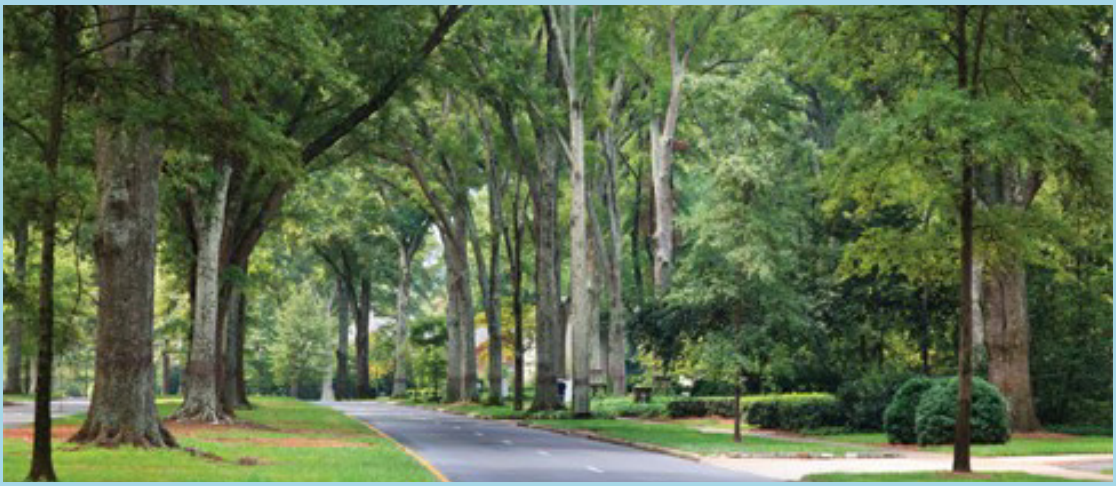
Spotlight on: Sense of Enclosure

Design professionals use the term "sense of enclosure" to describe the relationship between height and width for a defined space with the idea being that right-sizing the proportion of height to width in a space makes it more comfortable and inviting for visitors. Elements of height for a space may include buildings, trees, walls, or other permanent vertical features. Elements of width for a space may include streets, planting areas, plazas, outdoor seating areas, or other horizontal features that separate elements of height. Target ratios for instilling a sense of enclosure are expressed as the ratio of width to height. The ratio is measured using building-face-to-building-face distances on either side of the defined horizonal space.

Target ratios for sense of enclosure may vary by development intensity category— preserve, enhance, strengthen, or transform — and sometimes by general development category — residential neighborhood versus mixed-use area — within the same development intensity category. The Development Intensity Metrics Matrix in Chapter 2 identifies minimum building enclosure ratios for each of the development intensity categories.

In suburban areas, the placement of buildings, the relative sizes of each, and the presence of large surface parking lots in some locations may create broken lines in the landscape that dilute a sense of enclosure for the corridor or public space. Other vertical elements — especially trees — should be used in these conditions to span large gaps between buildings, including a planted center median to span very wide streets.

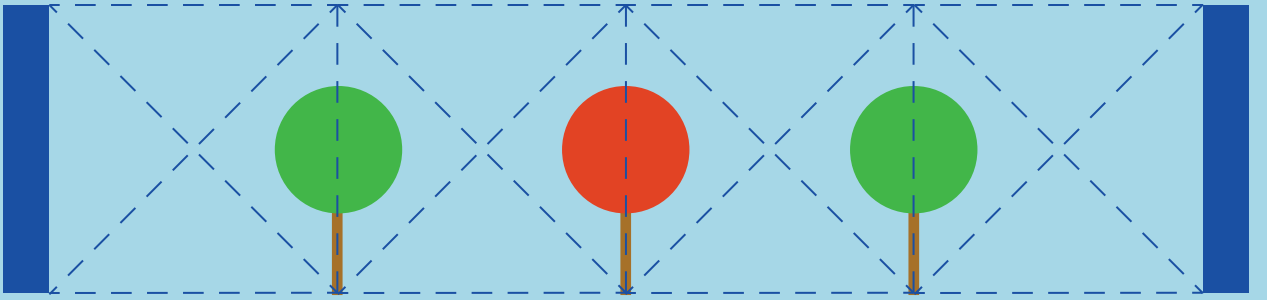
Town officials may also consider tree preservation buffers along specific roads in the planning area to help reinforce a sense enclosure for more rural or suburban landscapes.



Example of a sense of enclosure created by street trees.

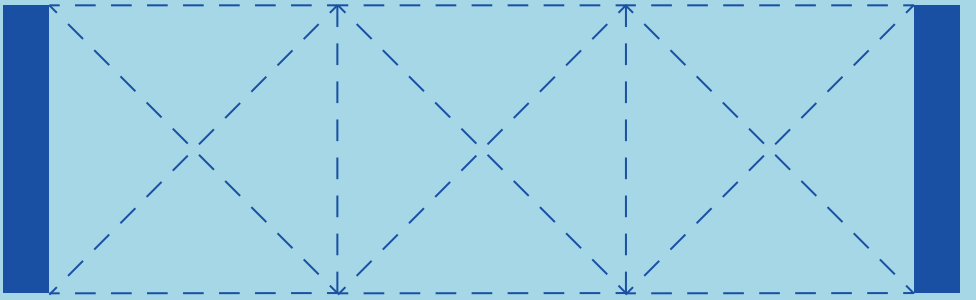
Example of a sense of enclosure created by a continuous building face

Spatial Definition by Width-to-Height Ratio:



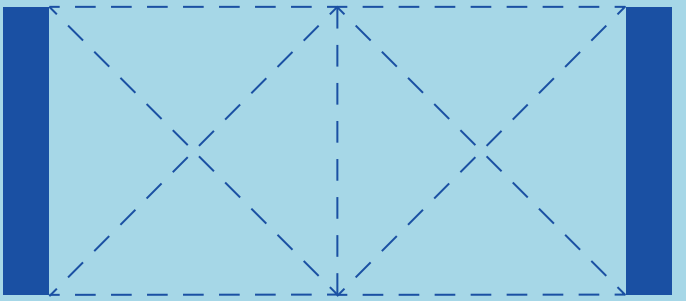
4:1

Minimum building enclosure ratio recommended for Level 1 areas on the Development Change and Intensity Map (Chapter 2). In some areas, street trees (or other vertical elements) may be used to reduce the perceived sense-of-enclosure. Adding street trees in the green locations creates a 2:1 sense of enclosure for the street and a 1:1 sense of enclosure between the street and buildings. Adding street trees in the red location creates a 2:1 enclosure between the street and buildings. Adding street trees in both the green and red locations creates a 1:1 sense of enclosure for the street and the area between the street and buildings.



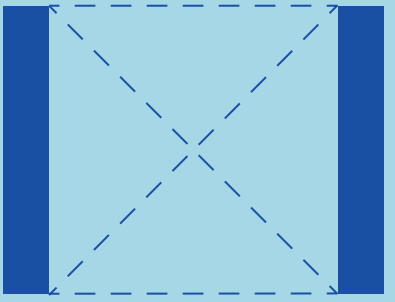
3:1

Minimum building enclosure ratio recommended for Levels 2 and 3 areas on the Development Change and Intensity Map (Chapter 2).



2:1

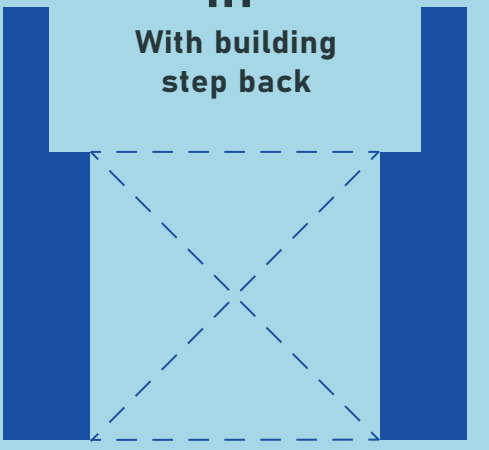
Minimum building enclosure ratio recommended for Levels 4A and 4B areas on the Development Change and Intensity Map (Chapter 2).



1:1

Minimum building enclosure ratio recommended for Level 4C areas on the Development Change and Intensity Map (Chapter 2).

1:1
With building step back



Buildings in Level 4C should consider a step-back condition in building height and massing away from the edge of a public space for any portion of the building over 40 feet tall to preserve the target building enclosure ratio.