

Planning Matters

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Great Neighborhoods:

Places that Stand Out for their Character, Livability, & Positive Community Feeling

by Mark Hinshaw, FAICP. Used with permission from *Planning*, copyright January 2008 by the American Planning Association.

Imagine that many people consider their own neighborhood a pretty fine place. After all, people live where they are comfortable with the physical surroundings and the neighbors. There are thousands of really fine neighborhoods throughout the country. In some ways it's unfair to single out just a few for extraordinary status.

So what distinguishes a truly great neighborhood from one that is merely good? The American Planning Association decided to answer that question through its Great Places in America program announced in 2007. During its first year, APA recognized 10 great neighborhoods and 10 great streets, based on criteria that were used to evaluate a total of nearly 100 nominations put forward by planners and others.

APA's criteria are listed elsewhere in this article. For the rest of us, "great" often means the extent to which a diverse group of people really cares about a place and demonstrates that caring every day, both individually and collectively.

In my own neighborhood, this translates to property owners planting and maintaining flowers for all to see, not just tucking them inside private gardens. It means that local merchants sweep their sidewalks every morning, learn their customers' first names, and watch the street. It means that neighborhood people seek attention from city hall, organize programs that celebrate the neighborhood's history, and welcome diversity. To my mind, great neighborhoods offer many choices, they accommodate change gracefully, and they are socially and economically inclusive.

Unfortunately, what has passed for neighborhood activism in the past few decades often is just the opposite. It has meant limiting choices by prohibiting new forms of housing, preventing change at all costs, and finding ways of subtly (or not so subtly) excluding certain types of people. Occasionally, what some people call neighborhoods are little more than single-family, auto-dependent

subdivisions, with virtually no other uses save for the occasional church, park, or school.

There is a countermovement, though. Planners and others have been pushing for walkable neighborhoods with a mixture of uses and buildings that reinforce the public realm. To them, great neighborhoods—whether old urban, new urbanist, or something else—are agents of democracy. No gates, or subtle forms of exclusion. Rather, the streets and sidewalks are the social glue that binds the place together.

It is popular to refer to Americans' love affair with the car. But as a culture we have had another love affair that is much longer and much richer. That is our adoration of small towns. We romanticize them, we idealize them, we elevate them to mythical status. We praise their intimacy, friendliness, and folksiness. They represent the best of us, collectively and individually. In a sense, we try to embody the virtues and values of small towns in our neighborhoods.

Great neighborhoods age well and endure through time. Many hands contribute to their richness. Layers are added, and they acquire the patina of human endeavor. These neighborhoods are burnished and repaired, maintained and fussed over. They have characters and heroes, order as well as whimsy. In short, they are physical and social expressions of our long-standing efforts to live together in human settlements. Great neighborhoods are life-affirming.

They're diverse

Among the great neighborhoods that APA has designated this year, many are socially, culturally, and economically diverse. Despite the new investment in the Eastern Market neighborhood in Washington, D.C., the area is home to many different racial and ethnic groups, people of varying incomes, and different family types. There are apartments as well as neighborhood is a great stew-pot of race, ethnicity, age, and income.

What Makes a Great Neighborhood?

1. Has a variety of functional attributes that contribute to a resident's day-to-day living (residential, commercial, or mixed uses).
2. Accommodates multi-modal transportation (pedestrians, bicyclists, drivers).
3. Has design and architectural features that are visually interesting
4. Encourages human contact and social activities.
5. Promotes community involvement and maintains a secure environment.
6. Promotes sustainability and responds to climactic demands
7. Has a memorable character.

In a different way, San Diego's Hillcrest neighborhood is socially diverse in that it has attracted a substantial number of gay and lesbian people. This new energy, which is celebrated by an annual Pride Parade down the main thoroughfare, infuses the area with a vitality and spirit that is palpable. Richard Florida has observed in his writings on the creative class that gays and lesbians are having an enormous influence by helping to reinvigorate urban neighborhoods throughout the country, and Hillcrest is a perfect example of that phenomenon.

Demographic diversity also is evident in neighborhoods such as Old West Austin, Pike Place Market in Seattle, and San Francisco's North Beach. These places aren't exclusive; they invite and embrace everyone.

Central locations

Most of the 10 great neighborhoods are situated close to the city center. This means they have had many decades to mature and benefit from waves of people and influences and architectural styles. Many are within walking distance of downtown, or they are linked to it by transit. Residents can live there without a car. Increasingly such neighborhoods

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will appeal to seniors and younger residents who do not wish to be saddled with automobiles. In many ways, these places are far more sustainable—socially, economically, an environmentally—than outlying suburbs where the automobile is the driver.

Energy, land, materials, transportations, and utilities are far more efficiently used and financed through taxes within denser, inner city neighborhoods.

Shared ownership

People who live in these neighborhoods feel very strongly about them, and not just because they have homes there. They identify with the, Robert Putnam has lamented the gradual erosion of group activities in the U.S. That may be the case nationally, but not in these places. They show that many people still put a lot of energy into looking after neighbors, sharing responsibility for maintenance and informal policing, along with seasonal events and celebrations.

In places like Park Slope in New York City, community activism is high, with many people dedicated to maintaining safe and clean streets, parks, and playgrounds. Commercial streets teem with family-owned businesses that take as much pride and responsibility for keeping the neighborhood up as residents do. Park Slope has seen an amazing amount of new investment, particularly in the form of people renovating and upgrading the blocks of brownstone dwellings so characteristic of this slice of Brooklyn.

San Francisco's North Beach is filled with people who let city hall know when new influences threaten stability. North Beach residents were successful in getting the city to adopt programs such as rent control and affordable set-aside requirements for new development, so that people with moderate incomes could continue to live there.

The Old West Austin Neighborhood Association (in Austin, Texas) meets with developers early on to ensure that new projects will fit with the adopted neighborhood plan. The group also works with developers of mixed use projects to include affordable housing.

Pittsburgh's Chatham Village is tiny by comparison, but its residents are also passionate about the place. The same is true of Elmwood Village in Buffalo, New York, and the First Addition in Lake Oswego, Oregon.

Mayor Laurel Prussing of the city of Urbana, Illinois, says that "the West Urbana

neighborhood is quite mixed and includes university students, long-time residents, and young families. But they all seem to feel very passionate about the place. A few years ago, we started seeing blocky apartment buildings intruding into the neighborhood. The residents lobbied hard to have the city ensure some protection from incompatible development. We listened and acted on their requests."

Sometimes citizen activism in one neighborhood can influence events beyond its boundaries. Residents of San Diego's Hillcrest neighborhood sought to replace a deteriorated pedestrian bridge that crossed a wide arterial street. City traffic engineers had declined to rebuild it, as it could not be linked to any transportation project. Rather than giving up, the community approached the Commission for Arts and Culture and secured funds for a bridge that would be a work of public art. According to Michael Stepner, FAICP, "Hillcrest's success resulted in the city reevaluating how it dealt with pedestrian needs and led to a pedestrian master plan that has changed the face of the entire city."

Community spaces

Most of the neighborhoods recognized in the APA program include at least one public spot where people spend time. Park Slope has Prospect Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Parents with strollers walk along the meandering paths, while elderly folks pass the day watching passerby. In Park Slope, the streets themselves are terrific social spaces, with stoops and steps providing places to hang out. Nearby, the Grand Army Plaza hosts a terrific Saturday market where locals gather, schmooze, and queue up to snag the best fish from the colorful vendors.

Pike Place Market is an amazing mixing bowl within the neighborhood that surrounds it. Its streets and lanes and back alleys are filled with people enjoying the sensation of being together in a confined space. People jostle, converse, squeal with delight, and watch buskers and hawkers sell their wares. Victor Steinbrueck Park—on the edge of the market—is the site of outdoor events and casual meetings. It attracts visitors, residents, and street people alike, and no one feels uneasy.

Peter Steinbrueck, an architect and Seattle city councilman whose father helped the market from demolition in the 1960's notes that "the 100-year old market embodies Seattle's long-standing populist

tradition." Indeed, when a ballot measure to save farmlands was presented to the voters of King County, it was presented to the voters of King County, it was pitched as a way to keep the market thriving. Voters approved a property tax levy to buy those farms and keep hundreds of acres of land in agricultural use rather than having them go to subdivisions and strip malls.

Washington Square Park in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood serves as a similar social space. Kids careen around the lawns while adults sit and watch from benches. Lovers lock arms and smooch, and senior citizens amble along. Surrounding shops and cafes animate the place day and night. Scattered groups of street people can be found, but the place invites and accommodates anyone. These spaces are true agents of democracy, excluding no one whether by rules or subtle clues.

On a smaller scale, the internal greenway in Chatham Village is a public space that ties the homes together in both a spatial and a social sense. This is a classic way of organizing dwellings in a village-like way—a design that has influenced other communities ranging from new towns to cohousing developments.

The First Addition in Lake Oswego is noted for its many private gardens that are visible from the street. This is a trait of traditional urban neighborhoods, with private space visually extending the public realm. As Tony Hiss has noted in his book, *Experience of Place*, most people need to see living systems, even if they aren't found within spaces that are publicly accessible. Well-tended front yard gardens also show that residents take great pride in their neighborhood. Oregon planner Sumner Sharpe FAICP, notes that "so well known is the First Addition's engaging, 'small town' streetscape that communities all over the state seek to emulate it."

Local commerce

The best neighborhoods provide residents with shops and services that can satisfy most of the daily needs. Businesses are often locally owned on the shopping streets. Ongoing personal relationships are important here. Merchant and customer know each other's first names. Residents feel responsible for nurturing local businesses and ensuring their survival over time, even if the prices are higher than in typical suburban chain stores.

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Most of APA's Great Neighborhoods exhibit this characteristic. Park Slope has a primary retail street that serves much like the main street in a small town. On the opposite coast, in the Hillcrest neighborhood in San Diego, University Avenue offers a lively mix of places to eat, sit, lounge, and shop. Some years ago, a local grocery store called Ralph's took over a defunct department store and renovated it. The market is the centerpiece of a group of stores, restaurants, and viewer, dense housing, creating a kind of village within a village. Surprisingly, the supermarket is barely visible from the street; the University Avenue frontage is lined with mixed use buildings.

Old West Austin's wide variety of residents, including members of many ethnic groups as well as university students, helps support the many locally owned businesses. Few chains are found here, although one of them is the flagship Whole Foods store, which is based in Austin.

Both Eastern Market neighborhood and the Pike Place Market neighborhood are anchored by their namesakes, each a rabbit warren of numerous locally owned businesses that give their districts a sense of uniqueness. These concentrations of small retailers provide a "third place" for many local residents to relax, eat, meet friends, and enjoy the fruits of dense urban life.

Columnist Neal Peirce has lauded the authenticity of the Eastern Market in Washington, D.C. "Its vendors are a shared city treasure—many family teams serving customers for decades, tempting all comers with cheese and bakery aromas, suggesting recipes, serving up homey breakfasts, offering a vegetable or fruit buyer a few extra bananas or apples ...a kaleidoscope of Washingtonians found the market a wonderfully natural place to people watch, rub shoulders, or carry home fresh foods."

Tragedy hit last April, when a fire gutted the 143-year old market building. While the complex is restored, the market is able to serve the neighborhood at least partially by operating out of temporary quarters.

History and character

Great neighborhoods usually take time to accumulate layers of richness. Multiple generations of people are needed to give a place roots and permanence, whether by planting trees, constructing buildings, or becoming local legends. A good

neighborhood has a patina, as with a well-used, well-loved piece of furniture that has been cared for, repaired, and polished. New neighborhoods, no matter how well planned or designed, don't demonstrate the contributions of hundreds of people as they have come and gone.

Sometimes the architecture is a focal point. Park Slope is packed with narrow row houses, each with a long flight of steps, oversized vertical windows, and strong cornice line. While sections were developed by different individuals, they followed the same general rules and created a place that is visually cohesive in its repetitive forms and details. Residents personalize their homes by painting their front doors in different colors. The effect is both charming and a sign of a strong community.

Some of this year's 10 designated neighborhoods are historic districts, with mechanism in place to protect their value. For example, the Pike Place Market Historic District prevents the intrusion of brand names, commercial corporations, and proposed changes to the physical setting. Everything from signs to paving and windows is carefully reviewed to ensure that the character of the district is retained.

Chatham Village is a National Historic Landmark, recognized as one of the nation's planned communities. Designed by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright after the fashion of an English garden city, Chatham Village served as a New Deal model for subsequent federally sponsored residential projects. The greenbelts and superblocs and village-like compactness influenced planning throughout the U.S. And while this original development has worked well over the decades, it also taught us the lesson that the widespread application of inward-oriented planning schemes was not always successful from a social perspective.

Jim Duncan, FAICP, has lived most of his life in Austin, Texas. He notes that the city's unofficial motto is "Keep Austin Weird," and a website by that name displays the wonderfully quirky local color. Duncan says that Old West Austin is a perfect example of that attitude. Originally a tract given to former slaves after the Civil War so they could build their own homes, the neighborhood is an eclectic mix of housing types and styles but generally is characterized by very small homes on small lots.

"Old West Austin personifies 'old urbanism,'" says Duncan. "So unique is its character and the little main street filled with odd shops including a huge, funky bookstore that it become a regional draw, attracting people from all over to visit the place and hang out."

City actions

Often neighborhoods that are widely valued also have the support of city-sponsored policies, programs, or projects. Not that this is automatic or easy. Most of the 10 neighborhoods celebrated by APA have had to maintain an active lobbying effort to ensure attention. Sometimes neighborhood groups have initiated their own efforts to strengthen regulations, add design standards, attract public and private investment, or seek out grants.

Great neighborhoods require great cities and great city governments that recognize their value. Plans, as important as they are, are not enough in themselves to ensure that neighborhoods do well over time. Cities have to work on efforts such as community policing, affordable and workforce housing, parks and schools, neighborhood gardens, street cleaning and maintenance. And because municipal funds are often scarce, some of these efforts require participation—either financial or in-kind—by the residents themselves. No one should depend on city government to provide everything.

One of my first professional jobs involved working with neighborhood groups to plant street trees throughout the five boroughs of New York City. The residents paid half the cost and the city picked up the rest and handled all the contracting and installation. That was decades ago. Now, when I visit those neighborhoods, the mature trees add immensely to the stability and value of the streets and blocks. In my current neighborhood, similar programs requiring partnerships are absolutely critical in the fostering of good neighborhoods.

It is encouraging that Americans are rediscovering the virtues and values of solid urban neighborhoods. Not the faux neighborhoods of isolated, exclusive single-family subdivisions but neighborhoods that are diverse, messy, vital, and ever-changing. People who live in these rediscovered places are not looking for escape from urban density and congestion. Rather, they revel in it.

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**2008 Zoning Compliance Permit Analysis
January—March 2008**

	City of Bardstown		Nelson County		Total	
	Permits	Est. Cost (\$)	Permits	Est. Cost (\$)	Permits	Est. Cost
Agricultural Structures	0	\$0	12	\$133,700	12	\$133,700
Agricultural Additions	0	\$0	2	\$3,200	2	\$3,200
<i>Agricultural Subtotal</i>	0	\$0	14	\$136,900	14	\$136,900
Accessory Additions	1	\$500	0	\$0	1	\$500
Accessory Structures	13	\$24,300	32	\$265,812	45	\$290,112
Demolitions	0	\$0	1	\$0	1	\$0
Duplexes (0 units)	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Manufactured Homes, double-wide	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Manufactured Homes, single-wide	0	\$0	4	\$70,400	4	\$70,400
Manufactured Home Additions	0	\$0	1	\$15,000	1	\$15,000
Modular Homes	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Multi-Family Structure (0 units)	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Single-Family Additions	1	\$2,000	10	\$296,800	11	\$298,800
Single-Family Dwellings	8	\$932,000	25	\$2,737,344	33	\$3,669,344
Single-Family Alteration/Remodeling	5	\$122,103	13	\$242,400	18	\$364,503
Townhouses/Condominiums (3 units)	1	\$160,000	0	\$0	1	\$160,000
<i>Residential Subtotal</i>	29	\$1,240,903	86	\$3,627,756	115	\$4,868,659
Commercial Accessory Structures	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Commercial Additions	2	\$417,500	1	\$5,500	3	\$423,000
Commercial Alteration/Remodels	5	\$47,500	0	\$0	5	\$47,500
Commercial Demolitions	0	\$0	1	\$0	1	\$0
Commercial Structures	3	\$96,200	2	\$545,000	5	\$641,200
Commercial Tenant Fit-Ups	4	\$24,000	0	\$0	4	\$24,000
<i>Commercial Subtotal</i>	14	\$585,200	4	\$550,500	18	\$1,135,700
Industrial Accessory	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Industrial Additions	1	\$300,000	2	\$178,000	3	\$478,000
Industrial Alterations/Remodels	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Industrial Demolitions	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Industrial Structures	0	\$0	1	\$65,000	1	\$65,000
<i>Industrial Subtotal</i>	1	\$300,000	3	\$243,000	4	\$543,000
Public Structures	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Public Additions	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Public Alterations/Remodeling	1	\$324,300	2	\$9,000	3	\$333,300
Telecommunications Facilities	0	\$0	0	\$0	0	\$0
Telecom. Accessory Structures	0	\$0	1	\$24,000	1	\$24,000
<i>Public Subtotal</i>	1	\$324,300	3	\$33,000	4	\$357,300
<i>Total Permits Issued</i>	45	\$2,450,403	110	\$4,591,156	155	\$7,041,559

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Great Neighborhoods *(continued from page 3)*

APA has found 10 great neighborhoods to celebrate this year, but there are hundreds of splendid neighborhoods in cities and town throughout the country. We are finally relearning one of our culture's most deeply rooted traditions; physically compact, socially intimate, and economically mixed neighborhoods that are walkable and offer many choices in jobs,

housing, recreation, and arts. And where the public realm is considered just as important as private space.

The renewed interest in real neighborhoods portends well for the future of cities. People are seeking the authenticity of experience, the richness that only comes from varied people living in close

proximity, and the intrinsic beauty of buildings that have aged well with time. We are not long satisfied with the ersatz; we want the genuine article.

To learn about APA's 2007 Great Places in America or for more information on this APA program, visit www.planning.org/greatplaces/index.htm

News

Bill Ellis was appointed by the Bardstown Mayor and City Council to serve a 4-year term on the Bardstown Board of Adjustment. Bill owns several properties in Bardstown's Historic District and was the former owner/operator of a local restaurant. Today he is retired and is renovating several historic properties.

Wes Parrish was appointed by the Bardstown Mayor and City Council to serve a 3-year term on the Development Review Board. Wes has worked as an insurance agent with Eugene Wilson and Company for the past 10 years.