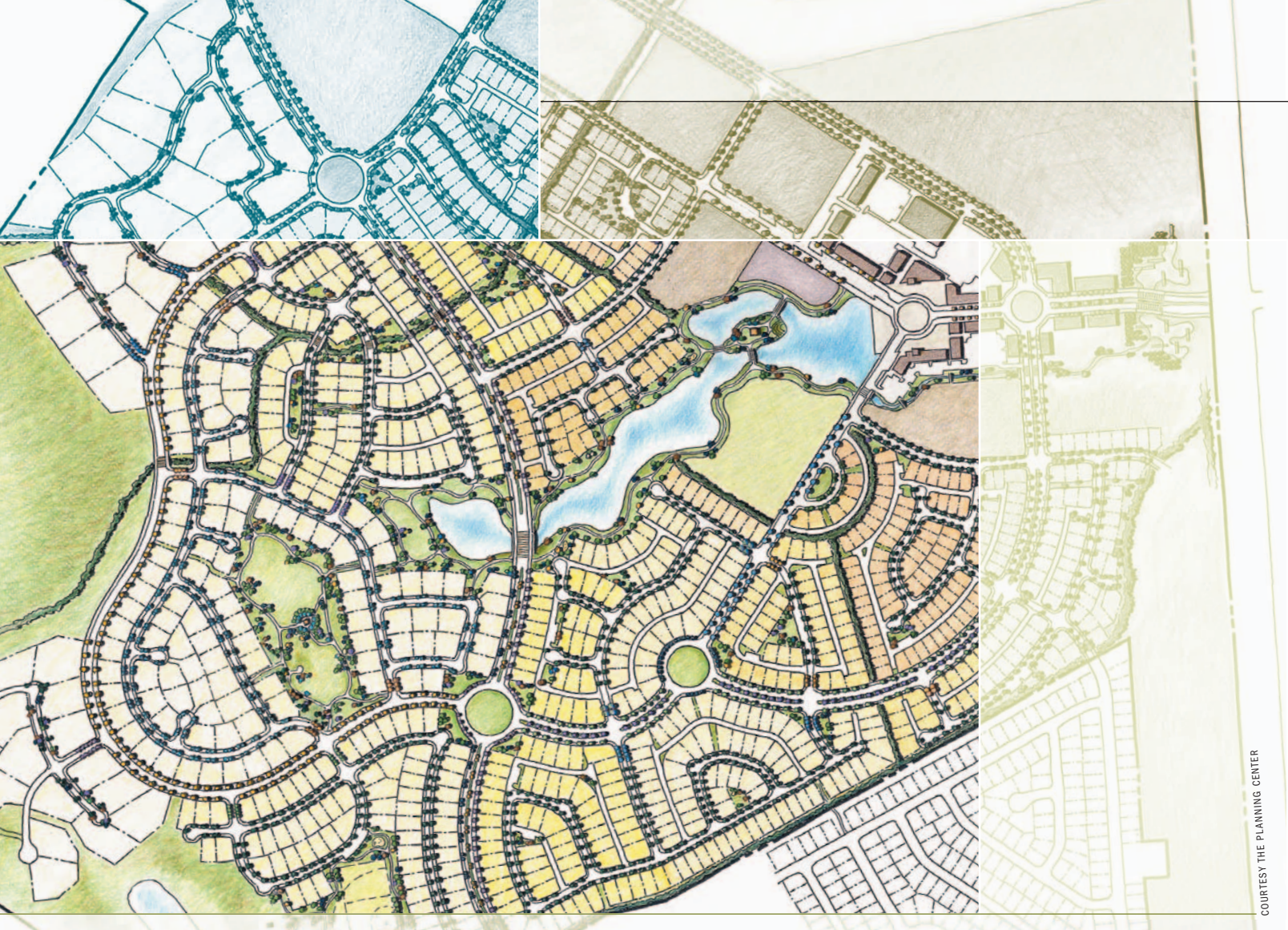


COURTESY THE PLANNING CENTER

The case for community

How to create places people want to call home

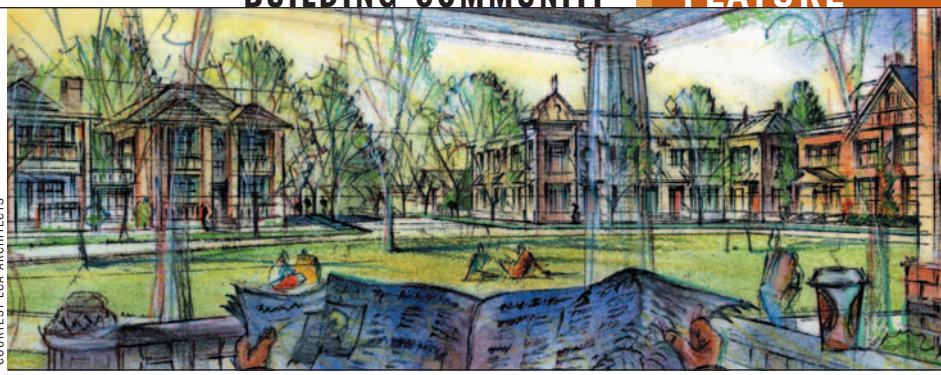
by Ryan Reed

PITY THE SUBURB. In the space of a single generation, conventional suburban design—the wide, curving streets and cul-de-sacs, spacious front lawns, three-car garages and big backyards—has gone from American Dream to whipping boy.

For a range of social critics, planners, and government officials, low-density, single-product housing tracts are alienating, isolating, auto-dependent, congested, unsafe, and spiritually unfulfilling places. Their triumph in the marketplace has been driven less by demand than by misguided single-use zoning concepts, speed-loving traffic engineers, fire departments fixated on big vehicles and liberal government financing for roadbuilding. This is the compelling argument outlined in books like *Suburban Nation*, by Andres Duany and others, and James Howard Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere*.

In this view, sprawl, suburban traffic congestion, neighborhood opposition to development, and a host of social ills ranging from obesity to crime all have their root in the same problem: developers forgot how to create livable and neighborly communities—or were foiled by planners' dictates on traffic and zoning.

Duany et al. even see the developer's social status as a primary victim of the rules. "As long as zoning codes favor low-density development over the creation of compact communities," they note, "developers will not be able to shake their reputation as land rapists, as they turn farm after farm into cookie-cutter sprawl."



COURTESY LCA ARCHITECTS

Above: For a growing demographic, domestic paradise isn't the backyard barbeque but the pleasures of the traditional neighborhood: a front porch, an appealing streetscape, a public park, and coffee from a nearby café.

Opposite: More planned communities are turning to pocket parks, alleys and garage-free streetscapes, walking paths, unique landscape features, and main street retail as basic amenities.

You don't have to accept the idea that conventional suburbs are the source of all evil to agree that their days are numbered. The corrosive effects of low-density suburbanization on traffic, smog, and infrastructure costs are becoming public issues; and politicians are lining up to embrace loosely defined antidotes to sprawl like "Smart Growth." Much of the anti-sprawl energy is going into "leveling the playing field" by clearing legal roadblocks to more compact and pedestrian-friendly development; but regulations, mandates, and incentive programs probably aren't far behind.

What politicians can only hope for, the market might well accomplish anyway. While big lots and semi-rural streets may top preference polls, more sophisticated market analysis is showing that builders are missing huge segments of the homebuying public. Seniors, singles, so-called "cultural creatives," and many nuclear families simply aren't finding what they want in the new home market—in part because of architectural style and size, but also because most new home neighborhoods skimp on public space and don't have the walkability, architectural variety, and demographic diversity they crave.

Bill Warkentin, an architect and planner in Riverside, CA, is astonished that most builders continue to build plus-sized, single-family detached product aimed at nuclear families—a tiny fraction of the market. "We have 80% of our builders who are building for 10% of the homebuying public," he says. "There's a ton of people who just can't express themselves in this market." In his area, innovative, higher-density projects like cottage neighborhoods have quickly sold out.

If density done right can attract a select demographic, density without changing the basic rules on how streets and neighborhoods are designed can often create a muddle. Builders squeeze conventional-style homes on smaller lots, and there's nothing to compensate for the loss of space. While builders have responded to criticism of "cookie-cutter sprawl" with a wider variety of designs, the real problem isn't with the homes, it's with the neighborhoods themselves.

Roads to community

Homebuilders are builders first and prefer to focus on the processes of construction and the fine art of balancing costs and quality. But like it or not, most builders are involved in something far more complex and more important: creating communities. Whether they're buying shovel-ready lots or planning subdivisions, builders exercise considerable influence over the form and quality of neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, you can't create community the way you order siding. You can't buy the feeling of a distinct place, the sense of belonging, or the countless casual conversations, connections, and emotions that make up the life of a community. But neither is "community" just an abstract quality of a city, or a function of good people, steady incomes, and quality schools. There's a growing understanding that good communities don't just happen but are the result of good design.

Community building isn't a new idea. In the 1970s and 1980s, as dissatisfaction with conventional subdivisions first made an impact, early master-planned communities (MPCs) pioneered the creation and marketing of distinct communities with amenities like golf courses, clubhouses, gated entries, vast parklands, architectural themes, and other features to create a sense of exclusivity and foster social life. In many MPCs, vibrant communities have developed, and builders have reaped the benefits of faster sales and higher resales than homes in conventional tracts.

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>
> *—Bill Warkentin, Warkentin Partnership*

But heaping on pricey amenities isn't the only road to community, or even the best one—particularly for the broader market. Over the past decade, community planners have perfected a set of approaches and tools for community design, emphasizing walkability, streetscape design, meaningful open space and community texture. Their approaches have proven their worth in a range of communities that are more memorable, neighborly and livable—and ultimately more valuable in the market.

Many of these ideas are evident in large-scale transportation-oriented developments, mixed-use town centers and main streets. But individual elements like street layout and width, home orientation, the adept use of unique landscape features and well-designed streetscapes and monuments can create an enduring sense of identity and security in any setting. Small parks, neighborhood stores and cafes become meeting places as valued as any country club. Core concepts like walkability and diversity can also apply to relatively small-scale projects.

Many of these techniques derive from the work of New Urbanists, whose traditional neighborhood developments (TNDs) represent a rigorous approach to recreating the compact, pedestrian-oriented community styles that reigned before World War II. (The National Governors Association has recently endorsed TNDs under the name "new community development.") TNDs account for less than 1% of all residential development. Their detractors consider them expensive and architecturally rigid, but New Urbanist ideas have transformed community planning.

As their ideas filter down, some otherwise conventional developments have borrowed a New Urbanist idea or two and marketed themselves as TNDs—raising the question of whether this represents a valid synthesis or a marketing ploy. Either way, it becomes important to distinguish between quality design and superficial theft. The judgment must be made, of course, not on the basis of how many features are adopted but how well they work together, harmonize with the setting, and contribute to an overall sense of community. The design, in other words, is more than a sum of techniques.

The vision thing

Thomas Kopf, a landscape architect with DTJ Design, Boulder, CO, is one of those spreading the gospel of community planning around the concept of placemaking. "Ten years ago this kind of community building was a hard sell," he says. "Developers are really starting to understand the benefits of planning, and it's exciting to watch. It's when they understand that good design is like lumber—they'll make their money back on it."

What counts isn't the number of amenities but their appropriateness; not the fact of mixed product and uses but how they're blended to create "texture."

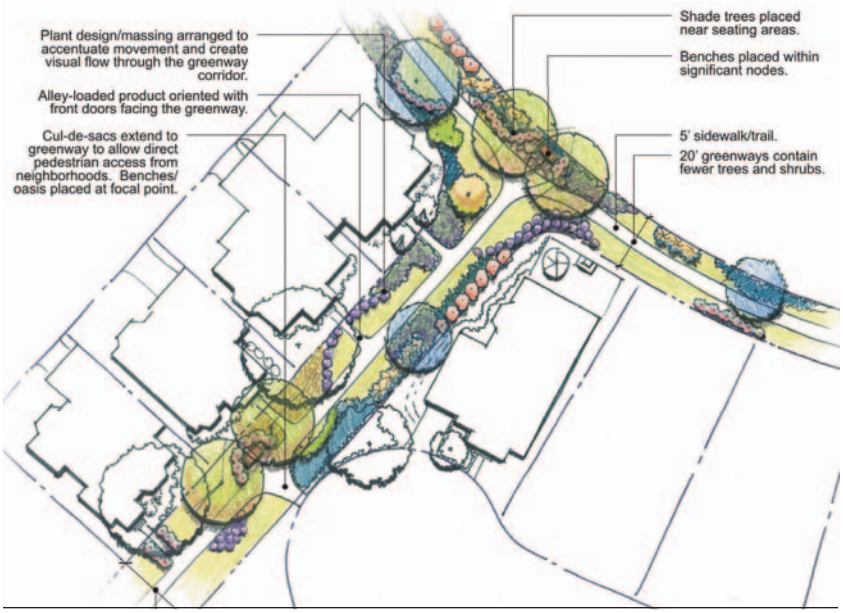
Kopf emphasizes the process of "community visioning" in the planning process, using cues from natural features, regional history, past land use, or the cultural context to create a story for the community that will resonate with buyers. The community story serves as a basis for signage, CC&Rs, and other aspects of the development, and should also carry over into the marketing.

"I preach the power of creating a design concept that goes with the marketing concept," he says. "If you're doing it properly, you'll get a huge marketing benefit." But a cute concept won't cover for mediocre design. "Buyers are pretty astute," says Kopf. "If you're not doing it well, they'll know it."

The developer as community builder

Kopf distinguishes between "subdividers" and "community builders." The first is looking to sell off lots and minimize risk. They develop land with as generic a plan as possible to appeal to a broad range of production builders. Any unnecessary amenity or open space could price the lots out of the market. Community builders, on the other hand, focus first on creating the open space and amenities necessary for a community, and reap the rewards of the added value.

Traditionally, community builders were local luminaries, founding fathers, members of a community. But community planning promises plenty of benefits for profit-driven developers as well: faster approvals, less neighborhood opposition, the advantage of offering different products, rapid sales, better prices, and lower carrying costs.



COURTESY THE PLANNING CENTER

Mixing products creatively calls for unique solutions, such as this "greenway" design from The Planning Center, Costa Mesa, CA.

"Builders think in terms of the product, the smallest amount they can charge for a unit," says Randy Jackson of The Planning Center, Costa Mesa, CA. "They don't think about driving values or minimizing carrying time. But if you get an accelerated sales rate because you've created a community amenity, that's money you can take to the bank." By emphasizing a community identity, location-based premiums, like proximity to open space, can be spread over the whole development.

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SMALL-SCALE STRATEGIES

Large master-planned communities can cluster homes, designate parks and open space, fund community centers and other amenities, and even enclose neighborhood schools—things out of reach for small residential projects. But there are ways to create community value on a small scale.

Jim Heid, president of Urban Green in San Francisco, lists five fundamentals:

1. Identify a clear focus—a small park, landmark, landscape feature—that people can feel a sense of ownership and pride about.
2. Include a mix of product types and price points to attract a variety of people.
3. Create connectivity: a logical street layout creates a sense of place and connection; walled off, single-entry subdivisions make cities into collections of tracts, with no overall sense of community.
4. Get the streets right. "Narrower streets and good landscaping are particularly important in smaller developments to create a sense of scale and intimacy."
5. Walkability should be a core principle. Connect streets or overlay walking trails.

A small park, quickly accessible from surrounding units, can structure a neighborhood with a meaningful and useful amenity.

COURTESY THE PLANNING CENTER

But it takes a broader financial vision to carry it off. Community-oriented development generally requires higher up-front costs than conventional development—for the design work, landscaping, infrastructure. It can require greater patience for the values to unfold, and a willingness to seek out the right buyers and to use the right forms of marketing—including the media that are more likely to profile a worthy project.

> "Look at it this way: if you left out one house for a small park, what does that do not to the premiums of the lots facing it but to the overall premiums for the other 50 lots in the neighborhood?"
>
> *—Randy Jackson, The Planning Center*

Bigger developments of 100 acres or more clearly offer the opportunity to use a broader range of tools. More units mean more clustering to create open space; more support for neighborhood retail, main streets, and other mixed uses; better transportation link-ups; a broader base for community centers and other amenities; and more opportunity for product diversity that can create a full-spectrum community.

But good design can benefit even small projects. "There really isn't a minimum size," says Kopf. "You can create community on a very small scale." Kopf has seen open space amenities pay off handsomely for small projects. For one 22-lot project in Baton Rouge, LA, Kopf alley-loaded and clustered homes around a central park with no loss of density. The community gained a focal point and sense of identity, and the developer earned premiums approaching $40,000 per lot.

Community homebuilding

Master-planned communities vary considerably in what they demand of builders; they can have fairly moderate requirements or telephone book-sized CC&Rs and design review committees. Ones with fewer rules can often lose their way, says architect and planner Art Danielian of Danielian Associates, Irvine. "You need someone in control of builders. You can't let them do what they want, or the community design won't work."

In practical terms, community-oriented design means being ready with a mix of products and styles, understanding alley-loaded and courtyard homes, and knowing how to build on smaller lots. Walkable communities will often insist on "four-sided" architecture—designs that look good from all sides, not just better "curb-appeal" siding and windows in front elevations.

Builders looking at MPCs face wide variations in the market. In Orange County, the epicenter of the movement, builders must be invited to bid, and then on whole neighborhoods within a community; in less established markets like Idaho, planned developers still sell individual lots.

There are dozens of design approaches to bolstering a community's identity and spirit. Here are some of the more important concepts:

1. Designate open space first

Open space isn't so much an amenity as the very backbone of a community. Parks and other landscaped areas serve as gathering places for socializing and recreation. Even an inaccessible landscape feature can become part of a community's identity.

Speculative land developers often extensively grade land to maximize yield and create easily built lots, wrecking the potential value of hillsides, rock outcroppings, and other quirks of the landscape. They can also fail to highlight the value of wetlands and stream corridors as amenities. Creative land plans recognize the value in these features and give careful attention to views, roads, and walkways to maximize their value. Existing buildings such as farmhouses can be designated landmarks in public space, and used to reinforce a community theme based on the area's history.

For open space to add value it must be meaningful, says planning consultant Jim Heid of Urban Green, San Francisco. Some developers simply dedicate leftover or unbuildable areas as open space which ends up being useless fragments in inconvenient places.

Many communities are finding value in smaller "pocket" parks—a picnic table, a small BBQ, a fountain and a small plaza—are particularly important as densities increase and backyards shrink, but they're also an important part of community building. Many master-planned communities market the presence of a park in every neighborhood.

Justifying parks and other open space requires a shift from conventional development wisdom in which premiums for adjacent lots offset the land cost. "Look at it this way: if you left out one house for a small park, what does that do—not to the premiums of the lots facing it—but to

the overall premiums for the other 50 lots in the neighborhood?" asks Jackson. "Now you're dividing the loss of that land by 50 units not the four units that face it. There's good data available showing that parks bring that value back into the community at large. It's not thinking about premium per household but how that drives the value of your community."

2. Take back the street

Probably the most dramatic improvement can come from taking back the streets from the traffic and civil engineers, who design them for the benefit of cars. "Streets should be thought of as a public amenity, not infrastructure," says Heid.

Traffic engineers long insisted on wide streets for safety reasons, but narrowing streets has in fact been shown to make them safer by slowing drivers down. They also provide a more intimate feeling to neighborhoods. Studies have also addressed the psychological feeling of enclosure that comes from scaled-down streets with height-to-width ratios of about 1:6.

Street widths can be a touchy subject with fire departments, which often require 36-foot-wide local access streets to accommodate their biggest trucks, parking, and traffic. Generally, traffic engineers have come around on widths, says Jackson, but fire departments often dig in. In Amerige Heights, a traditional neighborhood infill project in Fullerton, CA, the fire department endorsed narrow streets, but a few years later new leadership changed its policies.

If streets can't be narrowed, a wealth of alternative traffic-calming measures, such as knuckles and constrictions, have been developed that also slow traffic, as do smaller curb radii.

Landscaping, center trees or planter strips, wide sidewalks, patterned paving (such as bricked crosswalks), and distinctively designed signs, walls, and monuments can also give a street an identity, and create an inviting place for walking and chance meetings between neighbors.

COURTESY LCA ARCHITECTS

Main street-style mix-use retail areas are the new amenity of choice for young urbanites and retiring baby boomers—and a lot of people in between.

More frequent and shorter street lamps lend more intimacy than the standard tall, widely-spaced street lights.

3. Reconnect neighborhoods

Conventional suburbs use a hierarchical street system of arterial, connector, and local-access roads and cul-de-sacs. The latter are often disorienting mazes of curving streets with little rhyme or reason or sense of place. Since local access streets are disconnected and arterials are hostile environments, the scheme increases dependence on cars and makes walking trips to schools or local errands difficult.

> "Streets should be thought of as a public amenity, not infrastructure."
>
> *—Jim Heid, Urban Green*

An interconnected network of streets, on the other hand, shortens distances, spreads out traffic by giving

SUBDIVISION OR COMMUNITY? CREATING VALUE BY PLACEMAKING

SUBDIVISION CONVENTIONAL WISDOM	COMMUNITY CONVENTIONAL WISDOM
Streets are engineered infrastructure for cars and emergency vehicles; wider is better	Streets are a shared public amenity for driving, walking, playing, meeting neighbors; narrower widths slow traffic
Single price-point product protects lot values	Diverse products ensure the diverse demographics necessary for communities
Single architectural style creates cohesive sense of place	Diverse architectural styles create sense of organic growth and visual interest; leave 'theming' to public features
Garages in front efficiently uses land; buyers prefer homes oriented to decks and yards in the rear	Deemphasize or alley-load garages and bring homes closer to sidewalks, making streets safer ("eyes on the street"), more neighborly
Maximize cul-de-sacs because "everyone wants to live on a dead-end street"	Dead-end streets, especially without pedestrian connections, disconnect neighborhoods and increase reliance on cars
Minimize entry points to traffic grid; discourage non-resident traffic with mazelike, serpentine layouts	Grid connections reduce travel times, logical grids with established viewpoints create sense of place
Maximize lots; open space is for leftover, undevelopable areas	Open space is backbone of community; should be central to neighborhood design
Use pocket parks if premiums for adjacent lots can justify land cost	Pocket parks create value for entire community
Low density preserves value of individual lots	High density or clustering maximizes value of community
Segregated uses	Mixed use
Flatten landscape to lower building costs and maximize developable land	Use quirks of landscape to create value

alternatives to arterials, and connects neighborhoods more directly. They needn't be rigid grids, and features like terminated vistas can create visual interest and enclosure.

Dead-end streets, of course, are a strong consumer preference for diminishing traffic; when used, plans should designate walking paths to create pedestrian connections.

4. De-emphasize garages

Alley-loading is where a lot of builders get off the traditional neighborhood train, since the practice cuts into backyard size, nearly doubles street costs, and might strike some buyers as old fashioned and inconvenient. But its benefits are huge. With homes no longer hunkered down behind garages, streets become more beautiful places. More "eyes on the street" make sidewalks friendlier and safer from crime.

But good community plans will often recognize the limited appeal of alleys, and allow for houses with side or even frontal garages—as long as they don't dominate the streetscape. "There are 13 places to put a garage on a lot," says Jackson.

5. Diversify product

Single-lot-size zoning still dominates many jurisdictions, and many real estate agents still believe any size variation will drop values for the larger ones. This orthodoxy is rapidly changing, and many developers turn to planned unit developments just to mix product.

"Diversity gives a community texture," says Heid. Some markets will tolerate a product mix on the same street, but not all.

6. Create an entry

Impressive entryway monuments can be memorable, but more subtle approaches can work too, such as a massing of trees at the entry of projects.

On a redevelopment project with a skimpy budget, Jackson arranged payment for the first few homes to landscape and irrigate their front yards. "That changed the pattern of the neighborhood, and had a ripple effect," he says. "As soon as that went in, everyone said, 'Now *this* is a neighborhood.' It created an artificial gateway."

He's also used a paving strip that creates wheel chatter at an entry point. "After driving on the freeway for 30 minutes, you cross that chatter, your mind adjusts to 'well, now I'm home, I'm safe.' Anything you can do to change the status quo patterns helps create a sense of place."

7. Don't forget "soft" programming

Developers committed to their communities usually engage in a certain amount of social directing before turning the job over to an HOA. Community parties, concerts, parades, monthly movie nights, and other events not only foster sociability and strengthen identity, they can also pay off handsomely. Kopf has a client who throws parties for his community every few months, and asks everyone to invite all their friends as well. "That way the current owners are bringing in the new buyers," he says.

Many MPCs have set up intranets for residents, creating a virtual version of the local community for events postings and discussions. Don Whyte of Newland Communities noted at an IBS seminar last January that "community intranets are as much an amenity as parks and playgrounds."

In a more traditional vein, some communities require mail pick-up at a central post office. "People have to run into each other, so it brings down those barriers we all have," says Jackson, who experienced the practice at Arvida's Coto de Caza in Orange County.

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Alternative pavement treatments, planter strips, trees, short setbacks, and other features help create walkable, safe, and distinctive streetscapes.

More frequent and shorter street lamps lend more intimacy than the standard tall, widely spaced street lights.

Community prospects

In his 34th year in the profession, Jackson says this is the most exciting time for planning.

"There's still a lot of work to do" on community development, says Jackson. "Architects are rethinking how people can use smaller spaces. Cities are thinking about how people relate to one another. Communities are concerned about who and what they are. And with the consolidation of builders, even developers are concerned about their reputation, and want to make sure they leave a legacy behind."

"It's all coming together at the same time."

BUILDING THE CASE FOR COMPACT COMMUNITIES

A 1999 survey by market research firm AmericanLIVES, respondents preferred a traditional town setting (smaller lots, narrower streets, houses closer together) to a typical suburban setting (large lots, houses pulled back from the street, and large yards) by 73% to 33%. Other surveys have put serious buyer interest in compact "New Urbanist" neighborhoods at 30%.

Research by Feinberg & Associates on Baby Boomer community preferences, discussed at last April's NAHB Seniors Housing Symposium, found that most of these 30 million Americans are looking to move to mixed-use, diverse, and walkable neighborhoods, preferably with "main street"-type areas—and not segregated "active adult" communities with golf courses.

Studies show that the 50 million so-called "cultural creatives" buy almost exclusively older homes in established neighborhoods, in part because they value architecture over size, but also because they enjoy the narrow streets and public spaces absent from subdivisions.