

The Neighborhood, the District and the Corridor

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The fundamental organizing elements of the New Urbanism are the neighborhood, the district and the corridor. Neighborhoods are urbanized areas with a balanced mix of human activity; districts are areas dominated by a single activity; corridors are connectors and separators of neighborhoods and districts.

A single neighborhood standing free in the landscape is a village. Cities and towns are made up of multiple neighborhoods and districts, organized by corridors of transportation or open space. Neighborhoods, districts and corridors are urban elements. By contrast, suburbia, which is the result of zoning laws that separate uses, is composed of pods, highways and interstitial spaces.

The Neighborhood

The nomenclature may vary, but there is general agreement regarding the physical composition of the neighborhood. The “neighborhood unit” of the 1929 New York Regional Plan, the “quartier” identified by Leon Krier, the “traditional neighborhood development” (TND) and “transit-oriented development” (TOD) share similar attributes. They all propose a model of urbanism that is limited in area and structured around a defined center. While the population density may vary, depending on its context, each model offers a balanced mix of dwellings, workplaces, shops, civic buildings and parks.

Like the habitat of any species, the neighborhood possesses a natural logic that can be described in physical terms. The following are the principles of an ideal neighborhood design:

- 1) The neighborhood has a center and an edge;
- 2) The optimal size of a neighborhood is a quarter mile from center to edge;
- 3) The neighborhood has a balanced mix of activities—dwelling, shopping, working, schooling, worshipping and recreating;
- 4) The neighborhood structures building sites and traffic on a fine network of interconnecting streets;
- 5) The neighborhood gives priority to public space and to the appropriate location of civic buildings.

The neighborhood has a center and an edge. The combination of a focus and a limit contribute to the social identity of the community. The center is a necessity, the edge not always so. The center is always a public space, which may be a square, a green or an important street intersection. It is near the center of the urban area unless compelled by some geographic circumstance to be elsewhere. Eccentric locations are justified if there is a shoreline, a transportation corridor or a place with an engaging view.

The center is the locus of the neighborhood's public buildings, ideally a post office, a meeting hall, a day-care center and sometimes religious and cultural institutions. Shops and workplaces are usually associated with the center, especially in a village. In the aggregations of multiple

neighborhoods which occur in a town or city, retail buildings and workplaces may be at the edge of the neighborhood, where they can combine with others and intensify commercial and community activity.

Neighborhood edges may vary in character: they can be natural, such as a forest, or man-made, such as infrastructure. In villages, the edge is usually defined by land designated for cultivation such as farms, orchards and nurseries or for conservation in a natural state as woodland, desert, wetland or escarpment. The edge may also be assigned to very low-density residential use with lots of at least 10 acres. When a community cannot afford to sustain large tracts of public open land, such large private ownerships are a way to maintain a green edge.

In cities and towns, edges can be formed by the systematic accretion between the neighborhoods of recreational open spaces, such as parks, schoolyards and golf courses. It is important that golf courses be confined to the edge of neighborhoods, because fairways obstruct direct pedestrian ways to the neighborhood center. These continuous green edges can be part of a larger network of corridors, connecting urban open space with rural surroundings, as described in the 1920s by Benton McKaye.

In high-density urban areas, the neighborhood edge is often defined by infrastructure, such as rail lines and high traffic thoroughfares

that best remain outside the neighborhood. The latter, if generously lined with trees, become parkways that reinforce the legibility of the edge and, over a long distance, form the corridors connecting urban neighborhoods.

The optimal size of a neighborhood is a quarter mile from center to edge. This distance is the equivalent of a five-minute walk at an easy pace. The area thus circumscribed is the neighborhood proper, to differentiate it from the green edge, which extends beyond the discipline of the quarter mile. The limited area gathers the population of a neighborhood within walking distance of many of their daily needs, such as a convenience store, post office, community police post, automatic bank teller, school, day-care center and transit stop.

The stop's location among other neighborhood services and within walking distance of home or work makes the transit system convenient. When an automobile trip is necessary to arrive at a transit stop, most potential users will simply continue driving to their destinations. But the neighborhood, which focuses the required user population within walking distance of the stop, makes transit viable at densities that a suburban pattern cannot sustain.

Pedestrian-friendly and transit-oriented neighborhoods permit a region of cities, towns and villages to be accessible without singular reliance on cars. Such a system gives access to

the major cultural and social institutions, the variety of shopping and the broad job base that can only be supported by the larger population of an aggregation of neighborhoods.

The neighborhood has a balanced mix of activities—dwelling, shopping, working, schooling, worshipping and recreating. This is particularly important for those who are unable to drive and thus depend on others for mobility. For instance, the young are able to walk or bicycle to school and other activities, freeing their parents from the responsibility and tedium of chauffeuring. The size of a school should be determined by the number of children who can walk or bicycle to it from adjacent neighborhoods.

And the elderly, who relinquish their willingness to drive before they lose their ability to walk, can age in place with dignity rather than being forced into specialized retirement communities, which are the attendant creations of the suburban pattern.

Even those for whom driving may not be a burden enjoy secondary advantages. The proximity of daily destinations and the convenience of transit reduces the number and length of trips, decreases the private stress of time in traffic and minimizes the public-borne expenses of road construction and atmospheric pollution.

The neighborhood's fine-grained mix of activities includes a range of housing types for a variety of incomes, from the wealthy business

owner to the school teacher and the gardener. Suburban areas, which are most commonly segregated by income, do not provide for the full range of society. The true neighborhood, however, offers a variety of affordable housing choices: garage apartments in conjunction with single-family houses, apartments above shops and apartment buildings adjacent to shopping and workplaces. The latter's transitional sites are not provided within the suburban pattern whose rigorous, sanitized segregation of uses precludes them.

But the greatest contribution to affordable housing may be realized by the neighborhood's ability to reduce multiple automobile ownership and many of its associated costs. By enabling households to own one less vehicle, the average annual operating cost of \$5,000 can be applied toward an additional \$50,000 increment of mortgage financing at 10 percent. No other action of the designer can achieve an improvement in the availability of housing for the middle class comparable to the sensible organization of a good neighborhood plan.

The neighborhood structures building sites and traffic on a fine network of interconnecting streets. Neighborhood streets are configured to create blocks of appropriate building sites and to shorten pedestrian routes. They are designed to keep local traffic off regional roads and to keep through traffic off local streets. An intercon-

necting pattern of streets provides multiple routes that diffuse traffic congestion.

This contrasts to the easily congested single trajectories standard to the suburban pattern: culs-de-sac spill onto collector streets, which connect at single points to arterials, which in turn supply the highways. The suburban traffic model is more concerned with speeding traffic through a place than with the quality of the place itself; the pedestrian is assumed to be elsewhere on separate "walkways" or nonexistent.

Neighborhood streets of varying types are detailed to provide equitably for pedestrian comfort and for automobile movement. Slowing the automobile and increasing pedestrian activity encourages the casual meetings that form the bonds of community.

The neighborhood gives priority to public space and to the appropriate location of civic buildings. Public spaces and buildings represent community identity and foster civic pride. The neighborhood plan structures its streets and blocks to create a hierarchy of public spaces and locations for public buildings. Squares and streets have their size and geometry defined by the intention to create special places. Public buildings occupy important sites, overlooking a square or terminating a street vista.

The suburban practice of locating government buildings, places of worship, schools and even public art according to the expediencies of

land cost is ineffective. The importance of these civic and community structures is enhanced by their suitable siting, without incurring additional costs to the infrastructure.

The District

The district is an urbanized area that is functionally specialized. Although districts preclude the full range of activities necessary for a complete neighborhood, they are not the rigorously single activity zones of suburbia: the office parks, housing subdivisions or shopping centers. The specialization of a district still allows multiple activities to support its primary identity. Typical are theater districts, which have restaurants and bars to support and intensify their nightlife; tourist districts, which concentrate hotels, retail activity and entertainment; and the capitol area and the college campus, which are dominated by a large institution. Others accommodate large-scale transportation or manufacturing, such as airports, container terminals and refineries.

Although a degree of specialization for certain urban areas enhances their character and efficiency, in reality, few pure districts are really justified. Thanks to industrial evolution and environmental regulation, the reasons for segregating uses recede with time. The modern North American workplace is no longer a bad neighbor to dwellings and shops.

The organizational structure of the district parallels that of the neighborhood and similarly, for a good fit within the greater region, relies on its relationship to transit. An identifiable focus encourages the formation of special communities: a park for workers at lunch, a square for theater-goers to meet, a mall for civic gatherings. Clear boundaries and dimensions facilitate the formation of special taxing or management organizations. Interconnected circulation supports the pedestrian, enhances transit viability and ensures security. And like the neighborhood, attention to the character of the public spaces creates a sense of place for its users, even if their home is elsewhere.

The Corridor

The corridor is at once the connector and the separator of neighborhoods and districts. Corridors include natural and man-made elements, ranging from wildlife trails to rail lines. The corridor is not the haphazardly residual space that remains outside subdivisions and shopping centers in suburbia. Rather, it is an urban element characterized by its visible continuity. It is defined by its adjacent districts and neighborhoods and provides entry to them.

The corridor's location and type is determined by its technological intensity and nearby densities. Heavy rail corridors are tangent to towns and traverse the industrial districts of

cities. Light rail and trolleys may occur within a boulevard at the neighborhood edge. As such, they are detailed for pedestrian use and to accommodate the frontages of buildings. Bus corridors can pass through neighborhood centers on conventional streets. All of these should be landscaped to reinforce their continuity.

In low-density areas, the corridor may be the continuous green edge between neighborhoods, providing long-distance walking and bicycle trails, other recreational amenities and a continuous natural habitat.

The corridor is a significant element of the New Urbanism because of its inherently civic nature. In the age of the metropolis, with villages, towns, neighborhoods and districts aggregated in unprecedented quantity, the most universally used public spaces are the corridors that serve connection and mobility. Of the three elements—the neighborhood, the district and the corridor—the latter, in its optimum form, is the most difficult to implement because it requires regional coordination.

Conclusion

The conventional suburban practice of segregating uses by zones is the legacy of the "dark satanic mills," which were once genuine hazards to public welfare. The separation of dwelling from workplace in the course of the last century was the great achievement of the

nascent planning profession and remains institutionalized in zoning ordinances. The suburbs and cities of today continue to separate the naturally integrated human activities of dwelling, working, shopping, schooling, worshipping and recreating.

The hardship caused by this separation has been mitigated by widespread automobile ownership and use, which in turn has increased the demand for vehicular mobility. The priority given to road building at the expense of other civic programs during the last four decades has brought our country to the multiple crises of environmental degradation, economic bankruptcy and social disintegration.

The New Urbanism offers an alternative future for the building and re-building of regions. Neighborhoods that are compact, mixed-use and pedestrian friendly; districts of appropriate location and character; and corridors that are functional and beautiful can integrate natural environments and man-made communities into a sustainable whole.

The Street, the Block and the Building

Elizabeth Moule and Stefanos Polyzoides

The form of the New Urbanism is realized by the deliberate assembly of streets, blocks and buildings. In the American urban tradition, the cutting of a grid is the first presence of urban structure in the landscape. In this act of making a place, space is allocated for both public and private use—for buildings and for open spaces. Shaping this void in the city is an act of democratic responsibility. A plan is laid down by a governing body regulating private and public initiative in the construction of its parts. Public bodies, citizens and entrepreneurs slowly generate streets, squares and parks. Single buildings incrementally introduced into blocks eventually determine the character of the open spaces. It is at this most elemental scale, every day in a myriad of fleeting and poignant moments, that architecture and urbanism define each other.

This very simple American city-making model has been virtually abandoned in recent years. For the last half century, the building of the public realm has been handled with little regard for those it serves and for the quality of life that it generates. Increasingly, architecture has become the instrument of excessive self-expression. Individual buildings are often conceived as solely private, self-referential objects incapable of generating the public realm. Conversely, our public regulation system of zoning that controls the growth of the city has become overly verbal and complicated and

incapable of accurately guiding physical form (especially because everything is negotiable). Zoning conflates issues of use, density and form to such an extent that it has spawned the unpredictability and visual chaos typical of the American city. Moreover, transportation-dominated infrastructure engineering has so preferred the accommodation of the car over human beings, that the intended users of the public realm have been driven out. What many confuse as an unregulated and unfriendly urban landscape is actually the result of wrongly coded and uncritical design.

Because our current society has become so adept at creating and fetishizing those things which are private, we shall focus on the problem of making that which we hold in *common*. In city-making parlance, this is called the public realm. It is that shared space in society which brings people to gather together, to relate to one another and/or to be separate.

The New Urbanism seeks a fresh paradigm to guarantee and to order the public realm through individual buildings. Buildings, blocks and streets are interdependent. Each one contains to some degree the ingredients of all the others. Any decision to design streets in a particular manner seals the formal fate of blocks and buildings. Blocks of a specific character determine correspondent streets and buildings. Buildings of particular qualities dominate the

blocks that contain them and the streets that surround them.

The matrix for addressing the totality of street, block and building principles of the New Urbanism is *design*—not policy planning—and amounts to an aesthetic position. But this position is not about the definition of style, particularly revivalist style. Nor is it about diminishing design freedom. Instead, it is a method of design that is rooted in first causes and historical precedent. It is an attitude of expression that values the cultural variety inherent in climatic, social, economic and technical difference. It is also a professional ethic that stresses the integration of all architectural, engineering and design disciplines, the active collaboration among their practitioners and the participation of the public in the design process.

Above all it is about ensuring that there *is* a public realm. A city is a human artifact which is a collection of places and things. It is what we are born into and what we leave behind. What we hold in common is not only that which we share with the living, but that which we share with those before us and those after us. The city is therefore based on permanency.

An accessible (socially and physically) and truly shared place can be guaranteed at the most elemental scale through the following urbanist principals. These tenets prefer the human scale over that of the auto, balance private interests

with public interests and employ simple and physically determined methods over those that are complicated and solely legal-minded.

The Street

Streets are not the dividing lines within the city. They are to be communal rooms and passages.

Pattern - A single given street is always to be part of a street network. Connectedness and continuity of movement within such a network will encourage the mixing of uses in the city. A variety of alternative paths connecting various destinations shall minimize the traffic load on any one street.

Hierarchy - There is to exist a variety of streets based on their pedestrian and vehicular loads. Under no circumstances will a street be abandoned solely to vehicular traffic. Conversely, assigning streets solely to pedestrian use will sap their vitality. Distances between intersections will favor the walkability of streets and a proper rhythm of building form on given blocks.

Figure - The architectural character of streets is to be based on their configuration in plan and section. Building heights are to be proportionally related to right-of-way widths. The number of traffic lanes will balance vehicle flow and pedestrian crossing considerations. Shifts in scale within street sections are to be accomplished by the design of the landscape, building edges and other vertical streetscape elements.

Detail - The design of streets shall favor their proper use by pedestrians. The governing principles are: minimized block radii to slow cars at intersections, allowing easy crossing by pedestrians; landscaped medians to reduce apparent street widths; two-way streets that improve pedestrian crossing safety; properly designed curbs and sidewalks at intersections that accommodate the impaired. In addition, street parking protects pedestrians from the actual and perceived danger of moving traffic.

The Block

Blocks are the field on which unfolds both the building fabric and the public realm of the city. A versatile, ancient instrument, the traditional block allows a mutually beneficial relationship between people and vehicles in urban space.

Size - Blocks are to be square, rectangular or irregular in their shape. In their best historical dimensions, they vary between a minimum of 250 and a maximum of 600 feet. This dimensional range allows single buildings to easily reach the edges of blocks at all densities. It also forces parking to be located away from the sidewalk, either underground, in the middle of the block or in the street.

Configuration - Independent of shape, city blocks are to be lotted so that all of their sides can define public space. A variety of widths and depths of individual lots determine the range of

building types and densities that will eventually establish the intended city fabric. Initial lotting shall plan for this. Alleys shall absorb parking and servicing loads and allow the outer faces of blocks to become more intensely pedestrian.

Streetground - At its perimeter, each block is to be divided into parkway, sidewalk and setback. Within each block, lobbies, major ground floor interior spaces and public gardens of all kinds and sizes are to be understood as an extension of the public space of the city.

Streetwalls - The predominant visual character of all built fabric depends on several attributes of building envelopes: Their height, mandated setbacks and projections define the enclosure of the street. Their maximum width along with their height define a building's mass. Setback lines and the percentage build-to at their edges establish the fundamental rhythm between open space and built form on each block. Threshold elements at the setback line, such as arcades, porches, stoops, stairs, balconies, eaves and cornices, loggias, chimneys, doors and windows, are the means by which buildings interface with and determine the life of the street.

Parking - The omnipresence of cars within the public realm threatens the vitality of cities. Accommodating the pedestrian is the first order of priority for parking. Cars are best accommodated in the middle of blocks or underground. Parking garages are acceptable as long as their

ground floors at the sidewalk are occupied by pedestrian-related uses. Parking garages are to be regular buildings and, as such, need significant public faces and the built-in spatial redundancy necessary for a future use other than parking. Where parking lots are inevitable, they should double up as significant public gardens.

Landscape - Regularly planted trees along blocks shall establish the overall space and scale of the street as well as that of the sidewalk. These artifacts from man's historical contact with nature remain a psychically critical element of urbanism. The choice of particular species of trees and the patterns of their placement affect light and shadow, color, views—all significant aspects of the experience of place. Public open-space types (civic parks, neighborhood parks, etc.) shall be designed to be inhabited, not solely viewed. Semi-public ones (quads, courtyards, patios) are to give life and internal character to urban blocks.

The Building

Buildings are the smallest increment of growth in the city. Their proper configuration and placement relative to each other determines the character of each settlement.

Use - Neither of the two opposing extreme views of architectural use put forward by the Modern movement—functionalism and universal flexibility—adequately addresses the making

of a city or town. They have resulted in exclusive zoning and the fragmentation and disconnection of parts of the city from each other.

Buildings are to be designed by reference to their type, not solely their function. This allows for some changes in use and for multiple adaptations over time without compromising a building's form or rendering it obsolete. This is also critical from an environmental point of view.

Building types are to be organized by reference to dwelling, employment or institutional first uses. Their definition is based on their common architectural ingredients.

Density - Floor Area Ratio (FAR) zoning regulations are totally abstract and favor the design of buildings as singular objects. They are to be replaced with building envelope guidelines that link entitlements with predictable physical and architectural definitions of the public realm. Density regulations shall be stated independently of building use and parking. Parking requirements shall be established on a neighborhood and district basis as opposed to building by building. They are to be phrased by their intended architectural and urban consequences, not just numerically.

Form - There exist two kinds of buildings: fabric and monumental. Fabric buildings are to conform to all street and block-related rules and are consistent in their form with all other buildings of their kind. Monumental buildings

are to be free of all formal constraints. They can be unique and idiosyncratic, the points of concentrated social meaning in the city.

Built form and landscape form are mutually dependent. The relationship of buildings to the public realm is to be reciprocal. Frontality shall allow three scales of architectural expression: One that emphasizes the public character of streets; another that reflects the semi-public nature of open spaces interior to the block; and a third that responds to the service nature of alleys and backyards.

Each building and garden is of a particular formal type. Each formal type is defined by reference to a set of determining formal characteristics. Adjacent buildings and gardens sharing some of these characteristics generate a sense of a cohesive framework within the city. The hand of the individual designer acting on stable types is the source of all architectural variety.

Architecture is deeply bound within the culture of each region of the country. Building types, not building styles, are to be the source of historical continuity in our towns and cities. Further design should be based on research that establishes the viability of historic, regional types; and also suggests newly created or imported types that may have possible local applications. It is from the mix of time-tested and new architectural models that authentic regional building differences can emerge.

The social content of buildings establishes their character and their scale. Far from being mere objects of consumption, buildings can be used for a variety of social ends: forming the public realm, expressing the importance of our public shared institutions and improving the daily working and home life of a citizenry.

Individual buildings shall become ecologically sensitive in their use of materials and energy. Regionally proven methods of building and easily available local and recyclable materials are to be favored over international technological generalizations. Where economically possible, labor intensity in the building process shall be preferred. Low-energy consumption and pollution-free operations must be pursued.

Buildings are instruments for constructing time and place, not items to be consumed and discarded. For all practical and symbolic purposes, they are permanent fixtures in the landscape and the city. They should be designed with enough material and technical quality to allow their continuing renovation and reuse well beyond the expiration of their mortgage.

Coding

Specific street, block and building design rules for public or private developments shall be typically designed and presented in the form of a code. These codes are to be simply written and illustrated. They shall be brief and intensely

physical in their prescriptions. Their content amounts to a covenant among the owners, designers and users of particular projects. Eventually their individual interests and actions will incrementally but inevitably generate the public realm.

The judicious application of codes is to result in a diverse, beautiful and predictable fabric of buildings, open space and landscape that can structure villages, towns, cities and, indeed, the metropolitan region. Architecture and urbanism shall not be separated; nor shall formal, social, economic and technical/functional issues be considered in isolation.

The process of coding operates fully within the American urban tradition of safeguarding the public realm while allowing significant freedom for the designers of individual buildings. It is in the balancing of such public and private interests and concerns that the future quality of life in the American city lies.

Planning the American Dream

Todd W. Bressi

What is the "New Urbanism" that the projects in this book embody? In one sense, it represents a rediscovery of planning and architectural traditions that have shaped some of the most livable, memorable communities in America—urban precincts like Boston's Back Bay and downtown Charleston, South Carolina; neighborhoods like Seattle's Capitol Hill and Philadelphia's Germantown; and traditional small towns where life centers around a courthouse square, common, plaza, train station or main street. For planners and architects who embrace the New Urbanism, places like these provide both inspiration and countless practical lessons for the design of new communities.

But the New Urbanism is not a romantic movement; it reflects a deeper agenda. The planning and design approaches explored in this book revive principles about building communities that have been virtually ignored for half a century: Public spaces like streets, squares and parks should be a setting for the conduct of daily life; a neighborhood should accommodate diverse types of people and activities; it should be possible to get to work, accomplish everyday tasks (like buying fresh food or taking a child to day care) and travel to surrounding communities without using a car. The projects in the following pages show how these traditional approaches to building communities are being applied anew in suburbs and urban infill

projects, places that until recently have been regarded as being altogether different from traditional communities.

The New Urbanism also represents a new chapter in the history of American city planning. For a century, this reformist profession has been guiding urban redevelopment and suburban expansion with the goals of eradicating the crowding, poverty, disease and congestion that threatened to overwhelm industrial cities, and of creating a rational, efficient framework for growth that all but rejected traditional patterns of city and town development. The result of these efforts is a metropolitan landscape that is beset by an altogether different set of problems—traffic congestion, poor air quality, expensive housing, social segregation and neighborhoods whose physical character amounts to little more than the confluence of standard development practices and real estate marketing strategies. The New Urbanists are confronting these problems with an energy and creativity that had eluded planners until now.

The planners and architects whose work is shown in this book are at the forefront of a growing group of designers who are taking up this agenda. Their work is not clouded in theory and rhetoric. It is attracting the attention of not only critics and scholars but also people who can make change happen: citizen advocacy groups, local and regional planning agencies and



The automobile and the single-family home emerged as icons of the American dream. Government highway construction programs and housing policies promoted a landscape (left) and lifestyle (below) that repudiated traditional urbanism.

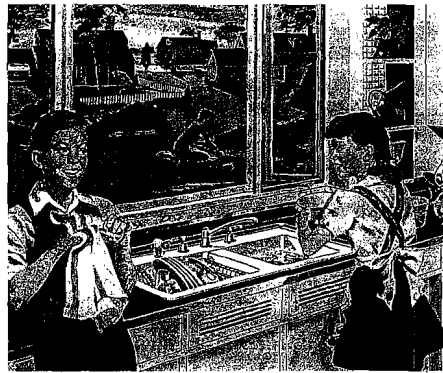
even private developers. There is little question that the approaches these designers advocate will be shaping the form of American cities and suburbs for decades to come.

From City to Suburb: A Century of American Planning and Urban Design

The suburban dispersal American cities have experienced in the last century has been remarkable in several ways. First, the magnitude of growth and the range of social and economic groups that have emigrated to the suburbs are unprecedented. Second, suburbs have evolved beyond their original role as "bedroom" communities; they now offer shopping, work and cultural activities, rendering suburbanites less reliant on central cities. Finally, this dispersal has been accompanied by the invention of new typologies for houses, commercial buildings and public spaces that contrast sharply with traditional forms—typologies that have been injected into center city projects as well.

This unprecedented suburban expansion has paralleled the unprecedented expansion of America's middle class and its desire to rise above urban, working-class conditions. The most powerful icon of the middle class, the single-family detached house surrounded by ample yards, has roots in Victorian-era mythology: The house was seen as a cradle, nurturing (and cultivating) the emerging independent

nuclear family, and as a bulwark, insulating women and children from the industrial city's evils. The house nurtured the family by providing specialized places for socializing, private life and household work, and by offering an opportunity, through landscaping and interior decoration, for the expression of individual taste. And the house, protected in its residential enclave and surrounded by spacious yards, offered privacy and protection from outside contamination. Suburban neighborhoods and houses also offered the middle class a new connection with nature: Romantic, picturesque site planning with curved streets and lavish plantings demonstrated the proper balance between nature and human artifice; irregular house forms like



porches and bay windows were considered a sign of organic complexity; and the yard was a garden that demonstrated the family's connection with the earth.'

The middle class's ability to move to suburban single-family homes was facilitated by transportation innovations. Before the 1920s, most suburbs grew in tandem with the extension of streetcar and railroad lines. Generally, they were compact clusters extending as far as a person might comfortably walk between home and a streetcar stop, and platted on tight grids that made land subdivision and sale efficient. Houses usually were put up by small builders who followed local practices or chose from the myriad of easily available plans. Houses came in a range of styles and typologies, depending on the region and the resident's taste and wealth—from Philadelphia's rowhouses and double homes to stately midwestern Victorians to California Craftsman bungalows.

After World War I, suburban growth was shaped by automobiles, which became the second icon of suburban life: Cars provided an unprecedented level of mobility, freeing people to determine their own travel patterns, and strengthened the suburbs' middle-class nature by excluding those who could not afford purchase and maintenance costs. Automobiles opened vast amounts of land for development, and the business of making and sustaining them