Placemaking: Creating the Product

Smart Growth Offers Amenities That Buyers Value & Homebuilders Can *S*howcase

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Smart growth and New Urbanism are about making places, not just developments. That's a good thing for the bottom-line businessperson, because there is a premium associated with placemaking that homebuilders can leverage to speed up sales and command better prices per square foot.

To reap a placemaking premium, neighborhood design matters. At the building level, architecture is still important, without a doubt. But great streets, mixed uses, blended housing types, and shrewd phasing – which all rely upon decisions made at the larger scale of the neighborhood plan – are really the key tools. Now hear this: The conventional interpretation of curb appeal has been updated, so it's time to catch up if you haven't already. The things that make smart growth neighborhoods *smart* also make them *beautiful*. Here's what you have to do:

Design Great Streets

In conventional subdivisions, builders showcase the features and square footage inside the houses and their lots. Smart growth projects, on the other hand, are designed to offer more opportunities for interacting with the community, socializing, and knowing your neighbors. The fundamental ingredient is an attractive and welcoming public realm *between* buildings. Every piece of the public realm is significant, but the most important of all is the street.

First, the fronts of the buildings, not the backs, should face the street. When you look down the street it should look like a human habitat, not a *car* habitat: porches, balconies, stoops, and storefronts belong on the parts of your buildings that front streets. That curious old 1970s habit of developing miles of roadway lined with garage doors is absolutely out of date—don't do it!

Optimize the land plan to create street scenes that strengthen the sense of place. For example, set up street layouts to create "terminated vistas" – moderately long views that conclude at the end of a street with focal buildings or landscapes. This builds a distinctive identity while also orienting neighbors to their surroundings and lending a conscious permanence. The same benefits come from the parks, squares, and signature spaces. Buyers perceive public spaces immediately when they visit streets in traditional neighborhoods; builders need to understand the geometry inherent in New Urbanist plans and use it to their advantage.[1]

The most appealing street is a well-defined, deliberately shaped, three-dimensional public space, often called by designers the "outdoor room." This results from getting the proportions of the street right; it's a function of the ratio between the width of the space between building façades and the height of the buildings and trees that give it form, but it's not complicated. The crucial detail is usually the front setback; nicer streets tend to have front porches positioned within "conversational distance" of the sidewalk.[2]

Don't make the error of tacking on a shallow porch just for looks. Here, less is not more. Make porches deep enough to be usable and genuine. Homebuyers can tell the difference.

Street trees, curb-to-curb dimensions, small intersections, on-street parking, and properly placed sidewalks are crucial details, too. Today there is a whole body of knowledge available about how to design streets where motorists drive more carefully and pedestrians feel comfortable. It is probably necessary to sign on a traffic engineer qualified to tackle those diehard, wider-is-better road design standards (still commonly mandated in too many jurisdictions), but the placemaking

premium will justify the effort and expense. Housing market analyst Laurie Volk of Zimmerman/Volk Associates says, “Take the same charming house from a good street scene, and drop it on a street that’s too wide or otherwise poorly designed, and there’s no way you’ll get the same price for it.” [3]

Design Somewhere Worth Walking To: Plan for Mixed Uses

Among many other things, smart growth offers one especially tantalizing promise: more choices for getting around, which means more options for accomplishing daily needs without slogging through unpleasant traffic. Suppose you could offer homebuyers a place with many of their daily and weekly destinations close at hand, close enough to reach by walking or cycling? The best old neighborhoods, typically predating World War II, had corner stores, pubs, places of worship, and other non-residential components built into the walking environment, accessible to homes. The recent revival of that principle shows that new neighborhoods can be designed that way, too. One of the benefits is to capture or shorten many car trips by including places Americans spend too much time and money driving to reach in sprawl – with all the pollution and energy waste that driving brings with it.

In addition to the transportation benefits, mixing land uses has placemaking advantages that can attract buyers. Much has been written recently about the importance of what author and urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg termed “third places”—not work or home, but the other places we’d frequent, if they were close at hand, to meet friends, make new friends, watch people, and expand social networks.[4] The rise of coffeehouses in recent years is often pointed to as an indicator of a cross-generational group of adult Americans who desire to reconnect with their community. When included in new neighborhoods from the beginning, a modest amount of storefront commercial space that is creatively operated to fill that need for third places can be a powerful attractor to future homeowners.

Here again, design makes the difference. Devise the mixed-use components in forms that are welcoming to a pedestrian and fit appropriately when situated among homes. History is your best guide of how to do this architecturally; America has countless examples of classic small shopfront buildings worth emulating.[5]

Remember, a tiny amount of mixed use goes a long way. An impressive percentage of car trips can be eliminated by the first few hundred square feet of convenient commerce and the first few units that offer live/work combinations. The more choice, variety and completeness in retail (that the market can support), the better. A full-size Main Street is ideal but not necessary to reap benefits from a mix of uses. Always reserve *some* space for at least a little non-residential development.[6]

Design a Clever First Phase and Showcase the Variety—and Even the Density!

To realize the added value of the traditional neighborhood approach, a chunk of that interesting public realm has to be ready to show off right away. Your buyer is selecting a community, not just a house, so the first phase and any models built on spec should be grouped to visually shape the first street space. The first street is the showroom where your buyers will see the idea of the neighborhood as a whole, in three dimensions.

Instead of lining up model homes on one side of a street and corralling prospects in an annoyingly fenced “sales trap,” build along *both sides of the street* or all four corners of an intersection. This works especially well to spotlight the difference between the beautiful streets enabled by alley-serviced lots and your competitor’s ugly street full of driveways. Forming one whole street—by building on both sides of it—is the most basic rule for phase one, according to Todd Zimmerman of Zimmerman/Volk Associates.[7]

Next, let potential buyers see your diverse product line in this first phase. A few decades ago, builders and developers started grouping houses of similar types and prices into separated "pods," presumably to cut production costs and reassure buyers that the neighboring families were going to be just like theirs. But today's households are more varied than ever, and smart growth buyers will be intrigued, not put off, by the idea of more architectural variety, more changes in scale and skyline, and a more fascinating mix of neighbors. Go ahead and mix the unit types and the land uses right from the beginning. On that first street or square, for example, compose a grouping of large and not-so-large houses, cottages, rowhouses, a well-scaled apartment house or two, and a corner store.

If smart growth is really embraced by the municipality, it will expect you to build higher density, not less. Perhaps, then, the biggest premium of all from a well-executed plan comes to you as an investor in the form of increased density, potentially lowering your per unit land cost and other expenses while upping your yield. For the savvy end user, however, this increased density should also be a selling point of the neighborhood, not a negative. With denser housing types integrated by design among the standard homes, your neighborhood holds the promise of being a place where homeowners can retire or downsize as empty-nesters without leaving their friends. Recast the higher density as a positive feature. Good urbanism lets you offer a neighborhood that achieves at least the "minimum livable density," which is to say dense enough to include senior housing options and enough residents to support small-scale local commerce, justify neighborhood schools, bolster congregations, and set the stage for successful transit. Brag about it.

That minimum livable density is going to vary from place to place in both numbers and the designed form. Smart growth principles tell us to take the time to work with citizens to find the right fit for local cultural traditions, resource constraints, and vision for the future. The very best places to pursue smart growth may be the ones where local government and community groups have taken the initiative in advance to take the guesswork out of the entitlement and approval process for smart growth.

Why Might Homebuyers Care?
Homebuyers can be motivated to pay the placemaking premium for several reasons:

Convenience and Fun
Smart growth projects offer more convenience by placing things we need and activities we want in locations close to housing. The form and location of the neighborhood will determine whether you can walk to a corner café or not. There is a lifestyle benefit associated with convenience when the place you choose to live gives you more personal time and more fun.

Cost Effectiveness
Smart growth is cost efficient for the homeowner, directly and indirectly, in both the short and long terms. For example, increased density helps distribute homeowners' association fees and infrastructure costs among more homeowners from day one. Over time, the buyer can benefit from the escalations in value that are typical in well-done traditional neighborhood developments. Volk asks, "If in a few years you get transferred, won't you be glad you bought the house that appreciated in value most quickly?"[8] These examples give just the tiniest glimpse of ways smart growth can be more cost effective—there are many, many more.

Living Healthier Lives
When people can walk or bike to their destinations, there are clearly related health advantages. Much has been written recently about spiraling health care costs and the epidemics of diabetes, obesity, and asthma among Americans of all ages. Disconnected, auto-dominated sprawl can contribute to or exacerbate many of these health problems. Your new walkable neighborhood, on the other hand, is conducive to making exercise part of daily living, and that's a marketable advantage. Builders and developers should be prepared to back up the active-lifestyle marketing

claim, however, by establishing the healthy community's physical street pattern right from the beginning. The most important exercise equipment to install? A network of genuinely walkable streets.

Coolness and Beauty
As baby boomers age into empty-nester households and the generations behind them bloom into their peak home-buying years, they are expected to demand neighborhoods that look quite a bit different from the sprawl subdivisions of the recent past. These Americans crave a neighborhood that will reflect their ideas about how the world should be. Design and market your neighborhood as a place for people with fresh ideas, not just a surplus of square footage. Make it a place for active people who want to get involved. And make it utterly beautiful. People are drawn to beauty and pay extra for it.

Doing Right by the Planet
The walkable neighborhood is not just more handsome, it's more sustainable. Proximity and access to other daily needs besides housing can increase transportation options, thereby reducing energy consumption, cutting pollution, and saving time. As for the smaller lots, less grass to mow and water saves time and reduces runoff pollution, too, and the higher density allows the preservation of meaningful green spaces we literally rely upon for oxygen. For contemporary consumers deeply interested in the environment, buying a home in a smart growth neighborhood may give them something to feel good about.

It Will Be Worth the Effort

Perfect and promote the stuff *outside* the house, the trademarks that make the community special, not just the *inside* of the house. Homebuyers will appreciate the difference. The neighborhood will endure and get better as it ages. And as the builder, you'll be more proud of your work.

Victor Dover is a town planner and charter member of the Congress for the New Urbanism. He has been involved in the design of more than 150 Traditional Neighborhood Developments and urban revitalization plans.

For Further Reading

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[1] To see a compilation of projects that follow these principles see the Links to TND and New Urban Neighborhoods website at: http://www.tndtownpaper.com/neighborhoods.htm .

[2] Newpoint, in Beaufort County, South Carolina, is a charming example of placing the porches at this "conversational distance"—to the point where this new neighborhood has become a legendary trick-or-treating destination every Halloween. ("Maximum candy for minimum effort," says developer Vince Graham.) According to the Wall Street Journal, "Newpoint turned a profit in its first year, outperforming [its developers'] initial expectations by as much as 40%." [The WSJ needs a citation (having it in the "further reading" section is not the same as putting it in the footnote where it's cited].

[3] Laurie Volk and Todd Zimmerman personal communication with the author, December 13, 2006.

[4] Ray Oldenburg. *The Great Good Places: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*. Paragon Books, 1989

[5] Our rapidly revitalizing Main Streets provide a vast catalog of both the essential conventions and the wide variety in the architectural details of storefronts. Visits to King Street in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia; Duval Street in Key West, Florida; or Commerce Street in Galena, Illinois, are tutorials in the design of mixed-use buildings. [It would be more useful to cite mainstreet.org.]

[6] This effect is visible at tiny Longleaf, a TND in the Tampa area, which has a small row of shopfront buildings flanking its village green; over time Longleaf will be the seed from which a full-blown town grows at Starkey Ranch. [Again, not helpful! Unless you live in Tampa and know where this is and can go see it, this statement is useless.]

[7] Todd Zimmerman personal communication with the author, December 13, 2006.

[8] Laurie Volk and Todd Zimmerman personal communication with the author, December 13, 2006.