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WHAT ARE CODES/ORDINANCES AND HOW DO THEY AFFECT MY CONSTRUCTION PROJECT?

Building codes, local (zoning) ordinances and design guidelines all serve a common purpose: they provide basic standards which all construction projects must meet or exceed. As professionals licensed to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public, we have intimate knowledge of many codes and know how to effectively apply them to a construction project. They are often legally enforced but may be optional for a certain certification, accreditation or funding source.

> Note: industry jargon that you are likely to hear often is included in italics. Throw around these terms to impress your friends!

Here are some of the most common codes:

International Building Code (IBC). The *International Code Council* (ICC) publishes a series of *model codes* every three years. These include the IBC, *International Existing Building Code* (IEBC), *International Mechanical Code* (IMC), *International Plumbing Code* (IPC), *International Fuel Gas Code* (IFGC) and *International Fire Code* (IFC), among others. They are described as model codes because they are standardized for a fictional "average" building. Some version of each of these codes is legally enforced by the *local building authority* (LBA), who may include amendments to certain sections if the model code isn't a good fit for the local context, climate or government policy. The IBC and its counterparts cover many aspects of building design, though much of the IBC deals with life safety for building occupants in the event of an emergency (fire, wind or earthquake). These life safety requirements place limits on the size (area and height) of most buildings and take into consideration the type of use (*occupancy*). You will hear us discuss emergency exiting (*egress*) as a frequent consideration of the IBC requirements.

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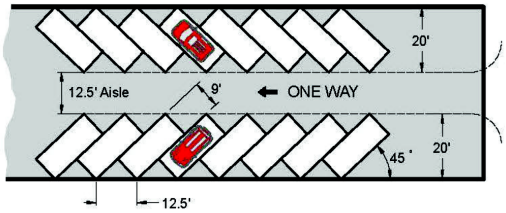
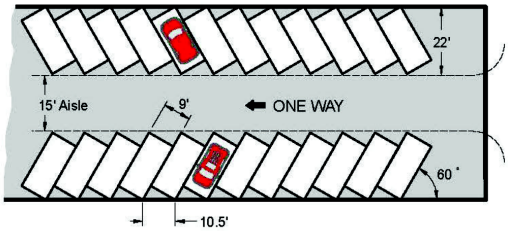
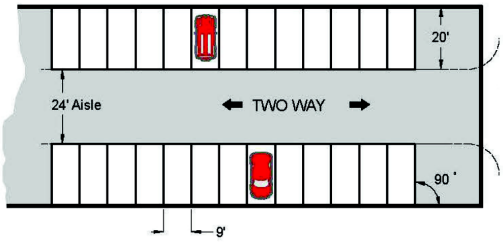
Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Guidelines for Accessible Design. The ADA guidelines were created to ensure individuals with disabilities can access and use most functions of new buildings and alterations of existing buildings. As a result, buildings and spaces are referred to as *accessible* when they comply with the ADA guidelines. The ADA is enforced by a federal act, so the LBA cannot permit exceptions or amendments. Much of the guidelines deals with mobility (wheelchair or walker) considerations, but also covers sight, hearing and even arthritis. Door widths, fixture clearances, stairway and ramp design are among the many building components that must meet or exceed the minimum standards in the ADA guidelines.

Fair Housing Act (FHA) Design Guidelines. The FHA guidelines are similar to the ADA guidelines (and in many cases, they overlap), but are specifically created for multi-family residential projects that receive federal funding. The FHA is also enforced by a federal act, so the LBA cannot permit exceptions or amendments.



Local Zoning Ordinance. Most municipalities have a local zoning ordinance, at the city and/or county level. They are created to preserve the character of the municipality and prevent undesirable uses. The zoning ordinance may include extensive measures to protect residential property owners. There is no standard for the format or content of a zoning ordinance, so they widely vary, but typically include minimum standards for landscaping, setbacks, parking and screening 'visual nuisances' (such as trash enclosures, mechanical equipment, loading docks and parking lots) based on the zoning use of a particular site. For undeveloped and unplatted land, the zoning ordinance may have standards for minimum lot size and maximum lot coverage (by a building).





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Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED). This is a relatively new set of standards that govern the design and construction of a "sustainable" building, or one that is more energy efficient and environmentally conscious than a historically "average" building. For most projects in many municipalities, LEED is optional and not legally enforced. However, construction projects for the federal government and some state or city government agencies are often required to meet certain LEED standards. The LEED program assesses categories such as water reuse/conservation and natural daylighting and awards points based on benchmarks. The sum of the points awarded categorizes the building as LEED Certified, Silver, Gold or Platinum, which is a theoretical measurement of how "sustainable" it is.

Additional Local/State Guidelines. In addition to adopting model codes, there may be additional building requirements enforced by local or state agencies. Most common are the fire marshal and health department, who may publish their own standards and review most building projects.

There is a lot of gray area in the codes and every plan examiner or building inspector may interpret the code differently, which also differs from the architect's interpretation. Following the plan review, we often present arguments to the LBA on behalf of the owner. Our experience arguing these cases and navigating the building codes may save you thousands of dollars, construction delays and countless headaches.

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