3

CHAPTER 3:
A NEIGHBORHOOD IS MORE THAN HOMES: PLACES TO WORK, PLAY, SHOP, LEARN AND GATHER

Homes provide the basic element of Great Neighborhoods – they are the private realm, where people live. What sets Great Neighborhoods apart is the stuff that lies between the homes, and what this offers the people who live in them.

All of the qualities that we think of as defining a neighborhood are embodied in the connections that link private homes and their residents together. These connections take many forms: some of them occur in the public realm, some in the private realm, and some in the "in-between" spaces. They include streets, parks, shopping areas, work locations, churches, schools, natural areas, and more. If housing comprises the bricks of Great Neighborhoods, then these connecting spaces are the mortar.

GREAT NEIGHBORHOODS PROVIDE PLACES TO GATHER

Public gatherings, chance encounters, social networks – these make Great Neighborhoods more than just the sum of their houses. These interactions provide the building blocks for civil society. For these things to happen, Great Neighborhoods need to provide places for people to gather and encounter others.

Streets

Of all public spaces, streets are perhaps the most important – and the most easily overlooked. We have become accustomed to concieving of streets as concrete conduits for moving cars. But in Great Neighborhoods, both new and historic, streets are the public spaces *par excellence*.

As a rule, the largest percentage of public space in any neighborhood is composed of its streets. Here in Dane County's cities and villages, nearly 25 percent of all the land area consists of street right-of-way; streets in Dane County occupy more than twice as much land as outdoor recreation areas.[9]

Great Neighborhoods' streets, like this one near Monona Bay in Madison, provide spaces for neighbors to gather and socialize.

Streets in Great Neighborhoods' are designed as much for pedestrians and bicyclists as for cars – they are "people-scaled." Typically, these streets are lined with trees or other landscaping, and they are almost always flanked by sidewalks, creating spaces that are safe and inviting for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Great Neighborhoods' streets are also laid out to connect frequent destinations over short distances. Unlike the typical subdivision street system, in which all small local roads feed into large arterials designed around the needs of the car (compromising safe passage for pedestrians and bicyclists), in Great Neighborhoods a network of interconnected streets and sidewalks makes it easy to walk to destinations – parks, schools, local stores, or neighbors' houses – or simply to wander about for the pleasure of it, perhaps with

stroller or dog in tow. Great Neighborhoods also encourage walking with safe pedestrian crosswalks. While walking, pedestrians are likely to encounter other people out walking, or stop to chat with neighbors in front of their homes. These spontaneous encounters are the defining characteristics of civic life.

Parks and Other Public Spaces

Great Neighborhoods also provide spaces where parents, children, dog walkers, and others can congregate to play, socialize, and relax. These include "vest-pocket" parks that might occupy only as much land as a single house-lot, or they might be large landscaped parks with recreational and natural amenities, winter shelters, and facilities for events and celebrations.

Civic plazas and squares also provide more formal public spaces. Often Great Neighborhoods locate such spaces at "ceremonial" sites – along main streets, at town centers, capping long vistas, and so on. Similarly, civic buildings such as libraries, schools, and neighborhood centers – which almost all historic Great Neighborhoods have, as well as many new ones – also provide important gathering places. Such places are also sheltered, an important consideration in Dane County's climate.

Neighborhood parks provide gathering spaces for picnics, games and music.

Semi-Public "Third Places"

"Third places" is a term given to places that are neither our private homes ("first places") nor our public, work locations ("second places"). In essence, third places are public places on private land. Third places include neighborhood stores, restaurants, and cafés. They all share open doors, a street presence, and often outdoor seating or vending areas that bridge the public and private realms. Such places demand pedestrian life in order to exist.

A local café provides a "semi-public" gathering space.

Americans long enjoyed third places in the form of the inns and ordinaries of colonial society, then as the saloons and general stores springing up with westward expansion. Later came the candy stores, soda fountains, coffee shops, diners, etc. which, along with the local post office, were conveniently located and provided the social anchors of community life.

"Third places" also suggest the stability of the tripod in contrast to the relative instability of the bipod. Life without community has produced, for many, a life style consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and-back-again shuttle.

-- Ray Oldenberg, "Our Vanishing Third Places"[10]

PLACES TO SHOP (AND DINE AND BE ENTERTAINED)

The way we shop has changed significantly in recent decades. Strip development, regional shopping malls, and "big box" retailers have replaced neighborhood stores and downtown department stores as the preferred places to buy clothing, household goods, and even groceries. **But retail trends are notoriously fickle, and consumers are now forcing retailers and developers to reconsider many of their core assumptions. The principles that make Great Neighborhoods work are now being used in retail.**

A Mall or a "Sense of Place"?

New shopping developments consider three key elements in determining market potential: easy accessibility, the right products for the market, and competitive pricing. Typical retail development tends to define "accessibility" exclusively in terms of the car. It also uses national marketing expertise, large capital reserves, and economies of scale to achieve high profitability. But it does all of this at the cost of feeling "local" – a cost that consumers can easily sense. A Wal-Mart in Sun Prairie is the same as a Wal-Mart in Shreveport, and Madison's West Towne shopping district is not much different from a dozen malls in New Jersey.

Local businesses can still prosper in Great Neighborhoods, because there is sufficient density nearby and because they can respond to customer demands in ways that suburban chain stores cannot.

A shopping experience with a distinct sense of place.

In contrast, shopping districts in downtowns and in Great Neighborhoods possess an unmistakable "sense of place." They have a mix of uses, a design aesthetic that ties them to the local, and an energy that cannot be replicated in most conventional developments.

Increasingly, consumers are unhappy with the placelessness of much modern retail, and many analysts now describe a "sense of place" as the fourth essential component of successful retail. A "sense of place" in shopping districts encourages repeat visits – the most crucial element to successful retail. This quest for "sense of place" explains why the designers of the new Greenway Station – a pedestrian-friendly, outdoor, aesthetically pleasant "lifestyle center" in Midddleton – rejected a conventional mall layout.

Main Streets: Revitalization and Reinvention

The turnaround of many downtown business districts demonstrates the importance of a sense of place for retail. The past few decades

The new breed of retail venues will need to exhibit all four ingredients in their design: accessibility, product, price, and a sense of place. … Rather than the old standard single-story, stand-alone stores surrounded and separated by acres of surface parking, the new center is integrated, with two-level store configurations serviced by parking garages.

The recent awareness on the part of shoppers of a quality of place has been building for some time and should continue to grow over the decades ahead. … No longer are shopping malls, strip malls, or stand-alone stores the primary choices.

Increasingly, office and residential uses will be incorporated into the shopping place not just to enrich the life and vitality of the center by extending its hours of operation, but also to increase the real estate return and to hedge project dependence on retail rents. Obsolete shopping spaces will be redeveloped as live/work/shop places and should become an increasingly important part of American metropolitan areas as they grow to accommodate the needs of an additional 108 million residents over the next 50 years.

-- Urban Land Institute, "Back to Basics"[11]

has witnessed the rediscovery and revitalization of main streets – both old and new – throughout the United States.[12] More than 1,400 communities across the country are actively involved in revitalizing their historic and older downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts.[13]

Dane County is also revitalizing and reinventing many of its main streets. New mixed residential and commercial developments are in various stages of planning and construction in DeForest, Verona, Sun Prairie, Madison, Middleton, Oregon, McFarland, Stoughton, and Cambridge. Many communities are also recognizing the importance of adding new housing to downtown and main street areas. Cannery Square in downtown Sun Prairie, for example, will add about 125 units of new housing downtown, ranging from affordable apartments to townhouses and condominiums.

Before   **After**

A façade improvement program funded through Dane County is spurring revitalization of Main Street in downtown Stoughton.

Town Centers

Developers are increasingly responding to consumers' interest in walkable, mixed-use places by developing projects called "town centers." These come in a range of sizes, but they all include a wide mix of uses, typically involving some combination of retail, housing, office,

Sun Prairie's reinvention of its downtown is converting empty industrial buildings into a market square and mixed-use commercial-residential buildings.

entertainment, hotels, and civic institutions. They tend to be composed of multi-story buildings, and they are oriented to pedestrian-friendly, interconnected streets, and to prominent open spaces. Parking is provided in parking structures or behind buildings. Over 100 such projects are underway nationwide.

Market researchers and developers have long known that the conventional mall is in trouble – in a 1995 survey, 86 percent of suburban homebuyers stated a preference for town centers over commercial strips and malls.[14] Early evidence also shows that town centers consistently outperform conventional shopping centers in terms of lease rates, residential rents, hotel occupancy rates, and on-site and adjacent property values.[15]

Mixed-use building in the Middleton Hills neighborhood.

In fact, a recent commercial market analysis showed a significant level of demand among Dane County residents for shopping, dining and entertainment experiences in main street type of settings – one market analysis estimated that Madison's State Street can absorb more than 100,000 square feet of new business development by attracting new customers from outside its student and downtown markets.[16]

What these trends demonstrate is that retail can work in neighborhood settings. Developments that respond to people's preference for real places – whether in existing main streets or new town centers – can succeed.

PLACES TO WORK

Today, few people live close to work. Two-income households and frequent job changes mean that most people consider employment options from across metropolitan regions, not just their neighborhoods. This, however, does not mean that Great Neighborhoods cannot serve as employment centers: healthy neighborhood business districts can provide local employment options, as well as positioning neighborhoods as employment destinations for people living elsewhere.

An employment trend that neighborhoods are particularly well-placed to benefit from is home-work. Nationally, more than 55 million people work out of their homes at least part time. Given the growth in flex-time and telecommuting, this is a trend that is likely to continue. Great Neighborhoods can accommodate home-based work in a variety of ways. Accessory spaces – attics, basements, rooms above garages, or extra bedrooms – can easily be converted to office spaces. In addition, Great Neighborhoods can provide live/work or loft spaces for home employment in reconfigured old commercial or industrial buildings, or in the upper floors of main street buildings.

The original rationale for separating work from home no longer makes as much sense. Zoning in America began in the early 1900s as a means to separate residential uses from manufacturing, and thus to stabilize home property values. At the time, manufacturing represented about a third of all employment, and most if it came in the form of heavily polluting factories. Today, however, less than one out of five jobs are in manufacturing (and this figure continues to decline).

Market expectations for office parks are starting to change. Many American corporations, finding that the physical context of their operations has become a major factor in attracting talent, no longer see the single-use, suburban office park with lush vegetation, internal amenities, and maximum flexibility as the most desirable place to do business. Their employees do not want to have to drive two miles for lunch, five miles to go home – and fight traffic the whole way. Instead they are asking for housing and restaurants adjacent to the workplace and the type of mixed-use integration this approach provides.

-- Paris Rutherford, "Reinventing Suburbia"[17]

Most jobs today are located in office type settings in multi-story buildings. Many are in stand-alone office parks. But many others are in locations – both urban and suburban – that allow them to benefit from proximity to living, shopping, and other activities. Workers can walk to a variety of places for lunch or to run errands, and they can live close to work. Shops benefit from nearby employers, as these provide potential customers.

A growing number of these "mixed employment districts" are emerging around the United States – at least 35 mixed-use projects that incorporate over 400,000 square feet of commercial space (including offices, light industrial uses, and research and development facilities) are currently under way. For example, AT&T Wireless located their 600,000-square-foot headquarters in Redmond Town Center in Redmond, Washington, just a block from retail stores and restaurants. **"Fortune 500 companies like the amenity of having retail nearby,"** the project's architect reported.[18]

In Dane County, the City of Fitchburg has approved plans for a similar project, the Green Technology Village. The project will mix high-technology employment with commercial and residential development. The density, mix of uses, and urban design will allow it to achieve several goals: it will be accessible by multiple modes of transportation; build on Fitchburg's strong biotech and high-tech base; and use sustainable building practices.

PLACES TO LEARN

Historic Great Neighborhoods almost always have centrally-located schools within their boundaries. These schools serve not only as places to learn, but as community centers. They are accessible to students (and parents) on foot or by bicycle. By encouraging walking and civic interaction, neighborhood schools also help create strong connections between schools, parents, teachers, nearby businesses, and community organizations.

Neighborhood schools, like this Madison elementary school, help build school-community connections. Here, the school hosts an annual carnival.

According to a 2002 report by 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, "Children travel by foot more than any other age group and 23% of the Wisconsin's population is 14 or younger. Highways, busy streets, and other traffic hazards become barriers to walking and biking, even for children who live within easy walking or biking distance from a school. Currently, an average of one in four children is considered overweight. Many schools are trying to come up with strategies to address the growing concern over childhood obesity, but they often overlook the obvious issue of how students travel to and from school. Students that are able to walk or bike to school get great health benefits. In addition, walking and biking gives them a sense of independence and it also reduces dependence on buses and cars, which in turn reduces traffic congestion and air pollution. Unfortunately, this is one lesson that just isn't being learned. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 30 years ago two-thirds of children were walking and biking to school. Today, less than 10% walk or bike."

By looking to the models provided by old Great Neighborhoods, new developments can begin reintegrating education into neighborhood life.

NATURAL AREAS

Finally, Great Neighborhoods – because they can accommodate the same number of residents on less land than conventional suburban developments – allow the preservation and even the enhancement of natural and wild areas. By "clustering" the built environment on one part of a subdivision, developers can preserve wetlands, steep slopes, prairie and forest tracts, and important habitat areas.

Great Neighborhoods also allow for the possibility of better environmental planning. If environmental planning is done in conjunction with other developments, integrating wild areas as "systems" rather than just varied ground cover, will preserve natural tracts

Planner Reid Ewing offers these 11 principles for using sound Great Neighborhoods principles as a way of preserving wildness:

1. *Use a systems approach to environmental planning.*
2. *Channel development into areas that are already disturbed.*
3. *Preserve patches of high-quality habitat, as large and circular as possible, feathered at the edges, and connected by wildlife corridors.*
4. *Design around significant wetlands.*
5. *Establish upland buffers around all retained wetlands and natural water bodies.*
6. *Preserve significant uplands.*
7. *Restore and enhance environmental functions damaged by prior site activities.*
8. *Minimize runoff by clustering development on the least porous soils and using infiltration devices and permeable pavements.*
9. *Detain runoff with open, natural drainage systems.*
10. *Design man-made lakes and stormwater ponds for maximum habitat value.*
11. *Use reclaimed water and integrated pest management on large landscaped areas.*

-- Reid Ewing, "Best Development Practices"[19]

which can be coordinated to form significant stretches of intact habitat. These preserved areas also can increase neighborhood value as amenities for residents and neighbors.

Streets and buildings in Great Neighborhoods can be designed to preserve or create corridors of native natural cover connecting wild patches both within the neighborhood and between the neighborhood and nearby off-site natural areas. Buffer zones should be maintained around all waterways.

A rain garden captures the rain water that runs off of the roof and parking lot from the Willy Street Food Coop in Madison.

Wherever possible, storm water should be captured in the neighborhood. Private owners can be encouraged to include rain gardens to capture run-off on-site. Neighborhood storm water detention areas can be designed as wetlands to allow infiltration and provide habitat for wildlife.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD AS A PART OF THE REGION

Great Neighborhoods are parts of systems that operate at the regional level and as such, they are a key factor in the health and competitiveness of the region itself.

Today, because of our great mobility, people frequently travel outside their neighborhood or village to find work, shopping, friends – almost everything. Most of us, without giving it much thought, travel between cities and villages within a metropolitan region to meet our daily needs. Although we may identify ourselves as residents of a particular place or municipality, our interactions – economic and social – take place on a regional level.

Equally important to defining regions is ecology. Sharing a watershed or an aquifer, for example, forces different municipalities to conceive of their water needs as part of a regional question. Also, local soils, plants, and animals form interdependent relationships; together with climate, topography, geology, and hydrology, they comprise "biotic communities" that lend a nature-based sense-of-place to regions and neighborhoods.

Modern American life, in short, is no longer lived primarily at the walkable scale of the neighborhood or village, but rather at the driveable scale of the metropolitan region. And these regions exist as overlapping economic, social, and ecological entities.

The interactions in which we engage across the region can be atomizing and anonymous. In contrast, the network of social, economic, civic, and ecological relationships that we develop close to home establishes each of us as a member of a particular community. The intimacy of geography cannot be reproduced on the regional scale, and so neighborhoods give us a sense of belonging to a place. A group of healthy neighborhoods will be a healthy region.

IN SHORT ...

Great Neighborhoods provide the type of homes – dense, compact, vibrant, varied – that make it possible for meaningful connections between houses and for residents to thrive. Great Neighborhoods bind homes together with active and pedestrian-friendly streets, high-quality civic open spaces, local and distinctive shopping opportunities, flexible and appealing employment locations, accessible and neighborhood-scaled schools, preserved wild spaces, and more. These, taken together, are what make Great Neighborhoods more than just the sum of their housing units.

Today, neighborhoods remain intimately tied into the fabric of regions, and the functioning of neighborhoods is as essential as ever to regional health. The maintenance and revitalization of old neighborhoods, as well as the sound planning of new ones, offers great promise for the success of the region's sense of community and its sense of place. The region works best as a neighborhood of neighborhoods.