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CHAPTER 5: MODERN LAND DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS – HOW WE GOT HERE & THE RULES THAT GUIDE DEVELOPMENT NOW



So if Great Neighborhoods are, in fact, “great,” why haven’t we built more of them in the last half century?

The short answer is that changes in development patterns that followed the Second World War led to the dominance of conventional suburban subdivisions. These patterns were influenced by laws, policies, and planning priorities at various levels of government, and many of these same regulations now perpetuate these land-use patterns.

But the rules of land development are not set in stone. They can be modified to meet the growing demand for Great Neighborhoods.

LAND DEVELOPMENT IN POST-WAR AMERICA

“Suburbanization” began long before the Second World War. Ferries, streetcars, and suburban commuter trains had seeded elite suburbs around most large American cities as early as the 1890s. Large-scale urban flight among American industries began in the 1920s, as factories updated their facilities and moved to cheaper land outside of town. But the post-war suburban boom was vastly different in terms of its scale and the intensity of its impacts on the American landscape, and on American society itself. It is only a slight overstatement to say that it changed everything.

World War II veterans returned to a United States in the midst of a radical economic transition. The immensely productive American wartime economy was re-tooled to produce consumer goods, infrastructure, and homes. Growing worldwide demand, increasing industrial productivity, and relatively strong unions meant that good-paying jobs were plentiful. Americans also got to work making families, creating the biggest home-grown population expansion in U.S. history: the Baby Boom.

In 1950’s America, the old-fashioned “American Dream” – a nice, safe place where you could raise a family – evolved into a narrower, more prescriptive, more exclusive vision. The post-war “American Dream”: owning a new house on a generous lawn with a growing family, paid for by Dad’s job, and cared for by stay-at-home Mom and her brigade of new household appliances.

Mortgage Lending, Homeownership, and Flight to the Suburbs

The Federal Home Administration and the Veterans Administration made huge amounts of mortgage financing available for purchase of new single-family homes, but it did not support investment in multi-family units or buying or fixing up old homes. The Federal National Mortgage Association (FNMA, or “Fannie Mae”) was created to establish a secondary market for home mortgages that enabled a huge expansion of home lending – again, for single-family homes. The U.S. government also created the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and enabled the rise of the savings-and-loan industry (which was then tightly regulated), further expanding home-financing opportunities.

The secondary mortgage market itself presents an obstacle to Great Neighborhoods. This market recognizes some nineteen “product types” of development defined by their single-use categories. Bankers and investors often balk at financing neighborhoods with mixes of uses that do not neatly fit into these product categories.



As the middle class moved out of cities to the expanding suburbs, the poor were largely left behind. Early FHA loans required restrictive covenants on mortgages that excluded Blacks (and often other minorities) from living in new suburbs. Into the 1960s, the FHA drew lines around African American neighborhoods, deeming them bad places for investment and refusing to make loans in those areas. (The lines on FHA maps were red, thus giving rise to the term “redlining.”) Many banks and home insurers quietly continued the practice into the 1990s. As blatant racial exclusion fell out of favor, some suburban communities adopted “exclusionary” zoning laws that restricted housing other than large single-family homes, effectively barring all but middle and upper income families.

In the cities, government’s answer to the mounting urban crisis was an ambitious physical remaking of America’s cities. Urban renewal programs demolished large portions of cities and replaced them with high-rise public housing projects, new Interstate highways, and other large public works projects. Many cities were left shells of their former selves. Disinvestment and increasing concentrations of poverty itself accelerated middle-class flight from central cities.

Separation of Uses

In the 1920s, residential property owners outside Cleveland won a Supreme Court fight for single-use zoning, allowing developers nationwide to separate housing from other incompatible uses. By the 1950s and ‘60s, however, separating uses had become an end unto itself.

As American mass culture strove for the suburban, middle-class “American Dream,” it rejected the perceived ills of city life: congestion, danger, dirt, and unpredictability. Suburbs were meant to be spacious, safe, clean, and ordered. As a result, new developments controlled their environments by separating all uses. Shopping, working, living, learning, and playing would each have its own realm.

The Car

Post-war development patterns were fueled (literally) by the rise of the private automobile. Although cars were not uncommon as early as the 1920s, roads were generally poor and the car was of somewhat limited utility as a practical means of getting around. In the 1950s, for the first time, it was commonplace for families to own cars. Americans embraced the personal freedom provided by the car. In many ways, the automobile embodied the freedom, power and wealth of the post-war era.

While economics, demographics, and technology were dominant forces shaping the post-war supremacy of the car, public policy and investment also played key roles. Cities, states, and the federal government had been building paved roads since the 1920s, and by the post-war era, a fairly complete system was in place. In the face of the car’s ascendancy, streetcars were forced to yield right-of-way and then were simply decommissioned; bikes and pedestrians were forced to the side of the road. Then, in the 1950s, the creation of the Interstate highways system made possible America’s final transformation from a rail-based transportation system to one dominated by the automobile and the freight truck.

Unfortunately, the things that make for a high-quality road experience from the perspective of a car – road designs favoring speed and occupant safety – are not the same things that make for a high-quality experience for anyone else. Landscaping, narrow rights-of-way, bike



lanes, sidewalks, pedestrian amenities, and the like are at best irrelevant to – and at worst in conflict with – the automotive ideals of fast passage for cars. So, most roads built in the post-war era dispense with these things in the interest of being wider, straighter, and faster.

Not only roads were remade, but private lots were radically reconfigured in order to accommodate parked cars. Commercial buildings that once fronted the street to allow pedestrian access from the sidewalk were now placed far back and separated from the street by large parking lots with a space for almost every individual employee or shopper. Larger portions of residential lots became devoted to car storage through the steadily expanding garages and driveways. In many places, garages became the dominant presence along residential streets.

Urban form itself was fundamentally altered by the car. Prior to the war, new communities clustered around rail lines, and development was limited by walkable distances from stations. In the 1950s, unconstrained by proximity to stations, development could spread out along the new roads and highways.

For the first time in human history, daily activities were no longer constrained by the limitations of walking. A location five or ten miles away was still easily accessible. However, by making distant destinations accessible by car, post-war development patterns also made them accessible *only* by car.

The Loss of Civic Space

A final result of the dominance of the car over all other modes has been the elimination of civic space. The pre-car street was a community's greatest public space, and this great forum of civic interaction surrounded and pervaded everything it touched – train stations, parks, main streets, houses' front porches, and more.

The replacement of a multi-modal, interactive street with an enclosed car removed the “glue” of civic life. Today, Americans don't just happen upon civic life – they must actively seek it out, and often they must pay to do so. Spaces for people to interact as neighbors and citizens have become few.

CODIFYING NEW GROWTH PATTERNS: THE “RULES” OF DEVELOPMENT

Many forces – rising wealth, the automobile, the baby boom, infrastructure investments, government policies – came together to radically alter historic development patterns. But laws and policies also emerged that essentially changed the rules of the game, both fixing and reproducing new growth patterns. Most of these rules make it very difficult to build Great Neighborhoods.

Taken together, the end result of typical ordinances, rules, and regulations is that new development features large-lot, single-family housing set along very wide roads, fairly far away from retail or employment centers that are only realistically accessible by car. These ordinances present challenges to the creation of new Great Neighborhoods because every exception to every rule must be separately granted, costing developers time and money, with no certain outcome.



Zoning

Zoning defines what uses or activities can occur at what locations. Zoning creates “districts,” demarcated by colored sections on a map, each allowing a narrow range of approved uses. As such, zoning separates housing, commercial, and industrial areas, often making very fine gradations within each category: single-family homes on one acre are separated from single-family homes on half-an-acre, which are separated from attached townhouses, which are separated from multi-family units, and so on. All of this makes Great Neighborhoods impossible to build.

Modern zoning also tends to favor large lots. Such zoning is intended to produce housing with large, gracious yards and an affluent feel. In many places, large-lot zoning also has side-effects: it is extremely land-consumptive, and it tends to put suburban lifestyles out of reach of lower-income people.

An exception to conventional zoning is Planned Unit Development (PUD) zoning. In PUD districts, the specifics of uses, densities, and so forth are negotiated directly between the municipality and the developer, rather than being pre-determined. PUDs allow greater flexibility in zoning, but they do not represent a systematic method for producing Great Neighborhoods.

Subdivision Ordinances

Subdivision ordinances are laws that govern how large parcels can be broken up – that is, “subdivided” – into smaller parcels. They typically specify what improvements the land will require before it can be built upon, including: stormwater drainage, sewer, water supply (both for consumer and fire department use), street widths that can accommodate fire and garbage trucks, and potentially protection of shorelines, wetlands, steep slopes, and other environmental or scenic resources. They may also call for amenities such as sidewalks and bike paths.

Roadway Design Specifications

Subdivision ordinances also create challenges for Great Neighborhoods because they typically call for roads that are wide, with wide turning radii and few sharp corners, and few traffic calming measures. Such roads more easily accommodate emergency vehicles and garbage trucks, but they also encourage faster automobile traffic and discourage a “human scale” for residential and commercial construction. They also tend to push pedestrians and bikes off the streets, effectively removing streets from the civic realm.

Subdivision road designs are usually based on state guidelines, which are in turn based upon guidelines laid down by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) in a handbook called the “Green Book.” Unfortunately, the Green Book’s design guidelines have long been derived from highway design, even in the case of urban streets. The Green Book views the function of roads as primarily to ensure the mobility of motor vehicles and are often used to advance road and street designs that discourage pedestrian activities.

AASHTO has begun changing its specifications for local roads to accommodate better neighborhood design. Such changes – disseminated through large state bureaucracies to civil engineers and transportation planners – take effect very slowly.



Building Codes

Building codes typically are designed for new construction, requiring the highest standard. This tends to make building renovation – bringing old buildings “up to code” – extremely expensive. The costs imposed by these codes can make renovation economically infeasible, even when options exist to safely renovate a building. Some states have adopted rehabilitation building codes to allow enough flexibility to enable the renovation of existing buildings in Great Neighborhoods, while still protecting public safety. Wisconsin’s Historic Building Code provides an alternative method for determining code compliance when a qualified historic building is remodeled, altered or undergoes a change in occupancy.

School Siting

School districts and state school policies set guidelines for size of schools. Often these guidelines call for school sites that, by their large size, preclude their placement in neighborhoods. The only sites large enough are on the urban fringe where driving is required.

According to a 2002 report by 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, “The number of schools in the U.S. declined by 70% since World War II but their average size increased five fold. This trend is changing due to recent research on the effect of school size on student achievement, which indicates that a small school policy may be a powerful tool for improving student performance. Larger schools exact significant and long-lasting costs in the form of lower levels of student achievement; greater problems related to safety, violence, and discipline; and lower rates of attendance and graduation. These are costs that are more likely to be paid first by poor and minority children. Academic achievement in small schools is at least equal, and often superior, to that of large schools. Student attitudes and social behavior are more positive in small schools, and the percentage of dropouts is lower.”

TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENTS (TNDs)

By the 1990s a growing number of people came to realize that, by reinventing our built environment for the automobile and the goal of suburban homeownership, we were sacrificing walkability, transportation choices, neighborhood diversity, public spaces, and civic life. They began to look for ways to accommodate all of these things. Architects, planners, and developers sought to combine the human-scaled, civic-minded patterns of pre-war America with modern financing, transportation, and development realities.

Basically, this effort – variously dubbed neo-traditional development, New Urbanism, traditional neighborhood developments (TND), transit oriented development (TOD), or close-knit communities (CKC), and which we have referred to, generally, as Great Neighborhoods – seeks to promote compact, walkable, diverse, safe and attractive neighborhoods. A top priority was re-vamping the many regulations, rules, and statutes that make it difficult today to build Great Neighborhoods.

New traditional neighborhood development (TND) codes, such as Wisconsin’s Model Ordinance for a TND²² and Dane County’s Model TND Ordinance, seek to remove the impediments to developing Great Neighborhoods by replacing conventional subdivision and zoning statutes with TND statutes. These ordinances lay out Great Neighborhoods principles: they define traditional neighborhood districts that are compact and walkable,



with a mix of uses and a network of attractive streets and public spaces; they provide expedited review processes for Great Neighborhoods; and they define detailed development standards for public spaces and private lots.

TND Design Principles

While there is significant variety between different Great Neighborhoods' models, they all share a number of basic goals, many of which have already been sketched out in other chapters of this handbook. They should:

- Be compact and walkable enough to encourage safe and efficient use by walkers, bikers, and transit riders, without excluding automobiles.
- Feature streets that function as an interconnected network, dispersing traffic and offering a variety of pedestrian and vehicular routes to any destination, while connecting and integrating the neighborhood with surrounding communities.
- Have an identifiable center that functions as a community gathering place, and identifiable edges that promote a sense of neighborhood identity.
- Offer a variety of housing choices within the same neighborhood, including dwellings that meet the needs and preferences of younger and older people, singles and families, and people of varying income levels.
- Host a diverse mix of activities and uses, including residences, shops, schools, churches, workplaces, and parks, all in walkable proximity.
- Contain a range of open spaces, greens, and parks that are accessible and convenient to everyone.



Great Neighborhoods allow for individual touches (as long they support the right team!)



This Spanish style home fits nicely into a Great Neighborhood.

TNDs and Architectural Style

A common misconception of TNDs and Great Neighborhoods in general is that they must be designed and built in traditional architecture styles. Although many of our historic neighborhoods are in fact built in traditional vernacular styles, the success of Great Neighborhoods is not dependent on any particular style. What matters is good planning and design of individual buildings and public spaces, the use of quality materials, the locations of buildings on each lot and the connections that are made between buildings and public spaces. Great Neighborhoods are about urban design ideas, not specific architectural styles.

IN SHORT ...

After World War II, the rise of the automobile, the pursuit of a suburban “American Dream,” and increased wealth caused cities and suburbs to expand rapidly. This expansion was markedly different from historical patterns. It was



characterized by highly separated uses and activities, connected by auto-oriented roads that severely hindered other forms of travel. These development patterns were locked in place by zoning and subdivision codes, as well as other public and private rules and policies that made the new form of growth the only viable option. New development patterns offered gains in terms of spaciousness, privacy, and travel convenience by car, but it came at the costs of reduced community connections, transportation choice, neighborhood diversity, and public spaces.

An effort to reclaim these qualities in existing and new neighborhoods gained momentum in the 1990s, as architects, planners, developers and others promoted a set of principles for new traditional neighborhood developments. New zoning systems – TND codes – emerged to provide an alternate set of “rules” by which development could take the form of Great Neighborhoods.

