Start with a clear purpose

Anatomy of a Design Criteria Package

A design criteria package connects the owner's priorities to the information a project team needs to develop a meaningful response. It should explain the project purpose, the requirements to address, the constraints to respect, and the evidence the owner needs to evaluate proposals.

> **How to use this resource**
> This is an illustrative outline, not a project-specific solicitation. Use it to discuss what your project needs to establish. The final content, technical requirements, procurement process, and approvals belong to the owner and its appointed advisers.

Give the package an identity

1. Project name, location, owner, issue date, and revision identifier.
2. Document status and purpose: working draft, owner review, or issued information.
3. A contents list and register of referenced plans, studies, and appendices.
4. Named responsibility for maintaining the brief and communicating revisions.

A useful contents structure

Part	What it establishes
1. Owner intent	Purpose, priorities, users, and decisions.
2. Program	Activities, capacity, adjacencies, and spaces.
3. Performance	Quality, operations, systems, and maintainability.
4. Scope and constraints	Inclusions, interfaces, timing, access, and budget parameters.
5. Information and assumptions	Known conditions, evidence, and unresolved questions.
6. Response and review	What teams should explain and how decisions are recorded.

The following pages show how these subjects become usable requirements. The examples describe a hypothetical occupied-school renovation; they are not client project records or universal technical specifications.

Owner intent and the facility program

1. Describe the outcome before the solution

> **Illustrative brief language**
> The project will support the educational activities identified in the approved program while accommodating the operating requirements in the phasing brief. Proposed approaches should explain how the priorities are addressed and identify any requested departures.

Annotation: name the actual program and phasing documents, identify their revision dates, and resolve which priorities take precedence. An undefined 'approved program' leaves teams without a reliable reference.

1. State the organizational need and the people affected.
2. Distinguish essential outcomes from preferences and options.
3. Identify the person or body responsible for resolving competing priorities.

2. Translate activities into program information

Program field	What the owner should establish
Activity and users	What people need to do and who participates.
Capacity	The intended number of users and the basis for it.
Relationships	Which activities or spaces should be near, connected, or separated.
Equipment and support	Known equipment, storage, technology, and service needs.
Operating conditions	Hours, supervision, access, and special use considerations.

Annotation: a room name alone rarely explains the activity. A 'flexible classroom' needs a description of the teaching arrangements, capacity, supervision, and changeover expectations the owner intends to support.

Question to resolve before issue

Can a team trace each important space requirement to an activity, a user need, or an explicit owner decision? If the answer is uncertain, mark the item for clarification instead of treating it as settled.

Performance, scope, and constraints

3. Describe the performance to be evaluated

For each significant expectation, identify what teams need to demonstrate. Depending on the requirement, evidence might be a drawing, system narrative, maintenance explanation, sequence, or agreed performance measure.

> **Illustrative requirement: service access**
> Identify equipment requiring routine service and explain the proposed access arrangements. Describe any expected interruption to occupied spaces and identify assumptions requiring confirmation by the owner.

Annotation: the facilities team should establish relevant service tasks and acceptable access conditions. Avoid inventing a universal threshold when the operating need has not been confirmed.

4. Make the scope boundary visible

1. Identify the spaces and systems included in the project.
2. Clarify interfaces with existing facilities and other planned work.
3. Allocate responsibility for equipment, technology, furnishings, moves, and temporary arrangements.
4. Record the owner-provided information that teams may use and its limitations.

5. Explain the conditions teams must accommodate

An occupied-school project needs more detail than 'keep the school open.' Identify the activities that continue, the areas affected, access limits, available work periods, and any temporary arrangements the owner is prepared to provide.

> **Annotation on budget and timing**
> Distinguish a target from an established requirement. State what a budget parameter covers and which dates depend on unresolved decisions. Ask teams to identify dependencies rather than assume the owner has already resolved them.

Give teams room to explain alternatives where appropriate. If a particular method or system is essential, state the reason and establish how alternatives will be handled through the owner's process.

Assumptions and the response schedule

6. Separate facts, assumptions, and decisions

Category	How to record it
Established information	Source, date, relevant limits, and where teams can find it.
Working assumption	The planning basis, who will confirm it, and the decision that depends on it.
Open decision	The question, information needed, decision-maker, and target timing.

Do not turn missing information into an implied commitment. Identify who will investigate significant unknowns and how confirmed information will be communicated within the procurement process.

7. Ask for comparable responses

For each material requirement	Ask the team to provide
Requirement reference	The criteria item and document location being addressed.
Proposed response	A concise explanation and a proposal page or drawing reference.
Assumption or departure	What is conditional, excluded, or different from the requested basis.
Owner action	Information, access, equipment, or decisions the owner must supply.
Supporting evidence	The narrative, drawing, sequence, or other material needed for review.

8. Carry the requirement into review

After selection, record how proposed changes relate to the brief. A change should identify the affected requirement, the new proposal, the relevant implications, and the owner's decision reference.

The response structure should support the owner's established evaluation process. Confirm the permitted review, clarification, and approval steps with the people managing that process.

A requirement record to use in discussion

Use this record for a significant requirement that needs clarification. Complete it with the stakeholders who understand the need, then incorporate the agreed information into the controlled project documents.

Requirement ID and topic

Owner need or outcome

Requirement and source reference

Evidence requested from the team

Assumptions or decisions still open

Decision-maker and target timing

Resolution and document revision

Before issuing the package

1. Resolve conflicting requirements or identify the owner decision needed.
2. Check that referenced information is available and correctly identified.
3. Make significant exclusions and owner responsibilities explicit.
4. Confirm that response requirements support the planned evaluation.

Further reading: Design-Build Institute of America, Design-Build Best Practices, dbia.org/best-practices/. This resource is an original Savoie Studios planning aid, issued September 2026.