primarily aesthetic choices related to visual features including facades, signage, and massing. Thus, as a compelling community interest, they are harder to justify on a case-by-case basis. It becomes rather difficult to explain to homeowners, for example, that the addition of a second floor to their bungalow does not conform to local guidelines. The benefit of adhering to consistent municipal design standards probably appears quite distant to those homeowners seeking an extra bedroom for their family. Yet, without such enforced design standards, the community look that many municipalities seek will never develop. The resulting loss of distinctiveness may be enough to send potential investors to neighboring towns. Even though this is an aesthetic program, it is highly political. The very existence of design standards favors those locals who benefit from rising property values and investment over other locals looking merely to use their existing properties efficiently as well as national corporations seeking to brand lease spaces for their outlets.

While there are a few national-level efforts to specify design standards, most famously the 2009 Neighborhood Development protocol of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) of the U.S. Green Building Council, most municipalities develop their own local standards. The responsibility for writing these standards typically falls to the municipal planning office. These professionals develop alternative approaches for the municipal council to consider when formalizing local appearance codes. The origin of these approaches is well represented in the professional planning literature (Ben-Joseph & Southworth, 2003; Duerksen, 1986, 2000; Glassford, 1983). Conversations about these standards occur at professional meetings, within town planner networks, and through planning journals.

It is the task of municipal planners to adapt the national discourse on design standards to local contexts. To implement these appearance codes, town governments establish a process that involves either administrative review of plans similar to the review of blueprints by the engineering or zoning departments and/or public hearings before design review commissions or boards. Most of these boards have no final decision authority on the plans. The outcome usually takes the form of a recommendation to the town council, which ordinarily accepts the recommendation. In only a few situations does the board’s decision have the force of law (reviewable by the town council). Both administrative and board review can result in a recommendation of approval, rejection, or a request to revise and resubmit. If a plan is denied, petitioners can appeal the decision to the full town council. The review board can also grant a variance for the plan. These variances are project specific. Nevertheless, the planning department keeps track of the variances and uses them during periodic reviews of the appearance codes to justify modifications and improvements in the standards. A board hearing involves a diverse panel of town residents who review petitions in public where testimony can be voiced. An administrative review takes
place between the petitioner and a municipal planner, who may also have written the design standards. A third, rarer possibility is the review of a project by a planning commission.

This research focused almost exclusively on architecture review boards and commissions. Mayors appoint the design review commissioners. Administrative reviewers tend to be assigned from among the hired staff of the planning department. Board membership can vary from ordinary citizens to design professionals. The latter often includes architects, landscape architects, historic preservation specialists, and contractors. Petitioners, too, can vary from architects and contractors hired by property owners to the property owners themselves. Usually, petitioners work with the planning officers for several months before approaching the board. Such preparation expedites the review process and leads more frequently to board approval.

Many times, municipalities and property owners have competing interests. Owners usually want their buildings to reflect their personal tastes and purposes. These preferences may diverge from the design standards. Building owners have successfully challenged board decisions in Illinois courts when there was a lack of due process, ex parte communication was present, proprietary information was made public during the hearing, or signage was denied on the basis of content rather than on content-neutral grounds (*People Klaeren II v. Village of Lisle*, Illinois Supreme Court, No. 90537 [2002]). Similarly, Illinois courts have held that communities can establish design standards in their appearance codes so long as they are clearly described and applied uniformly (Hedrick, 2009; *Hanna v. City of Chicago*, First District Court, No. 1-07-3548 [2009]; *Waterford Estates Development v. City of Palos Hills*, 232 Ill. App 3rd, 367,372 [1992]).

To meet this test, the literature that planning departments provide to petitioners stresses the community’s interest in architectural diversity. Quotations supporting diversity are highlighted in the brochures and pamphlets the planning department provides. The language of variation and diversity is balanced with the theme of consistency. Streetscapes pictured in the literature illustrate how a design can be creative and diverse, while still being consistent with the “language” of the street. For example, a streetscape from Vail Avenue in Arlington Heights, Illinois, that was reproduced in the brochure given to residents seeking permits shows how rooflines and gables have been combined over time to produce both variety and consistency on a single street (Figure 1). Despite these efforts, the design standards tilt more toward consistency than variety.

**Design review hearings as ethnographic encounter**

To study the design review process, I chose nine Chicago-area municipalities. I interviewed their planners and videotaped their board hearings between March 11, 2010, and September 15, 2010. The city of Chicago itself reviews designs administratively as part of the building permit process. The suburbs I chose all have well-established design review boards. These communities are listed in Table 1.

The Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University provided me with an institutional base that was recognized and respected by the municipal governments I was approaching. A senior researcher at the institute, John Hedrick, had recently organized a network for suburban planners throughout Cook, Lake, and DuPage counties who were interested in design review. The network holds meetings and workshops throughout the year. I was invited to attend a workshop, where I was introduced to the advisory board of the network, a group of planners who would become my collaborators in this research. I chose the suburbs I did because their planners were active in the network and were interested in facilitating my research. These planners were all in Cook County (and one Lake County) suburbs.
All but one of these suburbs used specialized board reviews to reach final approval of plans. The outlier, Schaumburg, had limited design review to certain districts and used a staff review with testimony before the planning commission to reach a final approval. The map in Figure 2 shows the relationship of these communities to each other and to the metropolitan region.

I began my involvement with each town or village by interviewing the planners in their offices. I asked about their backgrounds in design review and standards, their experiences in the community in writing these standards, the history of the design standards in their town, the composition of the review board, the stakeholders who were currently shaping the politics of design review locally, and how the process worked in their office from the petitioner’s point of view. They then supplied me with the agenda for each of the monthly (and sometimes biweekly) board hearings by e-mail, often pointing out for me cases they thought would be particularly interesting. Illinois has an open meetings rule where all governmental deliberations have to afford open access to all citizens. Even so, I e-mailed the legal departments of each town for permission to videotape the hearings. I was granted permission in every case, except Lake Forest. They recorded their own hearings using a sophisticated three-camera system to capture much more information than I could. These videos were published on the town’s website within a week after each hearing. The town asked that I use its videotape instead of creating my own.

I trained a student to index the video files. I asked her to identify the start and end times of each case on the video file of each meeting, characterizing the case as commercial, signage, or residential. I then went through each case to identify the various issues and stakeholders. I was particularly interested
Table 1  Characteristics of Municipal Design Review Hearings Observed (2010) and Features of Those Observations

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C = a review limited to commercial design, including multifamily housing; S = signage; R = residential, single-family properties; ARC = a hearing before an architectural review board; STF = a review by staff; A = the status of the commission as the approval authority; R = the commission recommends approval to the municipal council (from Hedrick, 2009).

Figure 2  Map showing the location of the suburbs selected for this study. Map in the public domain, annotated by the author.

in identifying the following behaviors and language artifacts in the hearings: the use of drawings and other visual representations; the moments when a board member involved a particular style of life; the moments when a petitioner or board member used a phrase containing *distinguish, differentiate, or identify*; the moments when a board member or petitioner invoked the words *history, tradition, and standards* when discussing a plan; the moments when a board member or petitioner invoked the words *increased value, market value, or viability* when discussing a plan; the moments when the conversation
centered around technical architectural language; the moments when a board member or petitioner invoked the words *insider, member, resident,* or *native* or used threatening language of any kind; the moments when a board member or petitioner invoked the community, especially its experience, history, or future, as a way of legitimating his or her position when discussing a plan; the moments when the petitioner showed deference to the board after a disagreement; and the moments when a board member offered a compromise after a difference was exposed. These features and language artifacts indexed specific architectural, class, and economic values that supported and justified aesthetic choices in the public fora. On the basis of this analysis, I was then able to identify cases that illustrated the forces involved in enforcing design standards in these towns and villages. I include a sample of these here.

The observations were conducted between and during a period in which the number of submitted projects under review was among the fewest since the boards’ creation in the 1990s. Around this time, the restricted credit market and ensuing recession in the Midwest construction industry was in full swing. During interviews, planners in the selected suburbs were asked to describe how design review had changed as a result of the housing bubble burst after September 2008. All of them noted that there were significantly fewer demolition requests than in the three previous years. I only observed one demolition petition in 2010. The planners in suburbs where residential property is reviewed noted that there were far fewer single homeowner projects after 2008. I observed four single home petitions in those suburbs. Planners across the selected communities observed an increase in the number of requests for variances for leased properties. I observed six petitions for such variances. They observed the number of signage and branding requests to increase. I observed more than 20 signage and branding cases. Finally, they saw the number of large, multiunit developments decreased. Observations in 2010, then, offer a different set of opportunities than observation that could have occurred between 2006 and 2008. Because the history of design standards in these communities is barely 20 years old, there probably was never a norm against which to compare the kinds of cases I was accumulating. Planners tend to move to different jobs over time. All of the planners I interviewed were in those positions for periods of five to three years. Hence the institutional memory of the cases presented to the boards was not to be found in their memories. Conversely, the focus of the research was not to write the history of design review in these suburbs but instead to discover how design standards shape suburban development.

After listening to numerous cases, I came to the conclusion that many petitioners believed that the economic slowdown gave them license to request variances that distorted local codes. It appeared that their pursuit of such variances was informed by misguided beliefs that board members would place the need to optimize occupancy rates and tax receipts over and above design standards. For the most part, the petitioners were wrong in these assumptions. Although boards were sometimes willing to compromise under certain circumstances, whenever a direct challenge to the design standards arose, the board vigorously defended design standards, even if it meant rejecting petitions outright. The board chair from Glenview commented to me recently his surprise at the number of projects that were approved by his board but then never reached the construction stage. After the municipality approves, the developer or lessor still faces the problem of financing.

Most communities are intent on defending their design standards in much the same way that major corporations want to protect their corporate brands. To illustrate this tendency, I will explain how this works using cases from three Cook County communities each showing a different review category: residential design, commercial design, and commercial signage. Later, I will provide a fourth case on a commission’s assertion of its power to limit even interior, residential alterations that impact
design standards. I’ve selected these because they permit me to illustrate processes I want to offer as generalizations gathered from the entire set of cases.

Glen Ellyn

The Town of Glen Ellyn is currently situated on the site of a popular 19th-century spa that was located west of Chicago and accessible to the Quad Cities of Iowa via railway. The spa has long since disappeared, but the rail line continues to serve the town as an easy means of commuting to nearby centers of commerce. Glen Ellyn became a viable bedroom community after World War I and mainly attracted upper-middle-class residents. The obelisk-shaped street signage for which the city is known originated sometime in the 1970s. The downtown is currently in its 10th year of a redevelopment plan. Glen Ellyn has used design standards since 1966. Guidelines were first formalized in 1972, with revisions in 1989 and 2006. Professional architects and developers compose the nine-person architectural review commission.

Following a staff review after it was nearing completion, a new medical office building in Glen Ellyn was found to be out of compliance with the previous board-approved plan (Figure 3). Some of the shield panels attached to the building were incorrectly painted white. The soffits and trim along the top of the building were also painted white, creating an incongruous broad white line just under the roofline. White is the only exterior color specifically prohibited by the guidelines. When the project was approved, these features were supposed to be painted green (Figure 4). There were a number of discrepancies from the approved plans, including differences with the entrance, roof top equipment screen, and windowsills. The petitioner asked the board to approve a revised plan that permitted the petitioner to keep the white panels after admitting to the error and explaining that an architect looked at the wrong elevation drawings when ordering the panels.

The board, for its part, asserted that it actually had three options with regard to the contested building panels. They could allow the owner to keep the panels white, order that they be painted green, or have the owner replace them with green panels. This case represents an issue of compliance with approved ordinances. As one commissioner put it, “If this petitioner is allowed to put up whatever they want...
and we then approve it after the fact, what is the good of having these hearings at all?” Speaking in the minority, a more recent addition to the board stated that he did not believe that the white shield panels were so unattractive that they necessitate that the owner should pay for their replacement. The board was willing to consider the costs to the owner in devising a remedy to the error but refused to compromise on the color. Eventually, the builder agreed that replacing the panels was the best solution to getting the building in use sooner.

To the casual passerby, the question of whether the panels are green or white might appear irrelevant. The buildings on the adjacent commercial strip do conform to the guidelines. So the action might be justified for the sake of consistency. Consistency does appear to be a strong value underlying the development of design standards. However, the commission was not defending green over white. They were defending the right of the town to impose green if that was what was desired. In all the cases I observed, this was the strongest assertion of home rule with respect to design standards. Ironically, the owner of the building, Central DuPage Hospital, ended up receiving the 2011 trophy award from the commission for the project.

**Arlington Heights**

The village of Arlington Heights is one of several towns that developed along the northwest corridor rail line that continues toward the city of Rockford, Illinois. Although the community was little more than an agricultural loading station in the decades after the Civil War, by the end of World War I, it had incorporated as a town and established several industrial mills. Around this time, Arlington Heights
had implemented an aggressive development program around commuter services for Chicago’s growing economy. Similar to the case of Glen Ellyn, Arlington Heights has used design standards since the mid-1990s, and professional architects and developers primarily staff its design commission.

The aging owners of a home along a residential street near the center of town wanted to redesign their house to accommodate their changing needs as they aged. They wished to move their three-car garage, which had been built into the side of their house, to a connected structure in front of their house. The remodeling plan called for minimizing the garage’s scale and continuing the house’s roofline so that the garage did not predominate when viewed straight on from the street. The petitioner insisted that the garage would not block the front of the house.

Within the design standards, there are three possible approaches to placing the garage on the house lot (Figure 5). One of them does permit the garage to sit between the house and the street. In this case, the board found that the plan did not fit that standard as no other house on that street had a garage in front. The garage would obscure the front of the house and totally block it when approached from one side. The front door would become nonfunctional, according to the plan, and the front-facing windows were already small, high, and opened onto less important living spaces such as hallways and stairs. No porch or stoop was contemplated in the plan to give the front door more importance.

One commissioner spelled out the board’s dissatisfaction as follows: “We have 100 years of history of how a house sits in a fifty-foot lot. This is an urban house. Urban houses face the street. This plan puts the back of the house in the front. Turning your back to the street on an urban neighborhood is being a bad neighbor. So I can’t support this.” The design guidelines, illustrated by the photos, show

Figure 5 Design standard guidance for placement of the garage on the house lot. Note the red highlighted elements. Courtesy of Village of Arlington Heights. Used with permission.
that a garage could be placed in front of the house as long as it doesn’t block the view of the front of the facade from the street. This commissioner is citing those guidelines in his statement. Then he goes further. He anthropomorphizes the house, associating its position with the unsocial behavior of a person avoiding social interaction with neighbors. In his mind, the guidelines embedded a civic involvement in the community of the street.

The petitioner responded that there are no alleys in Arlington Heights and three-car garages are becoming the norm. This makes access to a rear garage almost impossible. The established streetscapes reflect a different lifestyle than the ones that are emerging today. They should be allowed to live their lives in the new style.

The board rejected this argument with a vote of 4–1. This case represents a board asserting the authority of the design standards over owner interests.

**Morton Grove**

Unlike the rail line communities of Glen Ellyn and Arlington Heights, Morton Grove is primarily an automobile suburb. It lies along Dempster Avenue, a major east–west artery northwest of Chicago that links several towns, including Evanston and Skokie, with the I-94 corridor.

Dempster Avenue is the town’s “Main Street” (Figure 6). Design standards were adopted somewhat later in Morton Grove compared to neighboring communities. Most were implemented after 2004 and are still in the process of being refined. Unlike the preceding cases of Glen Ellyn and Arlington Heights, Morton Grove’s architectural review commission comprises primarily nonprofessionals, even though the chair is an architect. At the time of my observations, the town was operating without a planner. The town engineer took up that role.

In Morton Grove, the main street is also a major commercial strip and transportation corridor. The shops along the strip attract passing motorists through signage. The town has attempted to use design guidelines to establish a scale of commercial signage that would be consistent along the street, conveying the city’s brand. Design standards can only be imposed when a proposal is brought to the

![Dempster Avenue streetscape in winter. Photograph by the author.](image)
commission. Existing signage cannot be changed by fiat. As properties changed hands and signage for
the new business was proposed, the commission would impose the guidelines.

The design standards for signage became an issue in the town mayoral and trustee election. Two parties, the Action Party, primarily run by Republican-identified citizens, and the Caucus Party, identified as Democrats, had traded the mayor’s office in 2005 and again in 2009. The 2009 election was important in shaping the approach of the review commission that I observed. The Action Party successfully took back the mayor’s office on a platform that criticized the Caucus Party incumbent, Rick Krier, for reneging on promises, increasing city spending, and imposing a garbage pickup fee (Steward, 2008). He was also faulted for reducing the prominence of the Dempster Street corridor, a major retail zone for the town, through enforcing signage standards that reduced the visibility of the shops. In an op-ed piece in the Chicago Tribune, a village trustee from the Action Party stated specifically that the party’s candidate “has demonstrated his commitment to bringing business to Morton Grove by working closely with business owners, [review] commission members and staff to update the sign code and various ordinances, making them more business-friendly to attract new businesses to town” (Toth, 2013).

Those appointed to the commission in the previous administrations had an interest in maintaining the signage standards as a long-term project. They felt that maintaining a modest and consistent scale preserved decorum on the street. There were other strips in the greater Chicago area that they could point to where the signage was out of control (Figure 7). As a result, the communities around those strips were thought to be as tacky and garish as the strips. The property values and occupancy rates had

Figure 7 Toxic signage. Photographs by the author.
plummeted as a result. They were determined that their community would not suffer the same fate. They could also point to successful strips in nearby towns, such as Lincolnwood, Rosemont, and Schaumburg, all of which maintained decorous signage standards.

The newer merchants on Dempster Avenue felt stifled. Their businesses depended on being able to attract customers to their goods or services through signage. The design standards appeared to them to stifle their creativity in reaching out to their customers. They organized to elect the Action Party candidate, Dan Staackmann, who promised to restructure the board with people who had businesses along the strip and understood the merchants’ point of view. Two of those appointments had been made before I started my observations.

Appearance codes address various spatial relationships within the built environment, including those between building facades and public space, the form and mass of adjacent buildings, and the scale and types of streets and blocks. The regulations and standards in these codes, which are presented to the public in both diagrams and words, represent a regulation strategy that designates the appropriate form and scale of development rather than distinctions in land-use types. In so doing, the planners directly influence the street-level character of the urban fabric. Conventional zoning focused on the precise and often homogenized regulation of land uses. The intensity of development was controlled through abstract and uncoordinated parameters such as the density of dwelling units per acre, building setbacks, parking ratios, and floor area ratios. Such approaches lead to a neglect of an integrated built form. Appearance codes are more regulatory than advisory. They are backed by ordinances written by planners. Elected community officials ratify them. The full force of the local state apparatus can be brought to bear on residents who do not comply with them. Potential punishments include fines, denial of occupancy permits, and tax liens. These are measures of last resort, as boards prefer compromise to confrontation.

Impacts of appearance codes on communities

Design standards are currently the major force in place making in American suburbs. They impact class diversity disproportionately to racial and ethnic diversity. In Chicago’s suburbs, design standards have a class-homogenizing effect on community life. When these standards operate as intended, new investment in the community tends to accrue at the higher end of the land rent spectrum. New development is located in choice areas and marketed to affluent buyers. Although it appears imprecise to associate the term *gentrification* with communities that gentrified two generations ago, the process is similar. The social diversity, then, tends to occur between suburban communities rather than within a single community.

Appearance codes are essentially development tools. Development outcomes are largely dependent on the quality and objectives of the community plan that a code implements. Such plans, in turn, are based on an urban imaginary, an ideology widely shared among the community’s political and economic elite. This imaginary links the community’s past to an imagined future whereby a town is beautiful, stable, finished, and orderly; uncongested by traffic; filled with symbols of community aspirations; egalitarian with a vital middle class; and possessing a strong sense of place grounded in viable local enterprises and architectural styles. That such a place has never, and probably can never, exist is irrelevant to such urban imaginary.

The fit between the urban imaginary and the lived experience of residents and shopkeepers determines whether form-based design standards succeed in creating a cohesive community look. There
will always be construction decisions that violate permit agreements, such as the Glen Ellyn building approved for green-colored panels that ultimately ended up with white panels. Individual homeowners will attempt to put their needs ahead of those of community leaders, as in the Arlington Heights house with its back facing the street. Also, there will always be shopkeepers who prefer the open competition of signage instead of the restrictive design standards, as in the Dempster corridor case. These petitioners are attempting to carve out their own niches beyond the urban imaginary of community leaders.

The public review process is a political dialogue between the municipality and its citizens. The more permanent participants in this dialogue are board members and planners. The composition and qualification of these participants disproportionately shape the outcome of the review. Boards and commissions staffed by professional designers tend to interpret standards and permit variances differently than nondesign professionals. Boards with a preponderance of new and untested members are usually more flexible in their application of standards than long-serving board members. Communities with experienced and well-trained planners who understand how to prepare petitioners for successfully presenting their cases achieve higher compliance with design standards than those where planners are less experienced or distracted by other projects. For all these reasons, design standards have variable degrees of success as strategies for placemaking in Chicago’s suburbs.

The most common way municipal representatives preserve these standards is by invoking the public–private distinction. Boards and planners often claim that form-based design standards pertain only to publicly accessible space, but never private space. Nevertheless, the more common features of design standards, such as where buildings are placed on a lot, heights of buildings, size of windows, placement of doors and windows, rooflines, and the massing of the building, have direct impacts on private spaces.

**Barrington**

The case of a request to raise the roofline of a “noncontributing” bungalow in a registered historic district in Barrington illustrates the difficulty in keeping the distinction clear. Ordinarily in historic districts, design review standards are much stricter, often including the specification of materials that can be used in the rare case where modifications are approved. Noncontributing properties are ones that lie within the historic district but are newer and are not considered historic buildings themselves. Noncontributing buildings fall under the ordinary design guidelines of the town, but the location within the district is taken into account. Plans that might be approved in other neighborhoods are not necessarily acceptable in a historic district.

The homeowner sought approval to raise the roofline of a 1930s Chicago-style bungalow several feet to accommodate a more comfortable ceiling height for a second-floor bedroom. Ordinarily, bungalows are single-story structures with little more than a crawlspace under the roof. As such, the peak of roofline is low, with the central gable perpendicular to the street. Thousands of bungalows were built between 1920 and 1960 in the Chicago area. Many of them have been modified in this way, including bungalows outside the historic district in Barrington. The plan would raise the roofline and add a window to the facade facing the street. The homeowner wanted to add more bedroom space to accommodate a young family. From the homeowner’s point of view, the modification was entirely about the interior space. Board members insisted that they had no desire to limit the use of the second floor as a bedroom. Rather, they asserted their responsibility to keep the height of the roofline within the standards for bungalows. Several architects on that board offered alternative approaches. They cited other adaptations...
of bungalows to convince the petitioner that everyone could get what he or she wanted if the petitioner would only rethink the design.

Board members often cite the community’s stake in a particular property as the basis for applying form-based design standards to individual applications. The community is often invoked as an agent in cases when board members must choose between taking a firm defense of the standard or agreeing to a variance. When citing the community’s interest in the look of neighborhoods, board members note instances of residents banding together to clean up a lot or divider strip, pay for spraying trees against invasive insect species, or plant blooming annuals and saplings in median strips. More often, board members involve the community as a faceless specter over the proceedings.

Neighborhoods, too, are commonly referenced as having a particular character or of providing a specific kind of street life. The neighborhood is more of a moral center that seemingly justifies municipal stewardship of the neighborhood’s character or aesthetic governmentality (Ghertner, 2010). This research was conducted in relatively affluent suburban communities where leaders envisioned a future of progress toward an ideal community. The literature on suburban utopianism, John Winthrop’s “city on the hill,” that pervades so much of the discourse on American exceptionalism is particularly relevant here (cf. Soderlind & Carson, 2012). The neighborhood is another, distinct urban imaginary filled with images that are never more than partially attainable. The neighborhood as a moral center that justifies a specific aesthetic and the community as agent deciding in which properties to exercise interest, then, serve as the complex locations for a distant and displaced authority in whose name standards must be maintained.

**Spatial agency**

Over the last few decades, researchers on cultural issues among urban people have been struggling to justify using a spatial concept, the “urban,” the “city,” the “neighborhood,” as a unit of analysis. Unlike people, our interlocutors assert, the city has no agency (Breitborde, 1994; Lynch, 1994; Zenner, 1994). It is merely a reification of an imaginary space. It cannot do anything. It has no business being used in analysis, except as data. Yet, those of us who work in these spaces come away with a feeling that a spatial form of agency does exist. I have tried in the past to identify the agentive processes and outcomes for human beings that emerge from variations in the landscape forms of a city (Rotenberg, 1995), but without the elaborated understanding of material agency that has become available in the last decade.

Agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act. It is ordinarily understood as intentional and based on an actor’s agenda. Action is socioculturally mediated when it connects both the production of action and the consumption (or reception) of action; that is, the actor intends a certain result to occur as a direct consequence of the act. Action becomes cultural because the actor is confident that the intention of the act will be understand by other people. All agency presumes the capacity for acting otherwise (Giddens, 1987:216). In his review of Anthony Giddens’s book just cited, Ivan Karp (1986) helps us distinguish between the actor and the agent. In his view, actors are people whose actions are rule based and rule oriented, whereas his agents are persons who constitute and reconstitute a social world. Agents operate both within and without rules.

Material agency refers to precisely this action of constituting and reconstituting the world by material objects independently of their manipulation by people. For example, the computer on which I am writing this page once had a flaw. From time to time, the computer would freeze up and show me an icon that meant it was processing information internally (a spinning beach ball on my Mac). During
the minute or so that it talked to itself, I was prevented from doing any further work. I knew that the computer was confused because its count of the number of files on the hard disk did not match actual number of files—there was one file too few. The only solution was to wipe the hard disk and reinstall everything, a half-day task I was not willing to do. And so I waited. The computer, with no manipulation by me, was controlling its own processes and directly shaping my behavior. This is material agency. The computer reconstitutes my work world on its own. Even though a material object, like a computer or a city, cannot be an actor, it can be an agent. It can direct my actions. But it cannot do otherwise. Hence, its agency is always narrowly channeled. Material agency in general, and spatial agency in particular, are not competitors for human agency; instead, they serve as surrogates for human action. They are repositories of human intent.

A city is not one thing. It is a collection of things arranged in space: buildings, roads, infrastructure, and so on, linked together in a system that the humans who live there use to constitute their world. The city's ability to reconstitute that world lies in the power of the collection and not in the individual elements. The city is an ensemble of places, an *assemblage*, following the introduction of this idea by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987). Assemblages consist of a “multiplicity of heterogeneous objects, whose unity comes solely from the fact that these items function together, that they ‘work’ together as a functional entity” (Patton, 1994:158).

Assemblage is itself an example of a way of ordering and arranging knowledge that Deleuze and Guattari characterize as a rhizome, as opposed to a hierarchy or tree. Treelike arrangements are bounded systems of knowing that have first principles, or foundations, that then produce unambiguous secondary identities within the arrangement. For example, a kinship descent chart is an arrangement that proceeds from ancestors to descendants. Rhizomes, conversely, are flat, unsystematic, and open. A rhizoid way of knowing asks us to focus on thresholds or conditions, which, once attained, bring about a transformation. Think of a crossword puzzle where only half the necessary clues are provided. The existing clues point to how the missing clues can be found. One can then finish creating the puzzle to solve it. Trees are about structure; rhizomes are about emergence. As such, rhizoid ways of knowing are more consistent with contemporary social thought.

An assemblage of places in a suburb is rhizoid because it can be seen as occupying two different states simultaneously: it can be seen as a whole or it can be seen as its parts. The thinking here is analogous to the way we understand bodies. They, too, can be understood as wholes or as parts. When understood as a whole, the body occupies one kind of space and time. When understood as parts, the body occupies a different kind of space and time. The whole is animate. It moves, and in the process of doing so, it occupies or constitutes space. The parts are inanimate. They can be thought of as moving too. But their movement is only conceptual. The threshold that permits the parts to function as a body is their cooperation. More importantly, what distinguishes one body from another is the specific way the parts work together to be or act in the world.

Although Deleuze and Guattari do not use the word *agency*, they do refer at one point to Spinoza's (2001) notion of “affect,” empowerment:

> We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, … either to exchange actions and passions with it or join with it in composing a more powerful body. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987:257)
Substituting the word “place” for “body” in this quotation, a substitution that is completely consistent with the logic of assemblage, produces an even more precise way of understanding material agency: “what a [place] can do, … how [it] can or cannot enter in composition with other [places], with the affects of other [places], … either to exchange actions and passions with [them] or join with [them] in composing a more powerful [place].” This leads us to see places no longer in terms of their experiential meaning to us as form or substance (i.e., my house, my office building, etc.) but rather in terms of their powers to shape the world, including other places. The assemblage “desubjectifies” the places, imbuing them with a life apart from our own. Subjective places, like my house, have agency because they mediate between a producer, who imbues a place with implicit meanings of hominess and representations of, say, class, and us, the consumers of homes, who have specific needs that we want that place to fulfill. When desubjectified, as a street lined with houses, the source of the agency shifts from our lives to the life of the street itself and especially to the contingent and emergent conditions around the production and consumption of the houses themselves. The ensemble of buildings on the street itself has the power to shape human action, apart from the power of the individual building to fulfill our self-contained desires.

Any collection of detached buildings on a street is an ad hoc grouping. One did not set out to bring together this particular collection of buildings. It just happened over a period of years that these were built. The origins of this collection are themselves a history that one can narrate. The point is that each building was constructed under a specific circumstance. There is no rule underlying the street. Instead, it formed out of contingency: there was the moment, the opportunity, the means, and the desire. There was no necessity. Yet, the origin of the collection in no way undermines or weakens the efficacy of the collection to be a street. Appearance codes attempt to tease out the design logic within this ad hoc grouping. In doing so, the writers of the code rely on period of construction, construction materials, size and shape (massing), and lot placement. The formulation of this logic results in some buildings conforming and others not. But it also results in a reduction of any future growth to the ad hoc nature of streets. Henceforth, the code prevails over the whims of the designer. Buildings in a mall are a special case, because those buildings were designed to fit together, but their signage does work with this argument.

There are several ways in which this collection of buildings can be said to be coherent. Certainly the design features are immediately available to the assertion of coherence, at least among the conforming buildings. Coherence can also be obtained by putting people into the street. They are there for reasons, and those reasons have coherence. That is, many people are there for the same reason: residence, commerce, production, recreation, and so on. There is a unity to the street beyond the unities of function, size, and shape. The number and variety of detached buildings “as a whole” generate possibilities for action that go beyond any one of these features of coherence. I could plan to create a pedestrian zone, for example, in one street but not another. In doing so, I would be recognizing that, say, shopping was coherent in people’s reasons for being on that street. But I could just as easily pick a street at random to create the pedestrian zone. “Build it and they will come [to shop].” Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would identify this last tactic as countercultural, one that exceeds and confounds the coherence of the collection.

Each building on the street possesses a specific history that influences my choice of interacting with it, both visually and behaviorally. This history offers me possibilities that have changed over time. I could interact with the building one way in one year and in a completely different way two years later. Each building offers itself in a “present” condition: newly painted, broken window, green instead of
white, storefront, domicile, or burned out. There is no exact duplication among the buildings. For that reason, each one can be said to have its own trajectory or movement through the web of the street, its own way of interacting or crossing the trajectories of adjacent buildings. These trajectories shape which buildings will be used, how often they will be used, and how they will (or will not) be combined with buildings to form the street. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would say that the power (to empower) is not equally distributed across the assemblage. Appearance codes, along with health fire and safety regulations, reduce the variety of building conditions and, in so doing, empower the buildings more equally across the streetscape.

There is no building that completely dominates the activities of the street. No one member has sufficient competence to fully determine the consequences of the assemblage on my actions. When I consider how I have used the buildings and streets I frequent over the last few weeks, I recollect that I access them at about the same frequency each day, week, month, or year, depending on my habit. I did not set out to do so. I also recollect that some buildings and streets are visited disproportionately when some circumstance in my life changes to break the routine. These buildings and streets are the “specialists,” so to speak. Others have served many different purposes or enabled me to carry out very different aims at different times. Appearance codes optimize this ease of access by removing obstructions, diverting the glare of lights, shielding the sight and sound of machinery, and directing movement toward access and egress.

Finally, the street and its buildings is a captured flow of objects for which organizational forms outside local control are implicated. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call these “state forms,” pointing directly to the political–economic actions present in the ways these streets mark instances where breaks or divisions in otherwise free-flowing phenomena are evident. These buildings on the street are separate from supply areas from which their construction materials and the labor to build them originated, often by great distances. The materials and labor are captured, transported, and assembled on the street. The organizational form that permits the capture of these materials and labor is the sanctioned legitimacy of private property and full rights of ownership. That, too, is a part of the assemblage: the buildings are owned by someone. Appearance codes intervene at this point in the emergence of the streetscape by limiting the use rights and disposal rights of the owner: no demolition without permission; no modification of the building’s exterior without review; and no adaptive reuse without a permit.

Before a building is constructed or repurposed, its materials and embodied labor were in flux. They were available for purchase and construction, but they were not yet purchased. They traveled to various places where they could be compared to similar products and labor. Such flows always exist prior to any particular assemblage coming into existence. The flows are suspended in time and space when the buildings are built and placed on the street. That is the moment when we can say that a durable object is being consumed. The flux is not terminated at this point because the buildings could and probably will outlive their current owners, perhaps in different forms, and eventually to be demolished, the materials recycled in other projects. All of the economic processes detailed by Thompson (1979) in his classic treatise on rubbish apply to buildings and streets. In this sense, they are still in flux. Appearance codes appear not to recognize that buildings are being draped only in the present.

The agency of the streetscape lies in its power to create the contexts in which my apprehension of buildings, visually and behaviorally, is assured. This can only be seen when the street is desubjectified, as the foregoing observation attempts to help us do. This power derives from the conditions under which the various buildings were acquired, their specific history as buildings after being placed on the street,
their coherences as buildings and as a streetscape, and the flexibility versus specificity that I impute to their features as buildings. It is the collaborative potential of this collection that emerges as I decide how I will go about my day in the built environment of my locality.

Planners use design standards in an attempt to realize coherence in this ensemble. It is possible to build forms with encoded messages that then reconstitute the town, signaling a range of potential actions to people. Streetscapes are particularly powerful ways of communicating these messages about community distinctiveness. When a consistent visual message is repeated across a streetscape, it is more powerful, more insistent, and more seductive than it might otherwise be. Appearance codes evoke this community look. The desubjectified vision of the assemblage, however, contains processes that will not be easily harnessed, such as history and coherence, flux and flow. Short of building a town from scratch with a single design regime, appearance codes will always represent approximations of their intended outcomes. They can only be applied one building at a time and only at the undertaking of initial construction or modification. As an exhibit of spatial agency, the streetscape exhibits resistance and resilience in its ensemble as well as compliance and subordination to the codes at particular moments in the life of a building.

The social space that appearance codes for buildings and streetscapes shape are intended to “produce” direct human actions toward political–economic ends. These include increasing visual and functional coherence by design, equalizing the “present” conditions of buildings, optimizing ease of access to both generalized and specialized buildings, and suspending the unfettered use and disposal rights of property ownership. Space “performs” these actions because human actors, designers, contractors, planners, and political elites, have cooperated to shape and channel my apprehension of buildings, visually and behaviorally. This, in turn, creates a structurational recursion between their political–economic acts of asserting appearance codes, the resulting spatial ensembles, my political acts as shaped by these codes, spatial flux and subsequent variances in the initial codes, and the reshaping of the ensemble, closing the circle.

Conclusion
Is local government solely concerned with raising property values? Maybe so, but there are interesting differences among communities in northeastern Illinois about how to do this. In the actions taken by these architectural review boards and commissions, we see that the impulse to prioritize these values is tempered by aesthetic considerations. These considerations result in the reinforcement of class distinctions between communities. This need not be the only outcome of design standards. Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga (this volume) cites instances from her data in which ethnic boundaries, with subtle subgroupings around postmigration length of residence, are implicated in the working out of design standards. Other outcomes are equally possible. The differences between these community experiences lie not in the specific appearance codes but in the aesthetic choices that board members are making while applying those codes. Issues of taste stand in for their social priorities, like class and identity, and their belief that economic valorization can derive from consistency and homogeneity.

The dynamics of ideology and decision making are largely ephemeral. As urban development practices, the appearance codes of local communities are highly contestable. They do not operate within a political vacuum. Both individuals and factions can challenge the decisions handed down by local review boards. These challenges can be based on anything from functionality and individual taste issues to corporate brand policies and alternative visions of a town’s futures. Contestation of this kind
prevents the appearance code movement of the past two decades from achieving the same hegemony as health, fire, and safety standards have achieved over the last century. Even the form-based standards of the New Urbanism are shifting toward functional or locational standards, as that planning regime itself morphs amid slower economic growth and restricted capital for property investments. Additional supports for design standards, such as the “green” LEED neighborhood standard around increased “walkability,” have been slow to establish a foothold in suburbs initially designed around commuter trains and automobiles.

What these observations about appearance codes and municipal economies of valorization and investment show us is the variety of emergent formations vying for dominance in economic decision making. In particular, appearance codes distort the real estate market by limiting the features and qualities of the buildings. The questions that I have explored over these pages relate to how design standards direct decisions toward the institution of a community look in Chicago suburbs. These codes then are the setting for an ideological practice of review. The planners, commissioners, and politicians who implement and enforce the standards can only experience their desired effect in some distant future. Only then will the fully realized ensemble be available. This way of approaching the political economy of cities reflects the clout that municipal institutions wield in legitimizing their authority over the short run. It also demonstrates that property investments are required to conform to predetermined criteria and that individual choice remains restricted in favor of the choices constituted by an ensemble.

References