

Town Planning Glossary



The language we need to deliver “sense of community” as well as economic value requires a set of familiar, multi-dimensional, historically-based terms that describe urban form to a diverse audience.

Rich McLaughlin
Minneapolis, MN
September, 2001
Reprinted from “Planning Minnesota”

Part 1

LEXICON

Through a variety of media, there is a lot of discussion around the country these days about future development and redevelopment of our region. As can be expected, particular attitudes are being expressed by our regional planning authorities, local builder associations, municipalities within the core and on the urban fringe, planning professionals, environmental preservation advocates, and concerned citizens.

However, the discussion has a peculiar tone not tending toward authentic community building. For example, the question appears to be one of whether to permit development, rather than what urban pattern that development might take. We seem to have forgotten the patterns that have historically sustained communities before our automobile dependence. Yet at the same time there is an increasing awareness that the development market is not a sacred monolith, but rather a diverse population driven primarily by diverse stylistic and value preferences. Finally, there is a real yearning for more pro-active rather than re-active participation in local-level planning activities, and for ownership in their results, especially in redeveloping areas.

If this discussion indicates a cultural hunger for that proverbial, “sense of community” and for an economic market to drive it, how do we get there? How do we get there at a local level? To the average citizen, big-scheme regional growth scenarios are a bit confusing, or seem unrelated to everyday life. Most people cannot visualize the lifestyles these scenarios perpetuate, and are therefore hesitant to endorse any of them. On the other hand, they do “know it when they see it,” and they are not hesitant to comment on what they know.

How can we as professional designers and planners promote place-making techniques attractive, valuable and understandable to builders, consumers and citizens alike? There are many obstacles, not the least of which is our inability to communicate in a consistent language. Zoning as the basis of our planning nomenclature doesn’t provide a true vocabulary of place-making. Zoning terms are

Comments or Questions: support@charrettecenter.com or 612.823.1966

View this article on the web at <http://www.CharretteCenter.com>

difficult for most people to imagine in built form. The language we need to deliver “sense of community” as well as economic value requires a set of familiar, multi-dimensional, historically-based terms that describe urban form to a diverse audience.

In an effort to clarify a language appropriate to a new urban form and pattern, a nomenclature is being established by the Congress for the New Urbanism. It is not a new language, but rather one that extracts words of historical merit and essential axioms of traditional planning. Many of these terms may sound familiar, but their meanings have been diluted or misused over the years for various reasons. With the pendulum of American taste swinging back to tradition, and a renewed interest in what characterizes so many beloved urban places and spaces, revisiting this lexicon is highly valuable. It offers authenticity to our understanding of traditional urban pattern. It also offers the tools for both speaking about and realizing place-making choices.

This lexicon is presented in a series of seven articles, to stimulate conversation about urban pattern and the choices those patterns offer. The framework for fine-grained, incremental development will become more apparent as the language becomes better understood, more widely used, and implemented in built form.

Walking Distance- A distance comfortable for most people to walk, as an attractive alternative to driving. This distance is best represented as one quarter mile, 1,320 feet, or a five-minute walk.

Walking distance is a historical axiom of urban pattern, delimiting the French Quarter and the Neighborhood Unit described in the 1929 New York City Regional Plan. Current adaptations such as Traditional, Neighborhood Development (TND) and Transit Oriented Development (TOD) also use a five-minute walking distance as a primary design determinate. A limited land mass, then, allows a complete neighborhood to be an incremental unit for urban evolution, as well as the sum of its constituent parts.

A complete neighborhood, in which the activities of daily living, including transit access, are within walking distance of a person’s home, reduces the number of automobile miles traveled by its citizens. Were the same population to live in a conventional suburban development (CSD) pattern, where daily activities are separated beyond a comfortable walking distance, increased miles would be traveled, and therefore more thoroughfares and parking spaces would be needed. Traditional urban patterns integrate human activities through a rich mixture of landscape and building, allowing the walk from one destination to another to be a pleasant alternative to driving.

Pedestrian Continuity- An experiential quality created by a safe, comfortable and attractive network of pathways connecting frequently-visited destinations. The essential characteristics of pedestrian continuity are:

1. Each pathway’s trajectory has a desirable or useful destination.
2. Frequent destinations are located in places that create a succession of five-minute walks.
3. The pathway network offers choices of route, and is logical, uninterrupted, and inclusive of shortcuts wherever possible.
4. The pathway’s trajectory is spatially defined by interesting building architecture and landscape, and tempered by the local climate, providing shade when the air is hot and sun when the air is cool.

5. Pathways are protected from automobile traffic wherever possible.

6. Pathways are visually monitored by people in surrounding buildings, and therefore offer pedestrians a sense of safety.

Typology- A body of knowledge from which physical models can be evaluated and compared based on attributes of function, disposition, and configuration. Typology also refers to creation, evolution, and transformation of physical models to account for their usefulness over time. With regard to urban form, typological attributes include characteristics of public and private buildings, and the spaces that buildings define. Typology of urban form includes the following:

Type - a physical form having defined attributes that could be emulated for other applications.

Prototype - a first model, having attributes worth emulation and transformation in other applications.

Archetype - the best known physical expression for a given set of typological attributes.

Stereotype - the exaggeration, misuse or misunderstanding of typological attributes.

Function, Disposition, and Configuration - Three primary attributes associated with building typology and performance coding. In conventional suburban development, land and buildings are designated for singular use or activity. In contrast, traditional neighborhood development integrates a range of activities, and is therefore can be better described by its building typology. Fundamentally, these controls are intended to maximize continuity and beauty within the public realm, and minimize influence on individual building use or interior design.

TND Codes prescribe- in written and graphic format- performance criteria in terms of function, disposition, and configuration.

Function- Existing or permitted uses for the building and its lot.

Disposition- Existing or permitted horizontal placement of structures on building lot.

Configuration- Three-dimensional building form.