

Principles of Traditional Neighborhood Design

Duany, Plater-Zyberk, Architects & Town Planners describing how traditional town planning differs from current practices.

There are two types of urbanism today: the traditional neighborhood, which was the model in America from the first settlements until World War II, and suburban sprawl, which has been the model since then. The two models are quite different.

The traditional neighborhood

1. A neighborhood has a living, independent identity. When clustered with others, it becomes a town; when standing free in the landscape, it becomes a village.
2. The neighborhood varies in population and density to accommodate local conditions. The neighborhood is limited in size so that a majority of the population is within a five-minute walking distance of its center (1/4 mile radius).
3. The needs of daily life are mostly available within this area: convenient work places, stores, community events, leisure opportunities, and transportation connections to more distant places.
4. The streets are laid out in a network, so there are alternate routes to most destinations. This permits most streets to be smaller with slower traffic, and to have parking, trees, and sidewalks. Such streets are equitable for both vehicles and pedestrians.
5. The streets are spatially defined by a wall of buildings that front the sidewalk in a disciplined manner uninterrupted by parking lots.
6. The buildings are diverse in function, but compatible in size and disposition. There is a mixture of houses (large and small), outbuildings, small apartment buildings, shops, restaurants, offices, and warehouses.
7. Civic buildings (schools, churches, etc) are often placed on squares or at the termination of street vistas. By being built at important locations, these buildings serve as landmarks.
8. Open space is provided in the form of specialized squares, playgrounds, and parks, and, in the case of villages, greenbelts.

Most suburbs have quite different attributes:

1. Sprawl is an undisciplined collection of isolated "pods," each dedicated to a single use, such as "shopping centers," "office parks," and "residential clusters." All of these are inaccessible to each other except by car.
2. Housing is strictly segregated from other buildings, and comes in clumps of similar cost, hindering age-mixing, mobility, and socioeconomic diversity within the same area.
3. Sprawl is limited only by the range of automobiles, which encourage retail catchment areas often exceeding 50 miles.
4. There is a high proportion of cul-de-sacs and looping streets within each residential pod. Through traffic is possible only by means of a few "collector" streets which, consequently, become easily congested.
5. Vehicles dictate the scale and form of space, with streets being wide and dedicated primarily to the automobile.
6. Parking lots typically dominate public areas.
7. Buildings are often highly articulated, rotated on their lots, and greatly set back from streets. They thus fail to define spaces or form a sense of place.
8. Civic buildings do not normally receive distinguished sites.
9. Open space is often provided in the form of "buffers," "pedestrian ways," "road berms," and other ill-defined residual spaces.

The neighborhood has several positive consequences:

- Neighbors meet easily on well-defined streets and squares, coming to know each other and to watch over their collective interests.
- Because the activities of daily living are within walking distance, everyone (especially the elderly and the young) gains independence of movement.
- By reducing the number and length of automobile trips, traffic congestion is minimized, the expenses of road construction are limited, and pollution is reduced. * By providing a full range of housing types and work places, ages and classes are integrated, and the bonds of an authentic community are formed.
- Local identity and civic initiative is supported by suitable civic buildings and spaces.

Suburban sprawl has several negative consequences:

- Every undertaking requires a car trip.
- In the construction of a huge paved infrastructure, natural landscape is destroyed.
- Each automobile not only generates roadways, but also requires a paved parking place at the dwelling, another at the workplace, and yet another at the shopping center.
- By consigning huge quantities of public funds to the auto infrastructure, the human infrastructure of good schools, post offices, fire stations, meeting halls, cultural buildings, and affordable housing is starved.
- The middle class is forced into multiple auto ownership. The average yearly cost of car ownership is \$6,000, which is the equivalent of payments on a \$60,000 mortgage. The possibility of owning one less car is the single most important subsidy that can be provided towards affordable housing.
- A person who drives 2 hours a day spends the equivalent of 8 working weeks a year in the car instead of in community life or personal use.
- Young persons below the legal driving age are dependent on adults for their social needs. They are bused to schools, from which they cannot walk, and isolated at home. Parent-time is inordinately devoted to chauffeuring.
- The single family house with yard is a good place for childhood only if it is structured as part of a neighborhood within which children can meet other adults and children, and walk or bicycle to school, play, the store, or friends' houses.
- The elderly lose their self-sufficiency once they lose their drivers' licenses. Healthy senior citizens who could continue to live independently within a neighborhood must be consigned to specialized retirement communities where their daily needs are met at great cost.

Some other important features of livable neighborhoods:

- Buildings must be aligned along streets and squares. The current fashion of staggering or rotating buildings hinders the creation of public space defined by the buildings.
- Trees along streets must also be aligned in a disciplined manner. Picturesque planting patterns should be reserved for parks and squares, not for streets and avenues.
- Parallel parking must be provided on most streets. A layer of parked cars cushions pedestrians from traffic.
- Parking lots should be placed to the rear of buildings to avoid the gaps that make sidewalks uninteresting to use.
- House lots, if less than 50 feet wide, should be provided with alleys so that garage doors do not overwhelm the street facades.
- At intersections, the street's turning radius should not exceed 15 feet from the curb. This maintains a viable pedestrian crossing distance and reduces the speed of automobiles making the turn.
- High capacity streets within urbanized areas should be avenues or boulevards, not highways. Highways are unpleasant for pedestrians and deteriorate adjacent building value, while avenues are compatible with buildings and people. Highways should be reserved for the countryside and be built without strip development.
- Lower-income housing should look like its higher-income neighbors, using similar exterior materials, windows, and building forms. The more affordable housing should not be segregated or clustered in large numbers. A good ratio is one affordable unit to ten regular units.
- Housing is provided above retail establishments. This type of dwelling can be provided for the cost of construction alone, because the cost of land can be assigned to the retail component of the building.
- Garage apartments or cottages are available in the backyards of single-family houses. These rental units, of limited size, provide extremely affordable housing that is interspersed with market-rate housing. This also allows young adults and the elderly to live near their families.
- Current building and zoning codes are concerned only with things like traffic flow, parking counts, the segregation of building uses, and the preservation of wetlands. New codes must be written that include effective provisions to protect and encourage neighborhoods. What needs fostering is healthy human habitat in all its complexity—something every bit as deserving of consideration as the natural habitat so eagerly guarded by modern Americans.