

Build a Better Burb

HOW TO MANUAL



CREATING A SENSE OF PLACE

A Common Vision

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A COMMON VISION: ADOPTING A GENERAL PLAN AND SUPPORTING CODES

First impressions are powerful, lasting and often revealing. What do visitors take photos of when they visit a community, and what do they tweet enthusiastically about? In combination, the things that capture their interest give a community its unique identity – in other words, its “sense of place.”

In 1937, Gertrude Stein famously wrote, “There is no there there,” a quotation which is now used to describe sprawling places that lack vibrancy, pedestrian life, and a sense of place and history. In contrast, there is definitely a there in communities with a sense of place.



Credit: WRCCG

Whether tourism is part of the local economy or not, communities should carefully cultivate a sense of place in their downtown, because having a “there” in the downtown is particularly critical to overall appeal and livability – and downtown is often the place that most defines a community. Strong community character and sense of place, especially in downtown areas, correlate with the robust social ties that make places successful over time. People gravitate to and tend to remain in livable places, and this enhances economic sustainability. It is easier to attract jobs and build commerce in places with a high quality of life and strong sense of place and community.

Often the reason a community has no discernible identity is that it has been allowed to grow higgeldy-piggeldy – new next to old, tall next to short, modern next to traditional – without consideration of how the context will be affected by new additions. Places that possess a strong, positive sense of place are that way for a reason: citizens have a common vision of how they want their community to be, and they work to maintain it. In these communities, carefully crafted comprehensive plans, zoning codes, and architectural design standards ensure that new development will fit in and make a positive contribution to the sense of place.

CUSTOM CRAFTED: TAILORING PLANS, CODES AND DESIGN GUIDELINES TO YOUR COMMUNITY

Communities with an appealing sense of place typically exude a style all their own that reflects their history, economy and attitude. In these communities, careful planning has helped to preserve, highlight and augment important features such as civic buildings, central parks or town squares, architecturally or historically important buildings, heritage trees and scenic vistas. This is not something that happens naturally or overnight. In the model communities highlighted here – Boulder, CO, Clarendon in Arlington County, VA, and Santa Barbara, CA – each city’s distinctive style is the result of general plans, zoning ordinances and design standards and guidelines. In turn, these documents are the product of numerous community meetings held to determine how best to project and protect the community’s unique style. Face-to-face workshops and meetings were essential in these community dialogues, but in the 21st Century, traditional methods are increasingly augmented by on-line surveys and even design wikis or monitored community web pages where citizens can post and comment on ideas.



Credit: Southern California Council of Governments

While a general plan lays out the vision in each of our model communities, subdivision and zoning codes were necessary to bring that that vision to life. They include measures to facilitate infill development and adaptive reuse, which help ensure that the urban fabric remains strong, without vacant lots and dilapidated buildings that detract from it. And they are routinely updated to meet today’s needs while ensuring that new development is of the type the community desires. Architectural policies in each of these places give the community a distinctive and unified feel, and require new development to be consistent with the overall vision for the specific setting.

WHAT THE MODEL COMMUNITIES HAVE IN COMMON

- ✓ A pattern of development that creates a place in which people – especially pedestrians – feel at home and safe
- ✓ Respect for the history of the place and its physical setting
- ✓ A recognizable center of community life where people gather and meet at shops, restaurants, and theaters, with government offices also located within this center
- ✓ Public spaces that welcome everyday users but also provide a venue for community events and celebrations
- ✓ Pedestrian-scaled streets with attractive and interesting amenities
- ✓ A diversity of buildings and land uses that serve the needs of all segments of the community's population
- ✓ Buildings of complementary architectural design that do not detract from each other or from key landmarks and important views
- ✓ Buildings that address the street rather than parking lots
- ✓ Coherent and complementary signage that reduces visual clutter and helps people find their way

CULTIVATING A SENSE OF PLACE

HISTORY SETS A PLACE APART

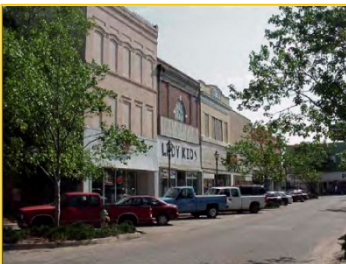
“Important views should be framed by architecture and important architecture should be provided with an enhanced setting.”

Images and quote from the Florence, South Carolina, Design Guidelines



Every place has a unique history. Long or brief, history chronicles how the place came to be and actively influences its character. Honored and showcased, history connects people to their forebears. But successful communities realize that history is still being written. They make sure that new development will make a positive and lasting addition to the continuing story they want the built environment to tell about the character of their community.

The ways in which communities honor their history and build upon it vary widely. In some communities, it may involve preserving whole historic districts intact. In others where few of the original buildings still stand, it may entail preserving those remaining structures and filling in the gaps with new buildings that replicate or echo the original architecture. In others it may be continuing the original function of the place – as a governmental, cultural or commercial center – with less emphasis on recreating past patterns than on showcasing significant buildings or functions within a vibrant, modern and evolving context.



“Although the historic downtown retail district is in need of renovation, careful inspection reveals a wealth of distinguished architecture and local history worthy of preservation.”

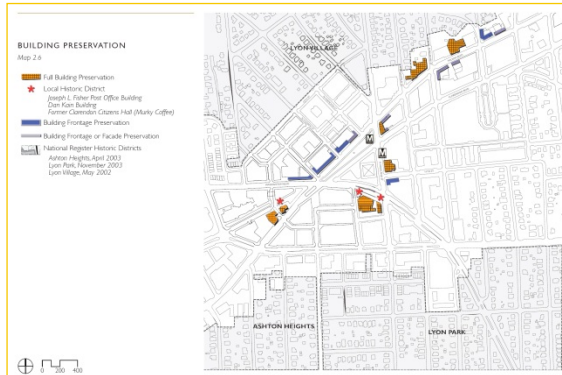
Preserving history is not without challenges. For all their beauty and cultural significance, historic buildings commonly suffer from economic obsolescence. Simply stated, they no longer meet the demands of the modern marketplace even though they are structurally sound: their rooms are the wrong size; their ventilation, heating and air conditioning systems don't meet today's efficiency standards; their stairways are too steep or narrow to meet safety requirements; and there is no handicapped access. And in many places, even if the structural issues can be resolved, historic buildings may be on smaller lots that cannot accommodate the parking or on-site storm water drainage facilities required by zoning codes. So it is not enough to simply designate buildings as historic or cultural landmarks, or to prohibit their demolition. Communities that value their heritage properties have adopted adaptive reuse ordinances and have established grants and low-cost loan programs to facilitate the repurposing of older structures.

Read more about Adaptive Reuse in How to Manual: Housing Reinvented

Source: <http://www.cityofflorence.com/misc/florence-downtown-design-guidelines.html>

AS APPLIED IN MODEL COMMUNITIES

Clarendon, Arlington, VA



Historic Building Preservation Map, Clarendon



Building frontage designated for preservation
 Credit: Arlington County Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development, Planning Division

When general plans were being developed for the five communities along the Rosslyn-Ballston commuter rail line in Arlington County, VA, in the Washington, D.C. suburbs, each community opted to retain its traditional function, but also to go boldly into the future as it honored the past.

Set among graceful suburban neighborhoods, Clarendon was Arlington County's first downtown. Over the course of several general plan updates, Clarendon's role as an urban village has been refined and updated. But even as the area has undergone extensive new development, effort has been taken to preserve the historic structures that played iconic roles in Clarendon's development. These buildings and building facades are designated for preservation by the Clarendon Sector Plan, and the Historic Affairs and Landmark Review Board must approve any proposed exterior changes. New buildings in Clarendon must be

compatible with adjacent properties and cannot detract from the ambience of the street as whole, but there is no restriction on the style of architecture.

Source: http://www.arlingtonva.us/Departments/CPHD/Documents/8235Clarendon%20Sector%20Plan_3%20Chap%201-2.pdf

Boulder, CO

For the citizens of Boulder, preserving the City’s historic structures is a key element in their plan for the downtown area because these buildings represent the pioneering spirit that led to Boulder’s founding and is still strongly associated with its character. But apart from projecting a frontier image, protecting the traditional buildings is considered essential to keeping Boulder’s individuality and livability intact.

Boulder has established three commissions to review development in the downtown, historic districts, and interface areas where commercial and residential areas meet: the Downtown Design Advisory Board, the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board, and the Downtown Management Commission. The Downtown Historic District has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1980.

Any new construction within historic districts must be approved by the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board, as must renovation or modification of landmarked structures regardless of location. Within downtown areas not included in the Downtown Historic District, projects must pass muster with the Downtown Design Advisory Board if their value exceeds \$10,000. While new buildings are not required to strictly mimic the style of historic buildings, they must be compatible with them and complement Boulder’s ambiance. Boulder’s Downtown Urban Design Guidelines illustrate the features and proportions that are preferred by the advisory boards. Design guidelines provide clarity to developers and property owners regarding the aesthetic desired by the community.

Boulder then and now



Downtown Boulder c. 1925
Credit: City of Boulder, CO



Historic Buildings, Pearl Street Mall,
Boulder c. 2010
Credit: Amy Ashcraft under
Creative Commons license

Santa Barbara, CA

Santa Barbara honors its Spanish Colonial heritage both by preserving buildings that date from that era (demolition of historic adobe structures is forbidden by law) and by imposing strict architectural standards on new construction in landmark districts. The City's first landmark district, El Pueblo Viejo (Old Town), was established in 1959. The following year, the Historic Landmark Commission (HLC) was established and given authority to approve any new projects within the landmark districts. The HLC's work over the last 50-plus years has resulted in a City that retains the beauty and grace of an old Spanish town, but which meets the modern needs of its residents and visitors.



Santa Barbara Mission (c.1786)
Photo credits: City of Santa Barbara



Santa Barbara City Hall (c.1923)

Source: http://www.santabarbaraca.gov/NR/rdonlyres/16A17719-04F0-4FE6-B5EA-E44D43D72A81/0/EPV_Guidelines.pdf

DESIGN SETS THE TONE

Urban design is multi-faceted. It is simultaneously concerned with how the street network is laid out; what uses are allowed along the streets; where buildings, open space and parking are placed relative to the street; how large and tall buildings may be; and how the resulting public space is furnished with landscaping, benches, and signage.

Read more about design and parking standards by reading **How to Manual: Housing Reinvented** and more on lowering parking requirements by reading **How to Manual: Better Transit/Less Parking**.

Urban design is also necessarily concerned with architecture because the design of buildings influences how the public realm of streets, sidewalks, plazas and parks look, feel, and will be used. This has led many communities to adopt strict architectural design standards for their downtowns, as well as historic neighborhoods, entertainment and tourist districts.



The French Quarter, New Orleans
Credit: US EPA Smart Growth

With the current emphasis on livability, an increasing number of communities are replacing their use-based zoning codes with form-based codes (read more on form-based codes, located in the Glossary of **How to Manual: Housing Reinvented**). These are often augmented by architectural design standards, which are generally adopted as an “overlay,” meaning they apply to specifically designated areas and the underlying zoning remains in place. Some places dictate a particular architectural style; others allow a great deal of latitude as long as designs are context-sensitive (i.e., they do not detract from surrounding structures or natural features).

AS APPLIED IN MODEL COMMUNITIES

Clarendon, Arlington, VA

The Urban Design Guidelines of the Clarendon Sector Plan do not dictate any particular architectural style – Clarendon has an eclectic mix – but they do give explicit guidance regarding architectural elements. The following elements are intended to contribute to a pedestrian-oriented ambiance:

- Storefronts (windows) of corner buildings must wrap around the corner
- Doorways must be recessed
- Awnings must be proportional to the entry or window they overhang
- Signage must be attractive
- Windows and doorways must provide a degree of ground-floor transparency appropriate to the street type on which the building is located
- Spacing between entrances must establish an attractive and balanced rhythm

Design standards are also established for loading zones, parking structure entrances, and other service areas.



Application of the Urban Design Guidelines has resulted in an engaging, walkable downtown that is traditional with a modern twist. Though there are high-rise buildings, at street level a comfortable human scale is maintained.

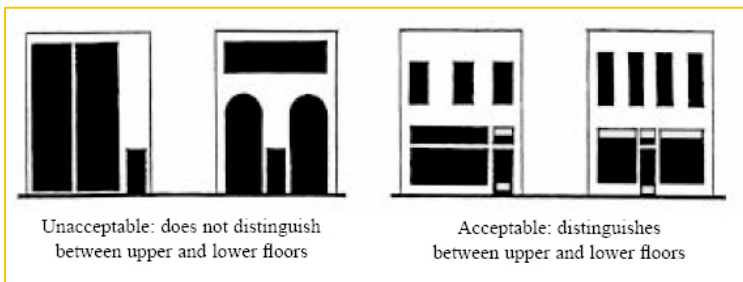
Market Common, Clarendon
Credit: Arlington County Department
of Community Planning, Housing and
Development, Planning Division

Boulder, CO

While design standards for downtown Boulder do not strictly require new buildings to be built in a traditional frontier style, they do encourage the use of traditional elements so that Boulder’s Rocky Mountain Front Range look and feel are maintained.

The Boulder Downtown Urban Design Guidelines clearly illustrate preferred general design principles, but refrain from calling out specific details. New construction must be designed so that it does not detract from neighboring buildings. New buildings cannot overshadow older structures; upper stories must be stepped back to minimize their presence. Elements such as doorways, windows, display window kickplates (i.e., protective, decorative panels at shoe level beneath the windows), awnings, parapet caps, and cornices should align to make the block face aesthetically pleasing.

Renovation or redevelopment of historic properties is more strictly regulated. Redevelopment must preserve the architecture of the original structure, but additions must be “subtly distinguishable” from and architecturally compatible with the original. Additions must maintain the building’s original scale, with any added stories set back to minimize their appearance. The color and texture of materials must coordinate with those of the original structure.



Design must be pedestrian-oriented and distinguish between upper and lower floors



Traditional design in new construction



Traditional kickplates below display windows

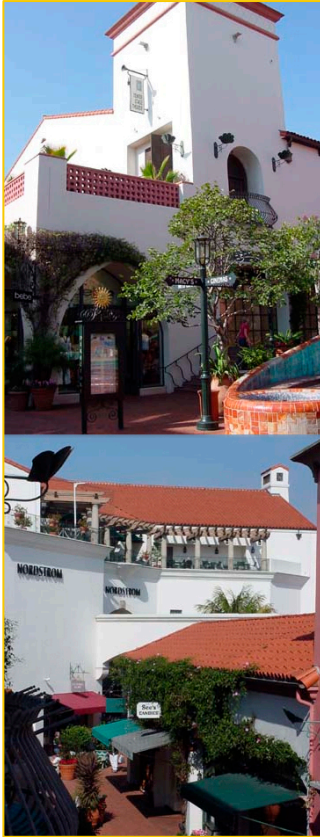


New construction set back to better integrate with older buildings

Credits: City of Boulder, *Downtown Urban Design Guidelines*

Source: <http://www.bouldercolorado.gov/files/PDS/boards/Downtown%20Design/ddguidelines.pdf>

Santa Barbara, CA



Two views of Paseo Nuevo (1990) shopping center
Credit: City of Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara's Urban Design Guidelines are similar to those of Clarendon and Boulder in that the guidelines require new downtown construction to be designed with the pedestrian experience in mind. Building heights, door and window placement, sidewalks and amenities must provide an attractive, comfortably scaled and inviting pedestrian environment. But in Santa Barbara, a specific architectural style – Spanish Colonial Revival – is required by ordinance for all new buildings in the El Pueblo Viejo district, which covers most of downtown.



Archways, wrought iron accents, tile roofs, exterior staircases and other decorative elements of the Spanish Colonial Revival style.
Credits: City of Santa Barbara

The City's design book illustrates a palette of elements that architects may include in their designs for projects in El Pueblo Viejo, and each proposal must undergo a rigorous architectural review process on its way to approval. Though restrictive in some respects, the design guidelines also encourage and inspire creativity. And while developers grumble about the review process, the result for residents and visitors is a uniquely beautiful, graceful and eminently livable place.

Source: http://www.santabarbaraca.gov/NR/rdonlyres/16A17719-04F0-4FE6-B5EA-E44D43D72A81/0/EPV_Guidelines.pdf

EVERYTHING SET IN CONTEXT



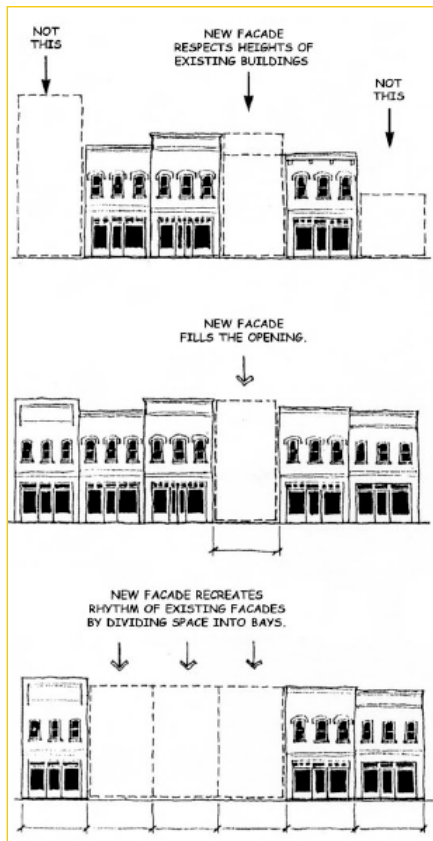
Monolith looming over Leeds, U.K.
Credit: Cait Hurley under Creative Commons License

For new development, when it comes to creating a sense of place, context matters: the natural backdrop, adjacent structures, and the surrounding neighborhood all matter. Buildings that bear no relation to their surroundings destroy the visual rhythm of the streetscape and diminish the aesthetic experience of a neighborhood. They disturb and in some cases destroy the sense of place, order and even security. Design standards or guidelines and a good review process reduce the odds that a discordant eyesore can be built on a downtown lot.



Rugged individualism run rampant
Credit: Hanson Partnership Pty Ltd

Source: <http://www.latrobe.vic.gov.au/WebFiles/MajorProjects/tacp/UrbanDesignContextReport.pdf>



Acceptable infill building heights, Ripon, WI

Source: <http://www.riponmainst.com/riponmainst/Design%20Guidelines.htm>

AS APPLIED IN MODEL COMMUNITIES

Clarendon, Arlington, VA



In Clarendon, property developers are required to take the nature and scale of surrounding properties into consideration when designing new buildings. Developers must navigate an extensive design review process, and tend to regard Arlington as a difficult place to win project approval. But the process – which may take as long as a year in some cases – is what gives citizens control over not just individual projects but the shape and character of the community as a whole. This is particularly important in those interface areas where residential neighborhoods abut higher density mixed-use areas.

Credit: WHA Architecture and Planning, P.C.

The design review process coupled with design requirements that step down height and limit window sizes on façades facing residential areas help preserve the neighborhood character that Clarendon residents value.

Boulder, CO

The architectural review process in Boulder works to ensure that new development fits in contextually with the City's historic downtown.

An illustration from the Boulder, CO, *Downtown Urban Design Guidelines* shows the pattern rhythm of 25-foot bay widths that infill buildings are expected to maintain, while another shows buildings that would be considered too monolithic (massive) compared to existing buildings to gain approval.



Pattern rhythm of historic storefronts



Discordant buildings

Source: <http://www.bouldercolorado.gov/files/PDS/boards/Downtown%20Design/ddguidelines.pdf>

Santa Barbara, CA

COMPATIBILITY OF NEW DEVELOPMENT WITH THE EXISTING ENVIRONMENT

- ❖ *Design developments to complement and enhance the character of Santa Barbara, the surrounding neighborhood, and existing adjacent developments, while allowing each development to retain a distinct visual identity.*
- ❖ *Incorporate natural features and landscaped open spaces into developments to provide a sense of openness and continuity, and enhance the environment of the City grid.*
- ❖ *Design developments to respect the arrangement of buildings and open spaces on adjacent sites and provide opportunities for enhanced circulation, solar access, and views.*

The project review process in Santa Barbara is lengthy and involved, but despite the criticism it receives from some developers, it has been enormously successful in creating a downtown in which each new building shares the same basic characteristics as existing buildings in the downtown, and adds lasting value to the whole. In



The form of the new building (left) is sensitive to the setback and height of the existing residence. Reference Guideline: 3.2.3.

Santa Barbara, there is no tolerance for “disposable” buildings designed for a single, short-range purpose. Though owners, tenants and/or uses may change periodically, buildings are designed to remain good neighbors.

The *City of Santa Barbara Urban Design Guidelines* explicitly require new development to complement adjacent structures, the City’s natural setting, and the surrounding neighborhood. They include the directive for new development to “enhance the character of Santa Barbara.”

Source: http://www.santabarbaraca.gov/NR/rdonlyres/F198D2AB-67DA-46B7-A83A-D06BA5461958/0/Urban_Design_Guidelines_1999.pdf

MODEL COMMUNITIES ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Clarendon, Arlington, VA

Clarendon is a neighborhood of about 4,950 people in Arlington County, VA. Located in the greater Washington, D.C. metro area, Clarendon is a stop on the Rosslyn-Ballston Metro commuter rail line. Since the 1970's the neighborhoods adjacent to the Rosslyn-Ballston line have transformed themselves into transit-oriented districts, each with a different emphasis. Surrounded by quiet single-family residential neighborhoods, Clarendon's urbane downtown mixes high density residential options with offices, retail, restaurants, night clubs and other entertainment venues that have proven highly attractive to young adults.

Boulder, CO

Situated 30 miles northwest of Denver, Boulder is home to the University of Colorado. Between 1950 and 1970, the City more than doubled in size and that rapid expansion prompted the 1970 adoption of the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan, which focused on controlling urban expansion and protecting the surrounding open space and scenic vistas that make Boulder one of the most desirable places to live in the country. With an estimated population of just over 100,000, the City routinely shows up on "Best Places" lists. Among its 2010 mentions, Boulder was deemed by Men's Health magazine to be the second Healthiest Town in the U.S., due in part to its hundreds of miles of bicycle paths, lanes and routes.

Santa Barbara, CA

Santa Barbara's dazzling location on California's Central Coast makes it one of the world's most beautiful places to live, but its attention to careful planning and strict urban design standards has placed it among the most desirable places as well. With a 2009 population of 86,353, the City has been careful to preserve and build upon the rich architectural heritage of its Spanish colonial days. The core of the City is built on a fine grid of streets and paseos (pedestrian passages) that make it a highly walkable place. While high real estate prices deter many from living in Santa Barbara, the City's natural beauty and amenities make it a top destination for visitors from around the world.

be bold

Long Island Index

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