

The Principles and the Public Process

Town Planning Terms - Part: 6



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Part 6

The previous two articles of this series described in some detail ten principles of traditional neighborhood development. It might be worth observing how many of these principles apply to the places we live, work, shop, and play in on a daily basis. How many of these principles apply to other urban places we know, love and want to emulate in new development? In each of these cases, do these environments provide the best opportunities for daily human activity?

The ten principles are tools for creating attractive places for people. Like the tools that give us the look and expense of urban sprawl, the tools of traditional neighborhood development give us the public realm and efficiency of traditional neighborhoods. Zoning diagrams and transportation modeling have given us many rules for the “horizontal infrastructure,” but little guidance on the “vertical infrastructure,” the critical component of place-making. For this reason, New Urbanists use a toolbox of archetypal principles and participatory processes to create traditional neighborhoods that simply cannot be achieved by blanket policies and regulations.

New Urbanism has also gained popularity in the planning and design professions because of its capacity to use development resources wisely. Many professional urban planners and governmental decision-makers have publicly stated that we can no longer afford to build the development pattern to which we have become accustomed. If this is indeed the case, we should take collective responsibility for determining attractive, market-feasible alternatives and quantifying the true costs and benefits of each. We need to answer the question, “Compared to what?” when we speak against urban sprawl. Only then will we be able to offer coherent choices for consumers of land and buildings.

Traditional neighborhood development is one coherent, visible choice in the way we build cities. It is discernible, not a warmed over version of today’s building trends. It refers to successful, mature neighborhoods and values their real estate durability. It observes what has made these neighborhoods sustainable models of good urban living. Once we know these characteristics, then we can learn how to choreograph new neighborhood form to accommodate today’s lifestyles, local forces, and traditional urban values.

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The ten principles serve two functions. First, they provide design determinants for architects and planners designing in a traditional urban vernacular. Second, they provide a checklist---a basis for comparison between conventional suburban and traditional neighborhood development patterns. The more these principles are adopted by new and infill urban development, the closer these come to authentic traditional neighborhood form. Conversely, the less they are adopted, the more suburban in character the neighborhood becomes. The ten principles present an ideal, a pure form toward which we can aspire, if we choose. Like any utopian model, they do not prescribe what will happen at specific locations, but rather encourage interpretation according to local conditions. The principles offer a coherent pattern of specific attributes through which local possibilities can be visualized.

Today, there are many traditional neighborhoods being built and rebuilt throughout the nation, framed by the principles of New Urbanism as well as local forces. More than traditional urban form in new construction, these development projects also demonstrate an effective means for achieving intended results over time. The workshop and charrette are process tools that include community stakeholders from a project's outset. Front-end public participation provides opportunities to merge principles of sustainable development with local forces to create desirable neighborhood components.

A charrette has two distinct advantages over the one-time mandatory public hearing. First, because the hearing is conducted after significant investment in design development, it becomes a forum for community reaction, rather than a means to achieve community consensus about a project's objectives. The community's physical, social, political and economic landscapes are not simultaneously addressed in the project's design development. A charrette, or a sequence of design workshops, allows resolution among local forces by bringing together all parties that will have a role in its success before approval hearings.

Second, public participation allows an interactive learning process between planning professionals and the local community in a time and cost effective manner. When project stakeholders sit around the same table, they learn more about their available choices. They weigh the costs and benefits of each, by themselves and against each other. At the same time planners and designers learn more about the social, political, and economic landscapes affecting the local community. In such an environment, informed decisions can be made quickly, translated into design alternatives, returned for discussion, and ultimately become design solutions the community wants.

The charrette is the subject of the next *Lexicon* article. In the meantime, it is worth thinking about the four community landscapes and how we typically address them in our planning efforts. Remember, when viewing a landscape, literally or metaphorically, our individual perspective may be somewhat different than someone standing ten feet away, even though we both see the same things.

Physical- Tangible components of a geographically defined area that by their composition, quantity, and quality generate desirable or undesirable places.

Social- Casual and organized relationships among people that promote or inhibit ideas and knowledge about the community.

Political- Formal relationships that generate a plan for action or inaction, such that a community's culture evolves according to the collective will of its citizens.

Economic- Relationships that add or diminish value to individual lifestyles and the natural environment, including preservation of resources and the exchange of goods, services, and property.

It is worth noting that the physical landscape is the only tangible one. Our social, political, and economic landscapes are relationship-based and are therefore susceptible to the unpredictable dynamics of human behavior. The physical realm is less resilient to the sudden changes than the other three, as is apparent when touring neglected or spirited deprived neighborhoods. But the landscape of neighborhood form has in the past demonstrated a capacity to shape healthy, mutually supportive community relationships, as is apparent when touring mature traditional neighborhoods that continue to escalate in real estate value.

The new urbanist model is capable of integrating all four landscapes successfully, recapturing traditional urban values, and offering their citizens an authentic “sense of community.”