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Value and Variety in Open Space

A neighborhood embedded with open space provides its residents with a variety of potential uses. Civic spaces such as village greens, pocket parks, and plazas are ideal for engendering a sense of community within smaller neighborhoods. In suburban settings, there is trending interest in locally grown produce. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and gardens within developments stir curiosity, thus creating a social draw. Cluster developments create protected open space by grouping homes with downsized lot sizes in a portion of the development parcel, conserving natural areas on the rest of the site. Consumers have long recognized the added value of pleasant views and recreation areas procured by clustering homes.

Preservation of unbuilt land has notable effects on the local economy and quality of life. By improving an areas' image, open space attracts tourism. A poll facilitated by the President's commission on American Outdoors found that natural beauty was the single most important criterion for tourists in selecting outdoor recreation sites. Greenways, rivers, and trails attract visitors from outside the local area. The increase in activity stimulates the local economy via an influx of revenue from visitors. According to Randall Arendt in *Rural by Design*, protected open space benefits real-estate development too, because it increases the marketability of adjacent property. This is an important factor in long-term resale value and appreciation. In *The Metropolis Observed*, Christopher Leinberger states that there is an emerging market for cluster development based on aging baby boomers who prefer to be close to recreational activities and seek low maintenance homes and neighborhoods with a community feeling¹.

The economic and development growth boom of the 1990s to 2000s led to intrusion into natural areas and open space. Characterized by non-contiguous, low-density residential and commercial development, urban and suburban sprawl encroached on the rural landscape. The result has been a renewed focus on open space as an integral part of a community. Core components of Smart Growth include using land more efficiently, preserving environmentally sensitive lands and maintaining a balance between development and resources. These goals can be achieved by including open space in the planning phase at both the community-wide and site-specific scales.

Cluster Ordinances

¹ Christopher B. Leinberger, "The Metropolis Observed," 57 *Urban Land* 30. October 1998.

Despite zoning obstacles, cluster ordinances have been successfully implemented for almost 40 years in rural transitioning areas. They assist in preserving rural characteristics in developments located between the urban/suburban area and the agricultural zone. Cluster development involves downsizing and grouping of residential lots to increase open space on the rest of the parcel that is being subdivided. This practice is used to protect and buffer environmentally sensitive areas, to preserve important site features, or to provide recreation areas or natural open space. Developers sometimes receive a density bonus for utilizing clustering, meaning they are allowed to build more homes than what would normally be permitted by the governing zoning regulations, as an incentive for preserving more open space.

In order to adequately protect a sensitive environment, cluster zoning should be guided by conservation design techniques that begin with the identification of high priority environmental features². Careful consideration is given when placing buildings, utilities, and roads in relation to sensitive areas. Management of the protected open space is typically given over to a homeowners association or local government after a developer completes the community.

The current prevalent pattern of lower density development is the result of local zoning codes that require low densities and separation of uses, combined with consumer preferences for single-family homes and larger lots, and low land prices that permit this larger consumption of land. Any movement toward more compact development must address barriers in zoning codes while conceding that most new development will continue to be single-family detached homes. Even when land is zoned for higher densities and there is market demand for it, local governments are often reluctant to grant high-density ordinances. Adjacent sub-divisions often oppose cluster developments due to fears about density and property values or require a wooded buffer zone (typically 70 feet) for visual separation. Open space designs usually require a special permit exception or zoning variance.

However, cities, towns, and villages have the authority to enact ordinances that allow or require cluster development. Because certainty and speed of project approval are a priority for developers, communities should consider making open space development a “by-right” development option. Doing so would cut down the approval time for cluster design, making it comparable to conventional subdivisions. Without this, developers are unlikely to choose cluster designs because the process is more expensive and time-consuming³.

Cluster development provides a win-win for communities and developers. Compact development reduces development costs through more efficient use of infrastructure, which in turn makes housing more affordable. Utility installation costs of building roads, water and sewer lines are reduced because lots are closer in proximity. Where public sewer systems are unavailable, the developer has more control over where construction of private shared wastewater treatment takes place. Local governments save on snowplowing and road

²*What Is Cluster Development?* Fact Sheet No. 6. N.p.: Eureka Township Envisioning Taskforce, n.d. Print.

³ *Better Site Design: A Handbook for Changing Development Rules in Your Community*. Ellicott City, MD: Center for Watershed Protection, 1998. Print.

resurfacing. Homebuyers who pay for these services through a homeowners association often pay less due to these cost savings⁴.

In Little Rock, Arkansas, the preserved natural area within the Woodlands Edge neighborhood provides a unique selling point for its 608 homes sites. The cluster development sits on a 778-acre infill site, with 428 acres preserved. During the planning phase, environmentally sensitive areas were identified and subsequently avoided during construction. These areas became site amenities, which added value. Innovative practices were used to achieve the required density and even helped earn the development a 4-star ICC-700 National Green Building Standard certification. These practices include: mixed use, community gardens, shared driveways/parking areas, and minimized street widths. The enhanced marketability of the neighborhood as a whole entices home buyers.



Transportation options can also be increased, by providing opportunities for pedestrian access and densities that can be efficiently served by transit. This leads to less traffic congestion and reduced air pollution. Response times for fire rescue and police services are reduced. From an environmental standpoint, erosion concerns are minimized as less land is cleared for construction. Grouping of the homes also reduces impervious surface area, thus reducing stormwater runoff, which is responsible for transporting pollutants to water sources. Further, Christopher Campbell, urban design and planning expert, cites that communities where cluster development is implemented on a wide scale appreciate at an annual rate of 2.5 to 3 percent higher than communities that implement large-lot conventional type development⁵.

Cluster ordinances do not take development potential away from the developer, and they allow farmers to extract their equity without conceding their entire land holding to clear-cutting. They are very effective at permanently protecting a substantial portion of development tracts when combined with a conservation easement. According to the Land Trust Institute, a conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values. Landowners are allowed to continue to own and use their land, and they reserve the right to sell or pass it on to heirs.

The Fields of St. Croix in Lake Elmo, Minnesota, provides a working example. The residential subdivision contains 125 single-family homes clustered on 40 percent of a 240-acre site. The remaining undeveloped land is covered by a 90-acre conservation easement that

⁴ Arendt, Randall "Open Space Zoning: What it is and Why it Works," Planning Commissioners Journal, July/August 1992.

⁵ Campbell, Christopher "An examination of Market Appreciation for clustered housing for permanent open space," University of Massachusetts. June 11, 2005.

includes restored prairie and oak savanna, as well as agricultural land that is currently used by a community-supported organic farm.

Designed Civic Spaces

Pocket Parks, village greens, and plazas foster a sense of community amidst a busy urban atmosphere. Though small, usually the size of a couple of house lots or less, they are often peppered throughout the urban environment. They include civic spaces, which are carefully designed as gathering places in the built environment. Two core benefits of civic spaces are providing visual enhancement and acting as a common meeting place for residents and for public activities. Public spaces are exceptional because they enable those who live and work in the community to experience the neighborhood and each other. Open space grants locals a valuable opportunity to enjoy a place of social interaction and relaxation in an urban setting where use of open space free of cost is virtually non-existent. Various functions include: small event spaces, play areas for children, spaces for relaxing or meeting friends, and taking lunch breaks, all of which benefit locals in the immediate vicinity.

Civic spaces are an important part of Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) in residential and mixed-use developments. TND focuses on compact, pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods, while incorporating mixed use and public places. This type of planned development reduces the necessity of owning an automobile, while simultaneously providing residents more opportunity to socialize and engage in civic life⁶. The Pinehills community in Plymouth, Massachusetts, is an example of this type of smart growth in a rural area. Pinehills has won numerous NAHB awards including for best mixed-use community. Residents take advantage of the myriad of activities available locally, from golfing, to attending events at the village green, to exploring over 10 miles of trails. The village green is the center for retail business in Pinehills. It features a two-acre park with a sloping lawn as well as pine and oak trees that highlight the area's natural beauty. Residents choose to live, work and recreate within the community because of how it affects the quality of their lives.

Civic spaces also provide a free public outlet for cultural expressions such as art shows or theatrical performances. Green civic spaces increase permeable surfaces within city limits and act as "lungs" of the city. However, environmental benefits are limited due to high human traffic. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania there are 60 pocket parks that feature play areas for children. Overseen by Philadelphia's Neighborhood Park Program, vacant lots in low-income areas were converted to public parks to supplement limited available facilities⁷.

Urban open space often requires community support and maintenance, or it risks falling into disrepair. Locals who invest their time into beautifying their public space transform it into a source of pride and identity for the whole community. Open spaces often occur in a disjointed fashion, simply taking the place of vacant lots. With planning, however, they can be connected via greenways or bike trails. The increased visibility attracts potential visitors and plays a vital

⁶ "What Is Traditional Neighborhood Design?" *CRCOG Best Practices Manual*(n.d.): n. pag. Capitol Region Council of Governments. Web. 12 Aug. 2014.

⁷ Blake, Alison. "Pocket Parks," University of Washington. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.

role in keeping the civic space safe and operational. When civic spaces are planned as part of a residential community, however, they exist as a community anchor instead of an added amenity.

Local Agriculture and Community Gardens



Figure 1: Willowsford farm in Ashburn, VA. Best in American Living award winner



Conventional developments have clustered around a golf course, pool or fitness center in hopes of turning a profit. Ed McMahon, a senior fellow for sustainable development at the Urban Land Institute says that, unlike with a golf course, which costs millions to build and maintain, developers are recognizing the value of providing green space that earns a profit. Additionally, tax breaks may be available for preserving agricultural land.

The concept of CSA unites consumers and farmers with similar ideologies into a mutually beneficial partnership. Central to CSAs, in their various forms, is a shared commitment to constructing a more equitable and locally sourced agricultural system. The operation of a CSA is financed by a community of like-minded individuals who pledge their support, creating shared ownership of the farm within the community. CSA shareholders are generally concerned with where their food is sourced and how it is produced as well as in the problems with industrial agriculture⁸. The farmers and consumers provide mutual support and ultimately share the risks and rewards of food production. This in turn alleviates stress, and more tangibly, the risk that small farmers endure in managing a small farm. The result, a community backed food system that allows its growers to focus on land stewardship while simultaneously maintaining productive and profitable small farms⁹. At Willowsford in Ashburn, Virginia, the CSA offers

⁸ Cooley, Jack and Daniel Lass “Consumer Benefits from Community Supported Agriculture Membership,” *Review of Agricultural Economics* 20(1). 1998.

⁹ DeMuth, Suzanne “*Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide*,” USDA, National Agricultural Library, September 1993.

diverse programming, including weekly vendors and demonstrations at the Farm Stand and CSA pickup and workshops in organic gardening, cooking, and healthy living. When you join CSA as part of your Home Owners Association (HOA) fee you get the first pick of the crops each week, a mix of vegetables, fruit and herbs. In return, the residents support the farm by paying for the produce in advance. This allows the farm to do their selling in the winter and focus on growing and harvesting vegetables during the season.

Similar to CSAs, agrihoods are residential developments where a working farm is the central feature. The catalyst for a successful agrihood is community demand for fresh, locally-grown, organic food. The farm then becomes a self-sufficient, vital, and healthy part of the community. In Gilbert, Arizona, a neighborhood called Agritopia is one of a growing number of agrihoods across the country. Because the Agritopia farm is self-sustaining, no fees are charged to support it other than buying produce at the farm stand or joining the CSA.

Community gardens, another variation of CSAs, provide a fun outdoor family activity, healthy diet opportunities and community beautification. Teaching kids at a young age how to grow their own produce provides them a lifelong skill that will positively influence their diets for life, not just one meal. Aside from health benefits, The National Green Building Standard recognize community gardens as a substantial green feature within a community.

Before building, developers should set up meetings to gather public support, ideas and opinions on the garden. This step is crucial to giving community members a voice in the process, and helps developers gauge how many potential members they may have. Location and accessibility are two additional important aspects of maximizing the effectiveness of a community garden. Locating the garden within walking distance from homes increases the likelihood that gardening will become a part of the daily lives of its members. If there is no need for a car and the garden is easy to get to, people will visit more often. In South Jordan, Utah, the Daybreak development supports multiple community gardens. According to Daybreak's developers, the community garden concept is among the most popular amenities for residents. Residents sign up for plots as soon as they are available. There is often a waiting list of residents wishing to grow their own organic vegetables. The concept is so popular that the developers have been looking for additional locations for more community gardens.

Home buyers are increasingly shopping for a dream neighborhood first, followed by their ideal home in that community. Thanks to a revitalized focus on the value of open space, planning for such space can reap many benefits. The variety of uses for open space suggests that the planning phase is among the most important. Assessing the circumstances of surrounding communities will ensure that the open space will fit a specific set of needs within the community, therefore providing maximum benefits. As natural spaces become less accessible, their value and positive effects on quality of life will continue to grow.

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