Regional Centre - Urban Design Framework

INTRODUCTION

The Regional Centre Urban Design Framework is comprised of a series of physical plans that illustrate desirable urban design objectives over the long term - 20 to 50 years or more. The strategies provide a framework for decision-making to reinforce the Urban Design Vision Statement and Guiding Principles. This Framework addresses the fundamental components of urban design that shape a city: Neighbourhoods and Districts, Open Spaces, Streetscapes, Civic Design, and Urban Character.

The Urban Design Framework encompasses the entire Regional Centre and is broad in scope and conceptual by nature. Its primary purpose is to ensure that when more detailed Neighbourhood or District Urban Design Guidelines are prepared, they are done so with guidance and with consideration for the broader urban design intentions for the Regional Centre. This is to make certain that as implementation takes place incrementally over many years in various areas, the sum of all these changes will contribute to a city that has a coherent urban design quality and character.

The components of the Framework plans are not meant to be considered as precise, rigid or a matter of policy. They define preferred strategies that can become goals to work towards and should be acted upon when and if the opportunity arises. There may be additional strategies or alternatives to achieving similar objectives that may arise with more detailed study at the Neighbourhood or District level.

While a specific idea proposed in this Framework may not be realized, the inherent objective and intent should remain relevant and other solutions explored when the time is appropriate. The objective is to set one vision, which is not policy, but is a hoped-for outcome that the Regional Municipality will seek to achieve through a variety of resources. This vision will establish goals that can trigger further studies, align efforts, guide change and generate momentum accordingly.

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Neighbourhoods & Districts

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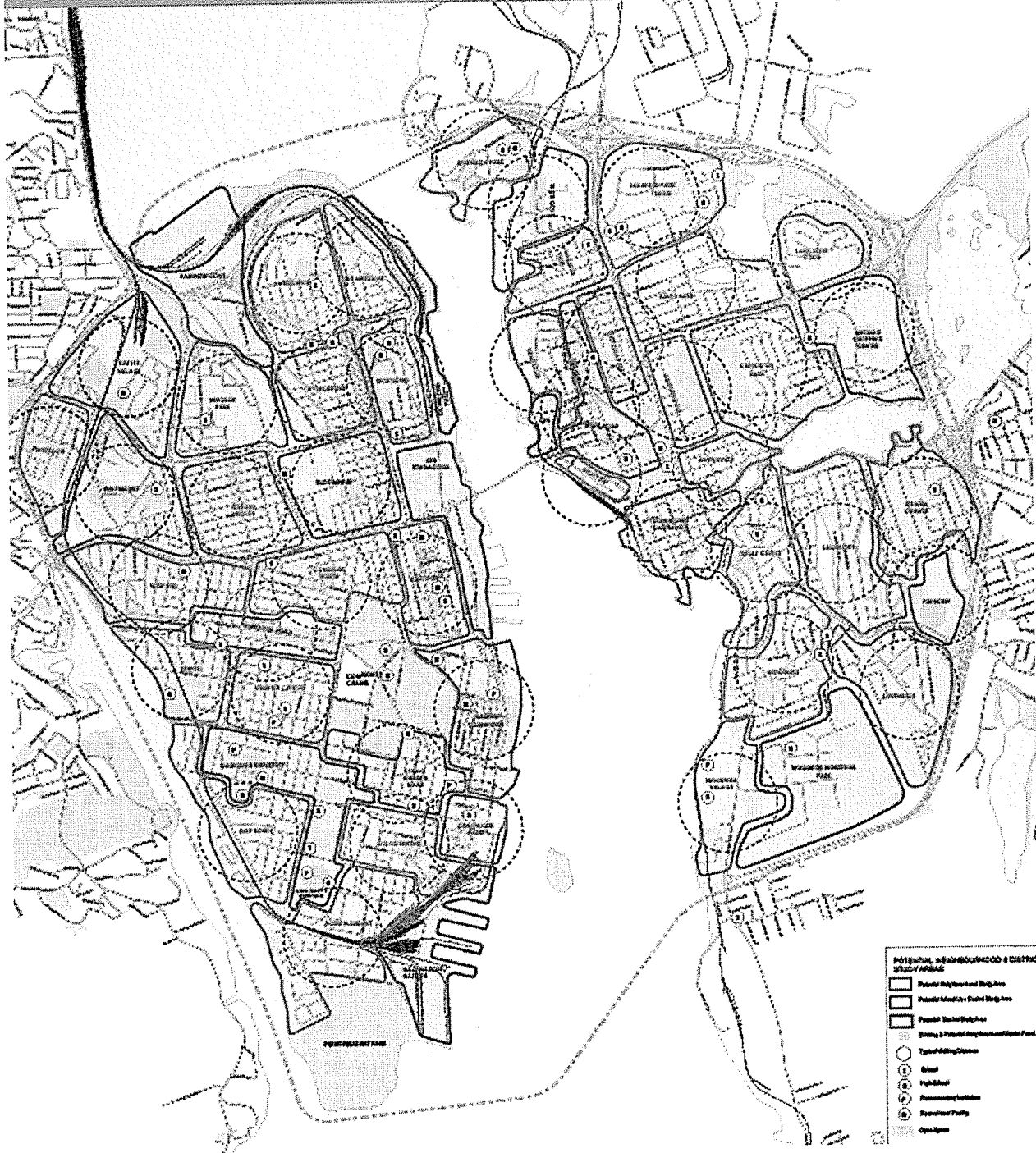
1. REGIONAL CENTRE URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK – NEIGHBOURHOODS AND DISTRICTS FRAMEWORK

Framework Description

Distinct Neighbourhoods and Districts are the fundamental building blocks of great cities. A "sense of place" that is enjoyed in cities is most often derived from the city's well-defined parts that offer a unique and authentic experience. The Neighbourhoods and Districts Framework helps to understand the Regional Centre as a collection of areas, each with its own identity and, in many instances, distinguishing built characteristics.

The purpose of this Framework is to guide change and growth in a manner that is sustainable, respects local identity and reinforces desired future built qualities and characteristics. It also identifies the important aspects that support complete and vibrant neighbourhoods such as public amenities. The boundaries of these neighbourhoods and districts ought to correspond to more detailed urban design guidelines that may be prepared in future.

Preparation of Neighbourhood & District Urban Design Guidelines

A key outcome of HRM by Design is to put in place a template and model for the preparation of area-specific urban design guidelines. While not all neighbourhoods and districts may require tailored guidelines, other areas that are in transition may require greater guidance to shape change. Neighbourhood or District guidelines may vary in their focus and scope depending on the unique needs and circumstances of any given area. Neighbourhood or District Guidelines should involve the community stakeholders in their preparation and should, at a minimum, provide the following components:

1. **Character Areas and Statements** - identifies unique sub-area characteristics, and include what should be protected and what should change.
2. **Urban Structure Plan** - an overall vision and the relationship between the public realm and built form quality.
3. **Public Realm Plan and Guidelines** - concepts and standards for public realm elements such as streets and blocks, streetscapes, open spaces, gateways, views, landmarks and heritage resources.
4. **Built Form Guidelines** - standards and benchmarks for development including site design, massing, heights, typologies, orientation, fenestration, rooflines and, possibly, architectural and material quality.
5. **Site-Specific Guidelines** - concepts and guidelines for special sites that require further exploration or guidance due to their prominence or scale.

Neighbourhoods

A Neighbourhood is an existing or potentially identifiable area with a prevailing residential character. As demonstrated in the Urban Character & Structure Framework, Neighbourhoods in the Regional Centre vary in character. They may include suburban areas that are exclusively single-family dwellings or apartments as well as more urban areas comprised of a fine-grained mix of housing types and other uses, including commercial centres or streets.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To reinforce existing distinct and desirable built qualities.
- To ensure the necessary amenities and services to support stable, diverse and cohesive communities.
- To ensure an appropriate range of housing choices within each neighbourhood.
- To support all modes of movement while encouraging a pedestrian culture.

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• To ensure safe, accessible and appealing living environments.

Priority areas for Neighbourhood Urban Design Guidelines include:

Bloomfield
Gottingen
Highview
Old South End
Shannon Park
Woodside Village

Mixed-Use Districts

A Mixed-Use District is an existing or potentially identifiable area with a prevailing character that includes a mix of uses alongside residential uses. Mixed-Use Districts within the Regional Centre vary in character and include the existing Halifax and Dartmouth Downtowns. They may also include areas identified to eventually accommodate mixed-uses such as the Mic Mac and Halifax shopping centres. As demonstrated in the Urban Character & Structure Framework, the mix of uses and intensity will not occur uniformly within Mixed-Use Districts as there may be existing areas that are exclusively residential or another use. Accordingly, guidelines will need to consider these as distinct 'character areas' within the District.

Primary priority areas for District Urban Design Guidelines include:

Downtown Halifax
Spring Garden Road
Cornwallis Park
Downtown Dartmouth

Secondary priority areas for District Urban Design Guidelines include:

Quinpool Road
Wyse Road

Key Urban Design Objectives
  • To reinforce a full mix of uses inclusive of residential, commercial, public/institutional, employment and open space.
  • To nurture walking environments through connected and animated streets, and multiple destinations.
  • To enhance visual and physical connections within and between districts and neighbourhoods for all modes of movement.
  • To ensure high quality amenities to cultivate attractive higher density living environments.
  • To provide vibrant, safe and appealing public places.

Special-Use Districts

A Special-Use District is an existing or potentially identifiable area with a prevailing character or function that is distinct from residential or mixed-use areas. Special-Use Districts within the Regional Centre vary in character and function and include areas such as ports and business parks; university and hospital campuses; and, the Department of National Defence Lands.

Key Urban Design Objectives
  • To ensure important employment, institutional and economic functions to the region are supported and enhanced with the necessary infrastructure.
  • To ensure the integration of Special-Use Districts through visual and physical connectivity.

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- To ensure Special-Use Districts interface harmoniously with surrounding neighbourhoods and districts.

Open Space

Prominent Open Spaces

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2. REGIONAL CENTRE URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK - PROMINENT OPEN SPACES

Framework Description

Open spaces that are successful can have a tremendous influence on the image, appeal and economic development of an area. They are also fundamental to attracting and retaining a residential population in the Regional Centre. How these spaces are designed, programmed and interface with surrounding streets and land uses is crucial to their ability to attract and delight a broad spectrum of users, and ensure that they are places where people feel safe and comfortable.

The Open Spaces Framework illustrates the character of the existing and potential "green" infrastructure and public open spaces, including parks and streets. This Plan is central to the Regional Centre Urban Design Framework as it guides the most public and visible aspects of the city and its relationship to important pedestrian infrastructure and destinations. The purpose of this framework is to ensure a network of public spaces and connections that will enhance the liveability, aesthetic quality and pedestrian environment in the Regional Centre.

Public Parks

Existing public parks define the network of park lands that are in public ownership and which the HRM Regional Planning Strategy (RPS) classifies into Neighbourhood Parks, Community Parks, District Parks and Regional Parks. General locations for new public parks are identified as strategic opportunities to provide additional amenity to an area, to complete the park network, or to serve a potential future development area.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To ensure parks serve the broad interests of a population of all ages; and, that active as well as passive forms of leisure and recreation are accommodated.
- To ensure well-connected and accessible parks within walking distance of most residences.
- To ensure parks are safe and inviting at all times and seasons by fostering activity and casual observation at all times.
- To introduce and encourage a greater diversity of public open space types at the neighbourhood or district level.

Institutional Open Spaces and Cemeteries

Institutional Open Spaces are publicly accessible "green" areas or open spaces that are associated with a public or institutional use such as a school, hospital or university. These areas can contribute to the green amenity of an area and can serve to strengthen the overall open space network.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To ensure publicly accessible institutional open spaces that are safe and well connected.
- To ensure institutional open spaces of a high quality design that contributes to the public realm.
- To reinforce the desirable qualities of institutional contexts with appropriate design responses

Other Open Spaces

Other Open Spaces within the Regional Centre are existing areas that contribute to the green infrastructure, but which may not necessarily be intended for public access. These include landscaped areas associated with freeways, utility corridors and rail lines.

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Key Urban Design Objectives
- To ensure these open spaces contribute to the visual quality and appeal of the Regional Centre
- To make better use of these spaces as part of the larger interconnected open spaces and trail network

Off-Street Cycling and Trail Routes

Consistent with the HRM Active Transportation Plan, Off-Street Cycling and Trail Routes describe the major leisure and recreational path network that is independent of the road network. These existing and potential routes generally correspond to major natural features such as the waterfront and opportunities along continuous linear open space systems such as highway corridors.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To provide an integrated, continuous and extensive trail network that serve both active transportation, commuting, and recreational use.
- To encourage active transportation choices through safe, convenient and appealing off-street trails.
- To enhance accessibility to major natural features and attractions such as the waterfront and regional parks.

Green Streetscapes

Streets serve as the primary and most extensive open space network. Accordingly, priority streets for Green Streetscapes are identified that serve as existing or potential "green spines" that link neighbourhoods, districts, major open spaces, and other destinations within the Regional Centre. A distinction is made for Prominent Green Streetscapes which correspond to existing or potential streets with a significant landscape feature such as a centre boulevard. The intended character and manner in which these become 'green' streets is described in the Prominent Streetscape Framework.

Streetscapes

Prominent Streetscapes

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3. REGIONAL CENTRE URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK - PROMINENT STREETSCAPES

Framework Description

Streets comprise the most significant land area in public ownership and are the primary way in which people experience a city. To support a critical population density, vibrant retail corridors, transit use and inviting walking environments, important streets must balance the needs of all users in thriving urban areas.

Having the most significant impact on the quality of urban design in the Regional Centre, streets must be recognized for their multi-functional role in creating a 'sense of place' and as spaces for the unfolding of everyday life. Accordingly, a shift in conventional thinking about road design must take place which considers their character and their 'capacity' for traffic as equally important.

This Framework provides a hierarchy of streetscape characteristics for prominent streets that supports the Urban Design Vision for the Regional Centre. It also works in concert with and reinforces the Prominent Open Space Framework (for connectivity) and Urban Character and Structure Framework (for land use and urban intensity). This Framework will assist in guiding the quality of the pedestrian environment (sidewalks, crosswalks, landscaping) and the appropriate relationship of the buildings to the street to reinforce the intended land uses and streetscape character.

Boulevards

A landscaped centre median is the defining characteristic of Boulevards. Boulevards vary in their transportation, land use, and pedestrian functions, but in general they serve as primary "green" spines to connect neighbourhoods, major open spaces and key public destinations. The most effective example of the use of the boulevard type as a civic design idea is evident on the streets that surround and frame the Halifax Commons. Three typical Boulevards exist in the Regional Centre:

1. **Parkway Boulevards** - broad regional roads with important traffic functions

2. **Urban Boulevards** - narrower regional or local roads in more urban settings

3. **Civic Boulevards** - broad local roads as an organizing civic design gesture

Parkway Boulevards

Parkway Boulevards are streets with broad public right-of-ways that function as important city-wide vehicular connections such as Connaught Avenue. Parkways are generally characterized by broad centre medians, generally without on-street parking and framed by buildings with generous setbacks. These streets can accommodate transit routes and on or off-street cycling lanes.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To maintain and improve the quality of existing Parkway Boulevards and where possible, extend the streetscaping to link to important city-wide destinations.
- To apply the Parkway Boulevard streetscape to other streets of comparable function with broad public right-of-ways, particularly on important gateway streets leading into the Regional Centre.

Urban Boulevards

Urban Boulevards are streets with narrower public right-of-ways than Parkways and function as city-wide or local connections for pedestrians and cars. These streets are generally characterized by a

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landscaped centre median, on-street parking, and framed by buildings of varying setbacks depending on the urban context and land uses. Existing examples of Urban Boulevards are Robie Street and Young Avenue.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To maintain and improve the quality of existing Urban Boulevards, and where possible, provide extensions to the streetscaping to link to important destinations.
- To apply the Urban Boulevard streetscape to other streets of comparable function.

Civic Boulevard

Civic Boulevards correspond to distinctive streets that serve as formal organizing elements and amenities for a specific area. For example, University Avenue has a broad right-of-way and functions as a ceremonial corridor that links a number of important public institutions and visually terminates at Dalhousie University. Other examples include the north end of Agricola Street and Prince Arthur Avenue in Dartmouth. Civic Boulevards generally have broad landscaped centre medians, on-street parking, and are generally framed by uniformly placed and scaled buildings to reinforce the importance of the street.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To maintain and improve the quality of existing Civic Boulevards and where possible, extend the streetscaping to link to important destinations.
- To apply the Civic Boulevard streetscape to other streets with a similar function.

Avenues

Avenues correspond to mixed-use corridors that have continuous street-oriented retail frontages. Avenues serve as 'main streets' for the surrounding neighbourhoods and districts and function as primary pedestrian, transit and vehicular routes that are of city-wide importance. The streetscape of an Avenue includes broad sidewalks, on-street parking and continuous retail storefronts placed close to or at the front property line.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To provide streetscape designs for Avenues that can nurture vibrant mixed-use environments that balance pedestrian, transit and vehicular needs.
- To strengthen the vitality of retail uses by ensuring pedestrian comfort, convenience, safety and amenities.
- To implement Avenue streetscapes along other streets that may serve as potential mixed-use corridors.

Main Streets

Main Streets are characterized by pockets of continuous retail in addition to residential and other uses and generally serve the immediate neighbourhood or district. Main Streets generally function as pedestrian and vehicular connections for surrounding neighbourhoods or districts and may include public transit routes. The streetscape includes on-street parking with varying building setbacks and sidewalk widths depending on the intensity of land uses.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To provide streetscape designs for Main Streets that accommodate higher density residential uses and nurture pockets of vibrant mixed-use environments.
- To strengthen the vitality of retail uses by ensuring pedestrian comfort, convenience, safety and amenities.
- To implement Main Street streetscapes along other streets that may serve as potential mixed-use corridors for neighbourhoods and districts.

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Neighbourhood and District Connectors

Connectors generally serve as collector streets for neighbourhoods or districts and function as important "green'" streetscape connections for pedestrians. Although Connectors may vary in their transportation function, land use and urban context, their common attribute generally includes linking key neighbourhood or district destinations (such as schools and parks), continuous street trees and on-street parking.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To provide streetscape designs for Connectors that enhances their role as important visual and physical links through and between neighbourhoods or districts.
- To ensure streetscapes that reinforces local character and identity.

Streets in Pedestrian Priority Areas

Pedestrian Priority Areas correspond to areas where volumes of pedestrian traffic are significantly high and relatively constant. Currently these areas are generally in or adjacent to the Downtowns of Halifax and Dartmouth. Future Pedestrian Priority Areas may potentially emerge associated with the development of Urban Centres throughout the Regional Centre. The intensity of mixed-uses and concentration of employment, public and cultural destinations generates continuous pedestrian movement in these areas. Accordingly, all streets within these areas should be designed with pedestrian comfort, safety and convenience as the paramount concern.

Objectives
- To accommodate and encourage walking as the primary mode of movement by ensuring high quality pedestrian-oriented streetscapes.
- To strengthen the vitality of retail uses by ensuring pedestrian comfort, convenience, safety and amenities.

4. REGIONAL CENTRE URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK – CIVIC DESIGN

Framework Description

The Civic Design Framework identifies priority areas for existing and potential opportunities to enhance the civic design quality and distinction of the Regional Centre. The purpose of this Framework is to leverage the existing unique natural and built assets and strengths to create an appealing and memorable city.

The components of the Civic Design Framework include:
Prominent Civic Heritage & Cultural Resources
Prominent Civic Gateways & Intersections
Prominent Civic Views & Landmark Sites
Prominent Civic Streets & Frontages

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Civic Design

Prominent Civic Heritage & Cultural Resources

Lake
Micmac

Lake
Banook

Halifax Harbour

Prominent Civic Heritage and Cultural Resources

As a central defining aspect and distinction of the Regional Centre, heritage and cultural resources play a pivotal role in setting the Civic Design context. The Civic Design Framework identifies the existing prominent heritage and cultural resources including structures and landscapes. It also defines a priority area that will require further guidance that is specific to heritage.

A 'Heritage Shed Priority Study Area' is generally defined as where the greatest concentration of heritage resources in the Regional Centre exists. This area identifies where additional study for the management, preservation and enhancement of heritage resources is a priority. Potential Heritage Conservation District study areas are also identified and more may emerge as area-specific urban design studies and guidelines are undertaken. Neighbourhood and District Urban Design Guidelines may consider guidelines specific to heritage to ensure the appropriate scale, massing and material quality of adjacent development.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To develop a viable heritage management plan for the Regional Centre.
- To identify and designate additional significant heritage structures, sites, landscapes and districts.
- To conserve designated heritage and cultural resources through meaningful use and adaptive re-use.
- To ensure new development respects the form, scale and character of designated heritage and cultural resources and districts.

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Civic Design

Prominent Civic Gateways & Intersections

Prominent Civic Gateways and Intersections

Prominent Gateways and Intersections identify important points of entry and crossings. Clearly defining these areas helps to enhance orientation, a 'sense of place' and can instil civic pride.

Primary Gateways are highly visible locations that can serve to mark entry into the Regional Centre, while Secondary Gateways can serve to mark entry into important districts such as the downtowns. These locations provide key opportunities where coordinating the design of landscapes, signage, public art and buildings can potentially create a sense of entry and orientation.

Prominent Intersections are key street intersections that should be acknowledged in the design of the streetscapes and buildings. Corner buildings at these intersections should reflect their civic prominence in their massing and in their material and architectural quality.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To create gateway experiences that reflects the unique culture, history and environment of the Regional Centre or key districts.
- To create a significant sense of scale and identity to gateway experiences that act as both thresholds to and landmarks within the Regional Centre or key districts.
- To ensure the gateway experience is well-integrated locally as well as marking a sense of entry for visitors.
- To enhance the built form and public realm of key intersections while reinforcing the distinct identity of the surrounding district or neighbourhood.

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Civic Design

Prominent Civic Views & Landmark Sites
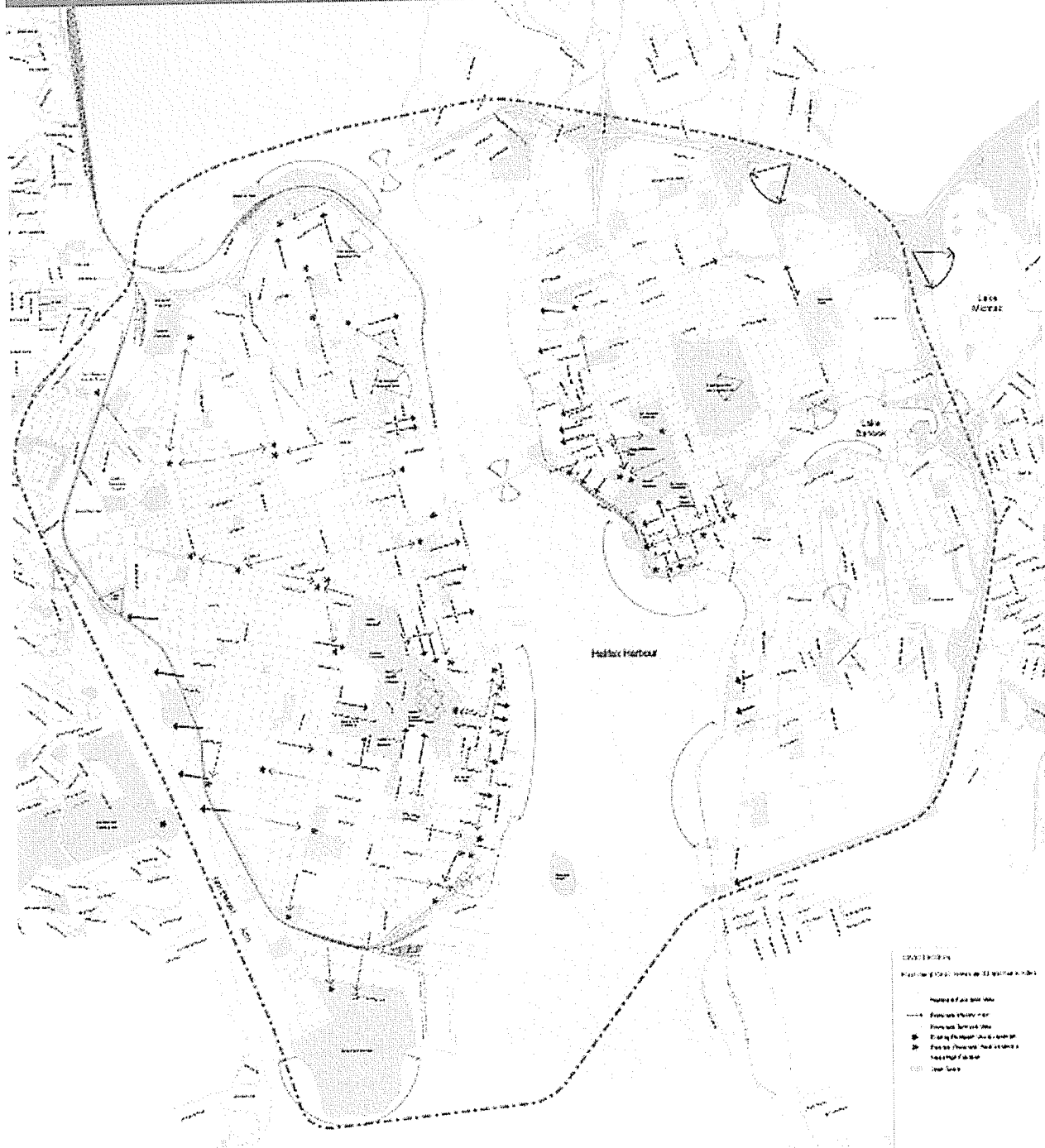
Prominent Civic Views and Landmark Sites

In addition to the existing protected view planes, there are numerous other types of prominent views throughout the Regional Centre that provide an opportunity to enhance civic design and orientation. The Civic Views and Landmark Sites Framework also identify existing and potential locations for landmarks that can reinforce important views and serve as civic building sites and/or public art locations.

Three types of prominent civic views have been identified:

- **Prominent Panoramic Views** - Dramatic sweeping views of the city or natural features afforded by the edges of large open spaces, waterfronts or high elevations.

- **Prominent Window Views** - Key views to the ends of streets that frame a prominent natural feature or open space.

- **Prominent Terminus Views** - Generally prominent axial views along streets that terminate at an existing or potential landmark building or structure.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To reinforce views and create landmarks to enhance orientation that creates a 'sense of place' within the Regional Centre.
- To ensure identified views are protected and enhanced by developments that frame views.
- To identify and reinforce new potential views and landmarks to enhance visual and physical connectivity across the Regional Centre and within neighbourhoods and districts.

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Civic Design

Prominent Civic Streets & Frontages
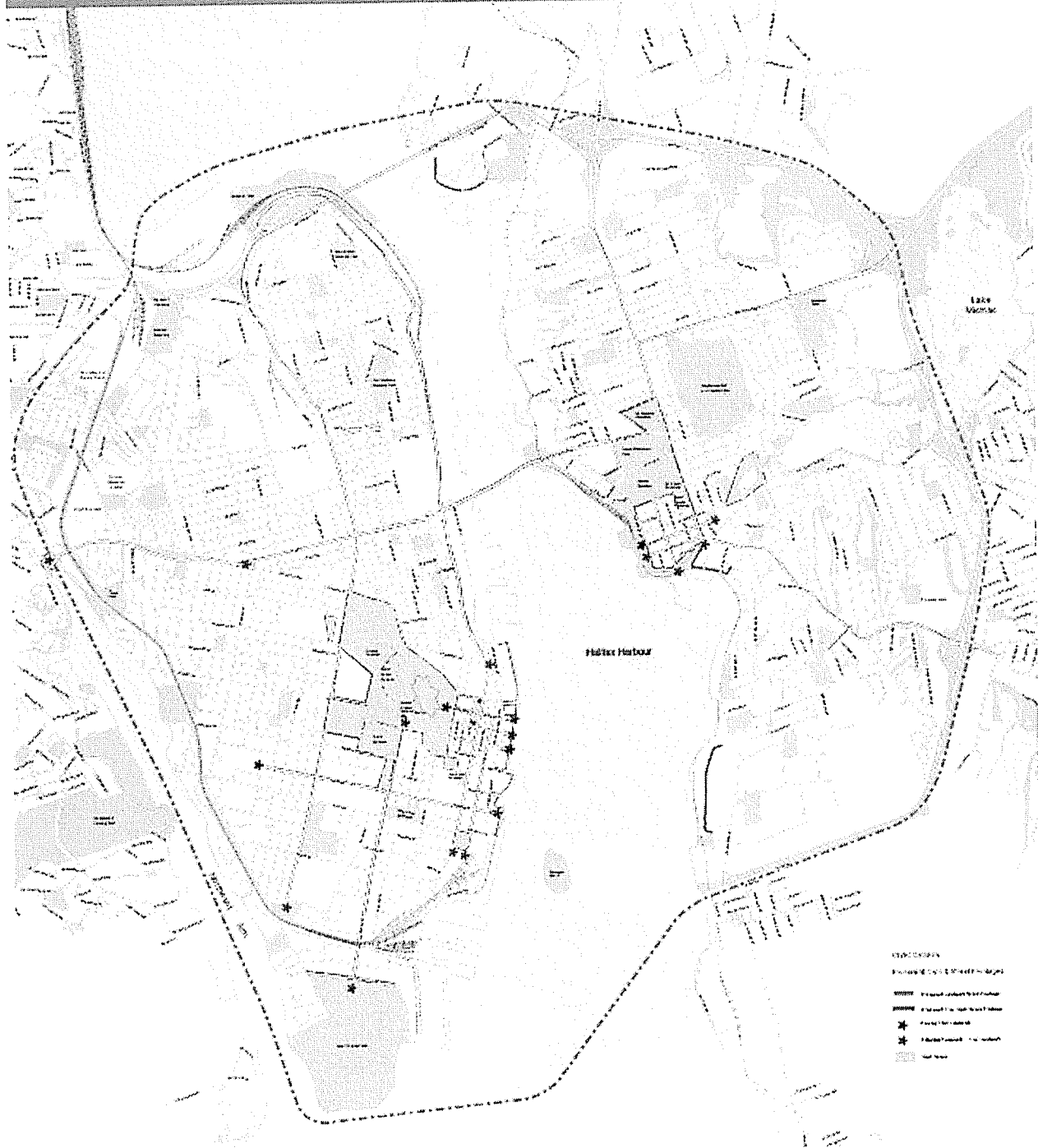
Prominent Civic Streets and Frontages

Prominent Civic Streets and Frontages identify streets, open spaces and natural features of city-wide civic importance due to their unique design and/or visual prominence. These streetscapes, edge conditions to open space features and the buildings that frame them should be of the greatest priority in the Regional Centre for the highest possible design and material quality.

Prominent Gateway and Landmark Streets are the primary approaches into the Regional Centre and streets that link key civic destinations, landmarks and/or open spaces. Prominent Civic Open Space Frontages defines highly visible open spaces and waterfronts of city-wide importance. The design quality of the open spaces, streetscapes and the adjacent buildings should reinforce the visual prominence and civic importance of these streets and open space frontages.

Key Urban Design Objectives
- To create an armature of continuous high quality civic design experienced along the primary routes into and through the Regional Centre.
- To reinforce visual and physical connections between key existing and potential landmarks and destinations.
- To enhance and reinforce the built and public edge conditions of key open spaces and natural features.