

## Designing Quality Public Spaces

by Peter Skosey and Heather Campbell

Community design matters. Homes located near parks and other open space have consistently higher real estate values than homes without open space nearby. Consumers are willing to pay more for goods sold in well-landscaped retail areas. Residents of older communities with sidewalks, neighborhood retail and interconnected streets walk more. And public spaces designed to maximize public use deter crime.

More and more communities recognize the benefits quality design can bring to their public spaces. This issue of *ideas@work* focuses on planning and zoning techniques that foster vibrant, livable communities. Examples from communities around the United States illustrate how new twists on old zoning techniques can be employed to incorporate design principles into local regulations.

### Benefits of Quality Design

**Z**oning and other planning policies can be used by municipalities to create high quality streets, parks and public spaces. Well-designed public spaces can serve community needs for open space, enhance local quality of life, establish community identity, protect environmental quality and increase the value of adjacent buildings. Established cities and suburbs especially benefit from carefully designed

public spaces, since opportunities for creating new public spaces are rare. A well-designed street or walkway invites people in, providing “eyes on the street” and improving public safety — while simultaneously enhancing the appeal of walking, cycling and transit as transportation modes.

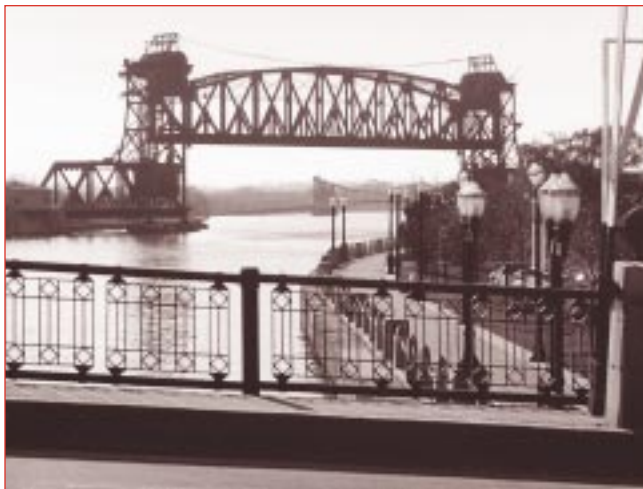


PHOTO COURTESY OF WWW.CITYOFJOLIET.COM

In Joliet, Ill., a riverwalk provides recreational space within a dense downtown.

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Although streets and parks might seem to be two very different kinds of public spaces, both serve the community. Parks and greenways are important routes for pedestrians and cyclists. Passive recreation uses, like strolling, are well suited to streets. Parkways and boulevards don't just move automobile traffic. Their benches and wide lawns serve as open space for adjacent neighborhoods. An especially well-designed street — like “home zones” in the Netherlands and other European cities — can be safe enough for children's play. Home zones are select neighborhood streets designed first for pedestrian use and social interaction.<sup>1</sup> Cars are legally allowed on the street, but theirs is not the intended use.

Parks and open space also increase the value of adjacent properties. Frederick Law Olmsted proved this “proximate principle” in the late 19th century, convincing the City of New York that public investment in park space would pay for itself many times over in the form of higher real estate taxes.<sup>2</sup> Today, real estate developers employ the proximate principle when they design clustered housing or conservation subdivisions. Mill Creek, a conservation development in Kane County, Ill., illustrates that

there is a strong market for open space and community-friendly design. Kane County government worked closely with the developer to ensure that 40 percent of the project remained as open space. As a result, the development includes 70 acres of parkland, dotting the community with tot lots and neighborhood parks. The County did not establish a lot-size-to-house ratio to allow maximum flexibility in design. This allows houses to be clustered closer together than in traditional suburban developments, maximizing common open space and allowing residents views of open spaces throughout the development. Sales have been strong, with houses priced from \$200,000 to \$800,000.<sup>3</sup>

Designers of public spaces should also remember that, at some point, every user of the space is a pedestrian. As such, planning should focus on the pedestrian experience. Pedestrians enjoy walking in environments that feel safe and inviting and offer visual interest.

*Beacon Street in Brookline, Mass. moves trains, cars, pedestrians, and cyclists; provides sitting and strolling space for residents and shop patrons; and connects open spaces like a neighborhood park and a farmer's market.*



PHOTO BY JEAN STRINGHAM

## Chicago

### Standards for Townhouses, Strip Shopping Centers, Parking Garages and Streetscaping

Over the past few years, new construction in Chicago has pursued forms and uses never addressed in the existing 1957 zoning ordinance. In order to guide development of these uses, notably residential townhouses, strip shopping centers and parking garages, the City introduced design standards into its zoning ordinance. For townhouses, design standards stipulate that garages face alleys. Front doors — not blank walls — face the primary street, and setbacks respect the block's existing character.

The City also requires site plan review for uses that may negatively affect the pedestrian experience, such as strip shopping centers and parking garages. Developers who propose these must follow certain design standards regarding curb cuts, sidewalk landscaping, shop windows (not blank walls) fronting the sidewalk and pedestrian access to retail. The City's planning department reviews proposed site plans, and certifies zoning compliance within a month. These design-oriented standards are being used as a model as the City comprehensively overhauls its zoning ordinance in 2003.

On another front, the City of Chicago has revamped more than 100 neighborhood "main streets" under its streetscaping program. These streetscapes typically provide new sidewalks, street furniture, parking reconfiguration, traffic calming devices, landscaping, new signage and artistic gateways that highlight a neighborhood's heritage. The distinctive streetscapes have catalyzed new investment: retail occupancy rates along a section of Division Street, known as "Paseo Boricua" for the concentration of Puerto Rican residents in the surrounding area, went from 20 percent to 80 percent following a redesign centered on bold new gateways modeled after the Puerto Rican flag.

## Cornelius, North Carolina

### Open Space Zoning Designations

Cornelius, N.C., near Charlotte, was one of the first towns in the United States to revise its zoning following a Traditional Neighborhood Development model. The chapter on open space in Cornelius' zoning code not only defines and designates open space, thus protecting it from development, but also includes an Open Space Types section. By delineating different types of open space and setting standards for each, Cornelius ensures that open space is actually usable space. The typology also ensures that open spaces take forms familiar to residents and compatible with the town's needs and physical plan. Types include playgrounds, squares, plazas, greens, greenways and greenbelts.

Cornelius, like many communities, also requires residential developers to dedicate a certain proportion of their development as either privately or publicly owned open space. The amount of land to be dedicated (or the payment in lieu of dedication) varies based on the number of bedrooms in the development. Dedicated open spaces are also required to follow certain guidelines for usability, in addition to classification under the town's open space typology.

# Principles for Quality Public Spaces

## Focus activity in and around public spaces

Human beings are social creatures, and nothing attracts people like other people. “People-friendly” common spaces welcome the public through designs that encourage pedestrians to walk through or linger in a place. Pedestrians like spaces with some visual interest, whether human activities or natural areas. According to a national study conducted by the University of Washington, consumers surveyed in cities like Austin, Texas; Los Angeles; Chicago; and Pittsburgh priced the same basket of goods an average of 12 percent higher in quality designed retail districts with trees and landscaping. Survey participants also gave 30 percent higher “quality of product” ratings in districts having trees over those with sidewalks only.<sup>4</sup>

## Respect Your Neighbors

New buildings, especially in infill areas, should respect the context set by neighboring structures. Visual consistency should be balanced with variety and innovation. This goes beyond providing sketches of a planned building’s height, structure and placement on a lot. Builders should also

illustrate how a new building fits in with the existing neighborhood fabric. New public spaces, and the buildings surrounding them, should enhance one another and fit seamlessly into a greater whole. Buildings and shade trees should frame public spaces.

In established communities, regard for neighborhood context is especially important. Builders should respect the area’s social traditions so that project designs both reflect and enhance the character of the community they serve. Extensive public participation in the early stages of the design process will help developers and architects learn about the physical and community context — and create structures that better fit the neighborhood.

## Minimize Conflicts Between Active and Passive Uses

Park planners distinguish between “active” and “passive” uses of parks; the same distinction holds for other public spaces as well. Noisy, social activities like ball games or restaurants don’t belong next to areas for nature walks. Active uses should be clustered near transportation connections and

## Case Study

### Denver

#### Mixed-use Zoning Districts, Streetscape Design Manual and Golden Triangle Design Guidelines

With the publication of its Streetscape Design Manual in 1993, Denver’s Community Development and Planning Agency has committed itself to promoting good urban design in Denver. In addition to the Design Manual, which sets forth guidelines for how streets should be landscaped and fronted with buildings, the City has established design review procedures for several zoning districts.

The Golden Triangle near Denver’s civic center is one such district. A one-page set of design guidelines apply to new building façades below an 80-foot cornice line, calling on builders to respect human scale, spatially define the street, create strong urban character and respect landmarks within the district. Applicants meet with Denver’s deputy director for urban design and submit a proposal, which is reviewed within a month. Approvals are valid for three years.

Similarly, as part of a plan to remake the 4,700-acre former site of Stapleton Airport into a series of new neighborhoods, Denver created four new mixed-use zoning districts. The districts provide a review period during which new projects are evaluated against the same general design principles set forth in the Streetscape Design Manual. The design review procedure is intended to assuage residents’ worries over inappropriate commercial development within their neighborhoods.



*On-street parking and a line of street trees provide a buffer zone for pedestrians on Green Street in Chicago.*



*Broadway Avenue in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood invites pedestrians to stroll, with its wide sidewalks, tree-lined parkway and a variety of activities from outdoor cafes to sidewalk shopping.*

small retail shops, which tend to succeed when located close to places that attract people. Mediate conflicts between active and passive uses with landscaping or structural elements. On a street, parked cars and plantings can protect pedestrians from traffic.

### **Keep Scale in Mind**

Designs that work for highways are not appropriate for local streets, and designs that work for large regional parks do not work in neighborhood parks. Places designed with attention to “human scale” appeal to pedestrians, both because of shorter, more convenient distances between buildings, and the perception that large spaces — like parking lots and wide roadways — are broken up. Large, undifferentiated open spaces can feel intimidating, empty and unsafe when crowds are absent, whereas more intimate spaces can feel safe and active with only a few people.

### **Hide the Dirty Work**

Garbage pick-up and parking garage entries are not primary uses, so why place them in plain view? Service drives should be on the side or rear of buildings. Shared green spaces should not be restricted to leftover areas (like floodplains) after developments have been platted; public spaces should be the first asset sketched on a site design and should be the focal point of any new development.

### **Create Connections**

Never miss an opportunity to make a walk shorter, or to create new green spaces. Paths should be

direct, whether between major attractions downtown or between homes and shops in a neighborhood. People are more likely to walk or ride a bicycle (for instance, to a transit stop) if the destination is within walking distance, 1/4 to 1/2 mile.

Building connections can also build a healthier community. Neighborhoods with older homes, sidewalks, interconnected streets and a mix of business and residential uses encourage residents to walk a mile or more at least 20 times every month.<sup>5</sup> Data shows that the overall number of trips people take on foot per year has dropped by 42 percent in the past 20 years.<sup>6</sup> This decline has been linked to neighborhood design that makes walking inconvenient or unsafe. Metro areas where people walk less also tend to have higher concentrations of overweight people. For every 10 percent decrease in the amount of walking in an area, there is almost a one percent increase in the number of people who are overweight.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. Center for Disease Control, recognizing the link between urban design and declining levels of physical activity, launched an initiative in 2000 to encourage the development of pedestrian- and bike-friendly environments.<sup>8</sup>

Small-block grids are one way of creating pedestrian-friendly environments; they also add visual interest and disperse traffic. Where it is not feasible to create small-block grids, mid-block walkways — provided they are designed for safety — can shorten walking distances considerably. Mid-block connections in Wheaton, Ill.'s downtown retail district provide both high quality design and convenient, short trips between long blocks. In addition to serving as a



PHOTOS BY GORDON CAMPBELL

*These two mid-block connections in Wheaton, Ill. shorten pedestrian and vehicle trips through a popular retail district.*

short cut, the mid-block connection affords cars easy access to a municipal garage in the middle of the alley. The sidewalk and landscaping in front of the garage also provide a comfortable atmosphere for pedestrian use. A second brick walkway allows pedestrians access to the main shopping area and attractive side entrances to a restaurant's outdoor eating area.

Neighborhood planners should also connect important sites. Whenever possible, streets and walks in new developments should tie into older

developments, neighborhood focal points should be reinforced and barriers between areas should be removed.

### **Put Safety First**

There is no substitute for human surveillance in keeping public spaces safe from crime. Adequate, human-scaled lighting and easy accessibility from well-traveled areas boost the ability of neighbors to informally keep an eye on public space.

## **DESIGNING SAFETY INTO PUBLIC SPACES**

The Red Hook public housing development in South Brooklyn, N.Y. once served as a convenient location for drug activity. The barren asphalt surrounding the development allowed drive-up drug deals, and provided numerous escape routes through the development, making it difficult for police to control crime. Benches around the perimeter allowed criminal activity near the street, forcing residents to walk through it to reach their homes. Lighting located high on the façades of buildings left public spaces dark and foreboding to residents, and provided a secluded location for drug transactions.

In 1996, the New York City Housing Authority commissioned landscape architects to redesign Red Hook's public space. With extensive input from residents, it was redefined to provide tenants with a sense of ownership. Fencing was installed along the perimeter of the development, restricting access to the project and forcing pedestrian traffic onto the sidewalks. Architects

relocated benches from near the street to the front of the buildings to increase resident use in the space. They also used landscaping and barriers to prevent vehicles from driving onto the property, and turned a new playground inward to provide access from the building, rather than the street. Pedestrian-level lighting on poles supplemented lighting high up on buildings. Asphalt was replaced with textured pavement to provide visual interest. Finally, landscape architects added trees, lawns and greenery to bring natural features onto the property. Now, where there were once deserted sidewalks, residents carry groceries, push strollers and let their children play on the playground. They cross through the space rather than take a longer route around, another indicator of perceived safety. The redesign allowed residents control over the common area, which increased resident use of the space and forced drug traffic elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

# Implementation Tools

## Zoning

Since 1916, zoning has been the standard tool by which American municipalities regulate land use. Conventional zoning ordinances regulate building use, height, bulk and setbacks, but many communities now also use design standards in their zoning ordinances to accomplish far more.

## Design Standards

Design standards, sometimes referred to as design review criteria, can be incorporated in a zoning ordinance to address community character and aesthetics. A design review board reviews proposals against design criteria specified in the ordinance before approving a development. Standards may stipulate building elements, like height or front door orientation, or overall context, such as how the building reinforces community character or contributes to surrounding property values.

## Design Guidelines

Many municipalities have design guidelines in addition to design review standards. These are handbooks advising developers on recommended

architectural practices and development standards within an area. Guidelines may be made mandatory in historic districts or environmental conservation areas. Pattern books provide design guidelines commonly used in historic master-planned developments.

## Streetscaping

Public or private funds can be used for façade renovation programs, street furniture purchases and maintenance, street reconfiguration and other improvements to the pedestrian environment. Some state departments of transportation are using context-sensitive design principles to design streetscapes and other public work projects that consider not just the users of the project (i.e., drivers), but neighboring communities as well. Context-sensitive projects balance safety and mobility with community aesthetic and environmental goals. Context-sensitive design involves community residents and incorporates community values in the street design prior to the build phase.

## Atlanta

### Quality of Life Zoning Initiative

Community plans for areas like Midtown in Atlanta call for compact, pedestrian-friendly development, and high quality streetscapes. Developers in Atlanta are eager to take on such projects, but the City's zoning ordinance made it almost impossible.

Planning officials responded to this problem by identifying several urban building types that were not allowed under the existing ordinance — notably street-oriented low- and mid-rise residential mixed-use and live-work buildings — and crafting new zoning categories to permit these building types. The result: four zoning districts with relatively flexible bulk, use and setback standards to replace the previous, more rigid 12 zoning districts. They also provided a common set of streetscape principles, requiring elements such as sidewalks, street trees, street-facing entries and windows, a minimum street façade height, rear service areas, consolidated driveways, landscaping and bicycle parking.<sup>10</sup>

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## Resources

Chicago, Illinois. Zoning Ordinance. Townhouse Standards.  
<http://www.ci.chi.il.us/Zoning/ordinance/default.html>

Strip Center Standards, Parking Garage Standards, Site Plan Review.  
[http://w5.ci.chi.il.us./Zoning/ordinance/link11\\_11A.html](http://w5.ci.chi.il.us./Zoning/ordinance/link11_11A.html)

Cornelius, North Carolina. Land Development Code. Open space zoning designations.  
<http://other.cornelius.org/planning/> (see "Chapter 8. Open Space.")

Denver, Colorado. Stapleton Airport Redevelopment Plan.  
[http://www.denvergov.org/jump\\_plans.asp](http://www.denvergov.org/jump_plans.asp)

Project for Public Spaces, "Eleven Principles for Transforming Public Spaces Into Great Community Places."  
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Compares streets around the world and examines design elements that make them successful.

## Endnotes

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## CAMPAIGN FOR SENSIBLE GROWTH

The Campaign for Sensible Growth is an action-oriented coalition of government, civic and business leaders in northeastern Illinois' six counties working to promote economic development while preserving open space, minimizing the need for costly new infrastructure and improving the livability of our communities.

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