

Setbacks and urban planning

Today many jurisdictions rely on urban planning regulations, such as zoning ordinances, which use setbacks to make sure that streets and yards are provided more open space and adequate light and air. For example, in high density districts, such as Manhattan in New York, front walls of buildings at the street line may be limited to a specified height or number of stories. Above that height, the buildings are required to set back behind a theoretical inclined plane, called *sky exposure plane*, which cannot be penetrated by the building's exterior wall. For the same reason, setbacks may also be used in lower density districts to limit the height of perimeter walls above which a building must have a pitched roof or be set back before rising to the permitted height.



A building setback used as a garden terrace outside a 19th floor apartment on East 57th Street in New York.

In many cities, building setbacks add value to the interior real estate adjacent to the setback by creating usable exterior spaces. These setback terraces are prized for the access they provide to fresh air, skyline views, and recreational uses such as gardening and outdoor dining. In addition, setbacks promote fire safety by spacing buildings and their protruding parts away from each other and allow for passage of firefighting apparatus between buildings.

In the United States, setback requirements vary among municipalities. For example, the absence of sky exposure plane provisions in the Chicago Zoning Code makes the Chicago skyline quite different from the skyline of New York where construction of tall buildings was guided by the zoning ordinance since 1916. The New York City Zoning Ordinance also provided another kind of setback guideline, one that was intended to increase the amount of public space in the city. This was achieved by increasing the minimum setback at street level, creating in each instance an open space, often referred to as plaza, in front of the building.