



# HOW TO OBTAIN A PERMIT FOR A SHELL BUILDING

City of San Diego  
Development Services Department  
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INFORMATION BULLETIN

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This Information Bulletin covers the procedures for obtaining permits for new shell buildings and for existing buildings or portions of buildings returning to a shell configuration.

## I. GENERAL

A shell building is a category of structure that, when completed, is not suitable for occupancy. Generally, the future tenant is known or the future type of tenant is known and the building is designed for a specific use. At a minimum, a shell building consists of all exterior walls, fire-resistive assemblies, foundation, and the roof structure. Multi-story shell buildings also include elevated floor assemblies, mezzanines, stairways and elevators.

A Certificate of Occupancy is not issued for a shell building permit (see Information Bulletin 585 for further information.) A future tenant must obtain and complete a separate Tenant Improvement permit in order to receive a Certificate of Occupancy for the building. The following are types of shell buildings:

**A. Speculative Shell Buildings** - A type of shell building that is constructed by the owner/developer for an unknown tenant without all of the interior elements necessary for an occupiable building. Examples of common speculative shell buildings include strip malls, offices, warehouses, retail spaces, and industrial buildings.

**B. Cold/Warm Shell, White/Vanilla Box Shell Buildings** - A type of shell building where the owner, designer, and/or contractor performs all of the work necessary for occupancy and generally knows the type of tenant(s) but does not have an actual tenant. The level of work associated with the finishes varies but typically includes all demising walls, toilet facilities, mechanical and electrical systems.

## II. INFORMATION ON PLANS

**A. Building Information** - The following information must be included on the development summary in addition to

### Documents referenced in this Information Bulletin

- San Diego Municipal Code, ([SDMC](#))
- California Building Code, ([CBC](#))
- California Electrical Code, ([CEC](#))
- California Energy Code, ([CEnc](#))
- California Fire Code, ([CFC](#))
- California Green Building Standards Code, ([CGBSC](#))
- California Plumbing Code, ([CPC](#))
- [Information Bulletin 103](#), Fee Schedule and Worksheet for Mechanical, Plumbing/Gas, Electrical
- [Information Bulletin 501](#), Fee Schedule Construction Permits- Structures
- [Information Bulletin 585](#), Certificate of Occupancy
- [Project Submittal Manual, Section 2](#)
- [Technical Bulletin FIRE-9-5](#), Design of Sprinkler Systems in Shell Buildings
- General Application, [DS-3032](#)
- Owner-Builder Verification, [DS-3042](#)

the applicable requirements in the Project Submittal Manual:

1. Occupancy classifications based upon intended future tenants (e.g., retail, restaurant, office, warehouse)
2. Construction type based upon maximum allowable height and area
3. Allowable area analysis (Separated, non-separated and/or accessory)
4. Fire protection systems (fire sprinkler, fire alarm, standpipe)
5. Clear indication that this is a shell only permit and the building/portion of building will not be occupied until a tenant improvement permit has been obtained and approved.

- B. Statement on Plans** - The following statement from designer included on the development summary:

"All future tenant improvements shall comply with prevailing code requirements. New requirements due to the proposed tenant improvements must be satisfied per the prevailing code. Such requirements may include, but are not limited to the installation of fire sprinklers, fire alarms, mechanical systems, toilet facilities, and elevators."

### III. MINIMUM CODE REQUIREMENTS FOR NEW SHELL BUILDINGS

The following section describes the minimum code requirements for permitting new shell buildings. This is not a complete list but is an attempt to answer the most common questions that the City receives from designers. A shell cannot be occupied until a separate tenant improvement permit has been obtained and approved.

- A. Construction Type** - Construction type shall be based on the maximum allowable height and area provisions of the California Building Code (CBC). This calculation must be included in the code summary and shall be based upon the proposed future occupancy types and the design approach chosen (separated, non-separated, or accessory occupancy.)
- B. Means of Egress** - Means of egress must be provided for shell buildings in compliance with the CBC as follows:
1. Occupant load for each area/space.
  2. Exit access doors and exits must be provided to meet the maximum allowed travel distance and common path of travel criteria.
  3. Exit stairways must be sized to accommodate the occupant load.
  4. Means of egress illumination (i.e., exit lighting) and exit signage must be provided for exit enclosures in shell buildings. In addition, any areas of the building "finished out" as part of the shell permit (e.g., entrance lobby, corridor, 1<sup>st</sup> floor tenant, elevator lobbies) are required to have emergency egress

lighting and exit signs.

- C. Fire Sprinkler System** - Fire sprinkler systems shall be provided and installed in shell buildings that are required to be sprinklered per the CBC and California Fire Code (CFC) as follows. Fire sprinklers are allowed to be deferred to the shell building permit.

1. When fire sprinklers are required in order to satisfy code requirements with respect to allowable height and area, type of construction, high-rise designation, or number of stories (in other words, the sprinkler requirement is not occupancy driven), sprinklers must be installed before the shell building permit is completed.

When sprinklers are required based upon the occupancy only, sprinklers are not required to be provided until the first tenant improvement is occupied. At that time, sprinklers must be provided throughout the building or fire area.

2. For mercantile, warehouse and industrial shell buildings which require sprinklers as stated above, sprinklers must be provided per Technical Bulletin FIRE-9-5.

- D. Fire Alarm System** - Fire alarm systems are typically occupancy specific and installed with the tenant improvement permit(s). Fire alarm systems need not be installed to obtain a final for the shell building permit. However, where a fire sprinkler system is installed and required to be monitored per the CBC, the sprinkler monitoring system is required to be installed and approved before the shell building permit is completed.

- E. Energy Conservation** - Shell buildings shall comply with all requirements in the California Energy Code (CEnc) and the California Green Building Standards Code (CGBSC). While some of the elements related to energy conservation may not be constructed the shell building permit, the envelope of the building shall meet the requirements of the CEnc and the CGBSC. The energy information is

required in order to guarantee design parameters are available to the designer of the tenant improvement and that the tenant improvement are constructed accordingly.

**F. Accessibility** - Shell buildings shall comply with all applicable provisions of CBC, Chapter 11A and 11B. All site elements, including the route of travel from site arrival point (s), route of travel to all building entrances and ground floor exits, parking spaces, and route of travel between accessible buildings and facilities on the site must be accessible.

In addition, any elements within the building provided as a part of the shell including entrances, exterior ground floor exits, toilet and bathing facilities, elevators, corridors, lobbies, stairs, and drinking fountains must be accessible.

**G. Water and Sewer Connections** - Water and sewer connections from building to City/private mains shall be provided under the shell building permit. Water meters must be provided for the shell building permit.

**H. Plumbing Fixtures** - Plumbing fixtures are not required for shell buildings permits but, when provided, plumbing fixtures must be provided per California Plumbing Code (CPC). In addition, once plumbing fixtures are provided, hot water must be provided.

**I. Other Requirements** - Mechanical and electrical systems, and fire flow requirements will be reviewed for shell buildings based upon proposed occupancy classifications. Each of these items may be reviewed again at the tenant improvement permit(s) to ensure that the proposed design provided are adequate for the proposed uses.

#### **IV. MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS FOR AN EXISTING BUILDING RETURNING TO A SHELL**

##### **A. Partial Shell**

When the proposed work includes a portion of a story or one of the stories of a multi-story building returning back to a shell configuration, the following

requirements must be satisfied. The shell portion cannot be occupied until a separate tenant improvement permit has been obtained and approved.

**1. Scope of Work** - Clearly indicate the areas which will be returning to a shell and the areas that are proposed to remain occupied.

**2. Rated Construction** - Required fire-resistive rated construction must be maintained. Where the scope of work includes removal/replacement of existing fire-proofing, all details must be shown on the building construction plans.

##### **3. Means of Egress**

- a. All means of egress components for remaining occupied spaces shall continue to comply with egress requirements of prevailing regulations or provisions must be made to accommodate the egress requirements.
- b. For the shell areas, means of egress must be provided as specified for new shell buildings above.

##### **4. Fire Sprinkler System**

- a. The existing sprinkler system must remain intact and operable for buildings that have a sprinkler system. Sprinkler monitoring must be operational.
- b. Where ceilings are removed in shell areas, it is acceptable to leave the pendant sprinklers "as is" until the tenant improvement permit is completed. The shell area is not allowed to be occupied until the sprinklers are installed per NFPA 13.

##### **5. Fire Alarm Systems**

- a. The existing fire alarm system must remain intact and operable for buildings that have an existing fire alarm system.
- b. For the shell areas that are not occupiable, it is acceptable to remove ceiling-mounted notification appliances when the ceiling is removed. All required initiation devices must remain or must be relocated to meet the

requirements of NFPA 72. Compliance with NFPA 72 for the shell portion is required at the time of tenant improvement.

**6. Elevators** - Elevators serving areas still occupied must remain in use for the occupants during construction. Required emergency service elevator (gurney/stretchers elevator) must be operational during construction and cannot be used for construction use.

**7. Energy Conservation** - Compliance with the CEnC and the CGBSC must be provided for shell portions of buildings as stated above for new shell buildings.

**8. Accessibility** - Accessibility must be provided for areas of buildings returning to shell based upon the proposed use identified by the design team. The portion that is returning to a shell is not allowed to lessen the required accessibility to any portion of the building.

**9. Other Requirements** - Minimum parking, plumbing fixtures, water and sewer connections and meters, and minimum fire flow requirements will be reviewed for buildings that have a portion going back to a shell configuration based upon the proposed occupancy classifications.

## **B. Full Building Shell**

When proposed work is to return an entire building back to a shell, the following requirements must be satisfied.

**1. Scope of Work** - Clearly indicate that the entire building will be returning to a shell and will not be occupied until a separate tenant improvement permit has been obtained and approved.

**2. Rated Construction** - Required fire-resistive rated construction must be maintained. Where the scope of work includes removal/replacement of existing fire-proofing, all details must be shown on the building construction plans.

**3. Means of Egress** - Means of egress must be provided as specified for new shell buildings above.

## **4. Fire Sprinkler System**

a. The existing sprinkler system must remain intact and operable for buildings that have a sprinkler system. Sprinkler monitoring must be operational.

b. Where ceilings are removed in shell areas, it is acceptable to leave the pendant sprinklers "as is" until the tenant improvement permit is completed. The shell area is not allowed to be occupied until the sprinklers are installed per NFPA 13.

## **5. Fire Alarm Systems**

a. The existing fire alarm system must remain intact and operable for buildings that have an existing fire alarm system.

b. It is acceptable to remove ceiling mounted notification appliances when the ceiling is removed. All required initiation devices must remain or must be relocated to meet the requirements of NFPA 72. Compliance with NFPA 72 is required at the time of tenant improvement permit.

**6. Energy Conservation** - Compliance with the CEnC and the CGBSC must be provided as stated above for new shell buildings.

**7. Accessibility** - Accessibility must be provided as specified above for new shell buildings.

**8. Other Requirements** - Minimum parking, minimum plumbing fixtures, water and sewer connections and meters, and minimum fire flow requirements will be reviewed for buildings that have a portion going back to a shell based upon the proposed occupancy classifications.

**V. OTHER REQUIREMENTS**

In addition to the requirements contained within this Information Bulletin, compliance with all requirements contained within the Land Development Code (LDC) of the San Diego Municipal Code (SDMC) including but not limited to zoning and historical designations, is required.

The requirements listed above address typical shell and typical speculative shell building permits. Where atypical situations require modifications to these general guidelines, the City will work with the design team and/or owner on a case-by-case basis as needed to facilitate the permitting and construction process.

**VI. FEES**

Refer to Information Bulletin 501, "Fee Schedule, Construction Permits—Structures" for fees regarding building permits. For Mechanical, Plumbing, and Electrical permit fees, see Information Bulletin 103, "Fee Schedule for Mechanical, Plumbing/Gas, Electrical Permits".