

Applicant: City of Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections	Page 1 of 3	Supersedes:
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Subject: Yards, setbacks, and gross floor area for purposes of Land Use Code standards	Code and Section Reference: SMC 23.84A – yard, setback, gross floor area	
	Type of Rule: Interpretation	
	Ordinance Authority: SMC 3.06.040	
Index: Land Use Code	Approved Date	
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BACKGROUND

Yard and setback standards throughout the Land Use Code regulate distances that must be maintained between structures, or between structures and lot lines. Site plans typically reflect the location of foundations and supporting structural members such as stud-walls, but not exterior finishing such as siding. The question has been raised whether such exterior finishing may be in violation of yard or setback standards.

Similarly, on the inside of buildings, architectural floor plans typically show the exterior walls and their interior surfaces without detailing features such as fireproofing and insulation, or interior finishing such as baseboards or wainscoting. According to the definition, gross floor area is measured to the inside surface of the exterior wall, but questions have been raised as to what features are regarded as a part of the exterior wall for this purpose, as opposed to features that have been applied to the wall.

RULE

Yards and Setbacks

For purposes of yard or setback standards, measurement shall be taken to the outside surface of the building foundation rather than to exterior finishing such as siding, provided that the finishes extend no more than 6 inches into a required yard or setback. In instances where projections above the foundation need to be included in a yard or setback calculation, such as with bay windows, or for other required setbacks above grade, the yard or setback shall be measured to the outside of the exterior wall, excluding exterior finishing such as siding, provided that the finishes extend no more than 6 inches into a required yard or setback.

Gross Floor Area

For purposes of the Land Use Code, gross floor area shall be measured to the interior face of the exterior walls, which includes drywall, as typically depicted on the architectural floor plans.

If a glass wall extends to the floor line, gross floor area is measured to the inside surface of the glass, as shown on the architectural floor plans. At your option, you may exclude structural columns that are attached to and are a part of the exterior wall system.

Areas occupied by interior finishing such as baseboards or wainscoting are included in gross floor area. In the case of unique construction or other irregularities, the Director will determine what is included in the gross floor area of a structure.

Stairs and Ramps

- Floor area under stairs and ramps is counted towards gross floor area, regardless of the height. This includes all floor area at the floor lines from the interior surface of the exterior walls.
- Where there is an opening in an interior upper floor associated with a staircase or ramp, the area of the stairs or ramp below the opening is counted on the upper level, as if the floor plate of the upper level were continuous. If the stairs or ramp are larger than the opening above, the area of the stairs or ramp is counted only to the extent that it is under the opening. In other words, only the portion of the stairs or ramp not covered by the floor above is counted.

Partial floors and multi-level spaces

- Floors or partial floors that have a floor to ceiling height of at least 7 feet are counted as gross floor area.
- In the case of partial floors, where a portion of the upper level is “open to below,” allowing a vaulted ceiling for a portion of the floor below, the open area, without floor, on the upper level, is not counted as gross floor area. Stairs that are within that open area and lead to the upper level are counted, with their area determined by the plan view dimensions.

- Enclosed light wells and other similar open areas spanning multiple levels are only counted towards gross floor area on the lowest level.
- Notwithstanding the above, areas occupied by stairs are separately counted as floor area on each level as noted above.

REASON

The City's long-standing practice has been to apply yard and setback standards based on the location of the foundations or framing of buildings. The width of finishing such as siding is not typically detailed on plans, and such finishing generally is not yet present when inspection is made for compliance with yard or setback standards. The extent of such finishing into yards or setbacks is minimal.

Similarly, features such as fireproofing, baseboards, and wainscoting typically are not detailed on the architectural floor plans. The walls shown on an architectural floor plan represent the structural framing and elements between the exterior and interior walls, and include the drywall on the inside of exterior walls. Standards based on gross floor area are applied to ameliorate bulk of structures, and to determine compliance with land use regulations such as floor area limits, developer contributions, the minimum requirements for parking and amenity areas, and whether a development requires State Environmental Protection Act review (SEPA) or design review. Exclusion of areas occupied by features such as baseboards and wainscoting from gross floor area calculations would circumvent the intent of the code.