Planning Primer 14: Landscaping and Buffering

Site Specifics - Development In Context

Landscaping and Buffering

Landscaping is too often one of the last requirements to be addressed during a site plan review. Many times a fence is substituted for a landscaped and well maintained vegetated buffer. Often as few shrubs or trees as possible are proposed within leftover edges or areas, after the site has been leveled and the buildings and parking lots designed and laid out. Similarly, retaining natural vegetation or incorporating natural features of the site seems to be ignored in many cases, a requirement zoning laws often include but boards may not implement or enforce consistently.

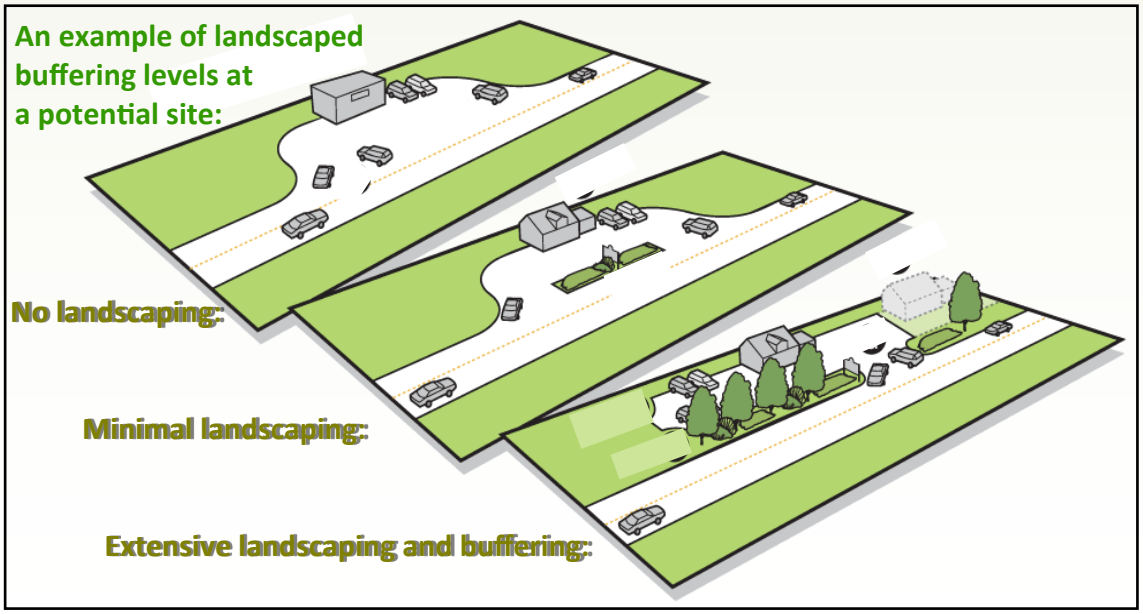
Good Landscaping and Buffering

Good landscaping works with the building's architecture to enhance the site, not just to hide certain features. Plantings should be designed to reintegrate the developed property into its surrounding natural system. Or in the very least, landscaping should include a variety of low maintenance native plants, shrubs, and trees that collectively provide a more natural area than simply a mowed strip of grass or single row of shrubs. Year round buffering and screening where needed also helps integrate a project into its surrounding neighborhood, and/or mitigate impacts from different uses located next to or near each other.

GOOD LANDSCAPING - BENEFITS GO FAR BEYOND JUST APPEARANCES:

- Absorbs dust and air pollution
- Can reduce wind velocities
- May dampen noise levels
- Dense trees can moderate temperatures (10 to 15 degrees cooler in wooded areas)
- Can reduce soil erosion and storm runoff
- Can filter and/or reduce water runoff
- Provides bird and wildlife habitat
- Typically increases property values

Landscaping example: Includes a variety of plants, shrubs, trees as well as a walkway



GENERAL LANDSCAPING PRINCIPLES

- Establish an open space system for each site; where feasible, connected to the surrounding natural area or landscaping patterns on adjacent parcels.
- Shape the site plan to take full advantage of existing natural features, such as mature trees, rock outcrops, slopes, stone walls, or streams.
- Set minimum open space guidelines for landscaping/permeable surfaces (can range from 10% in city or village centers to 75% in rural residential areas).
- Use low maintenance native plants when possible to reinforce the character of the region.
- Stress plantings along the public frontage, especially street trees and continuous landscaping to reinforce the flow of the street and bridge gaps between buildings.
- Encourage a diversity of plant species and combine trees with low plantings to provide contrasting forms.
- Use landscaping to frame views of architecture or open vistas.
- Generously landscape parking lot edges and dividing islands with shade trees and low plantings. (Example: one 3 inch tree for every 10 spaces or 15% landscaped area within the perimeter of large lots)

Effective Landscaping example:
The photos above illustrate deciduous and evergreen plants, shrubs, and trees planted as part of a recent bank project. The site also contains a large tree retained when the property was redeveloped with a new building, parking areas, and pedestrian connection to the sidewalk.

The landscaping and retained tree serves to integrate the new building into the neighborhood, buffer the parking area, and define the pedestrian access to the village sidewalk system.

Urban vs. Rural Landscaping Methods
As feasible, landscaping should establish a connection to the street and site surroundings.

In urban or village areas, the cultivated landscape usually involves more formal layouts with consistent setbacks, front yards that flow down blocks, and regularly spaced street trees and sidewalks to define street edges.

In more rural areas, landscaping forms should be more organic, relating to natural topography, woodlands, open meadows, wandering paths, and plants in more informal groupings. In all cases plantings on a site need to respond to the surrounding landscape patterns, soil conditions, as well as the local and regional climates.

Images: Dutchess County Planning

Unsightly views, such as rear storage or loading areas (shown in the left drawing), can be screened with natural combinations of evergreens and low plants or berms (as demonstrated to the right).

PLANNING PRIMERS: compiled by the Jefferson County Planning Office - modeled with permission after the set of *Greenway Guides*, developed by the Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development - 2001
Also based on the Jefferson County Planning Board *Growth and Development Guidelines* - 2005