

REINVENTING URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

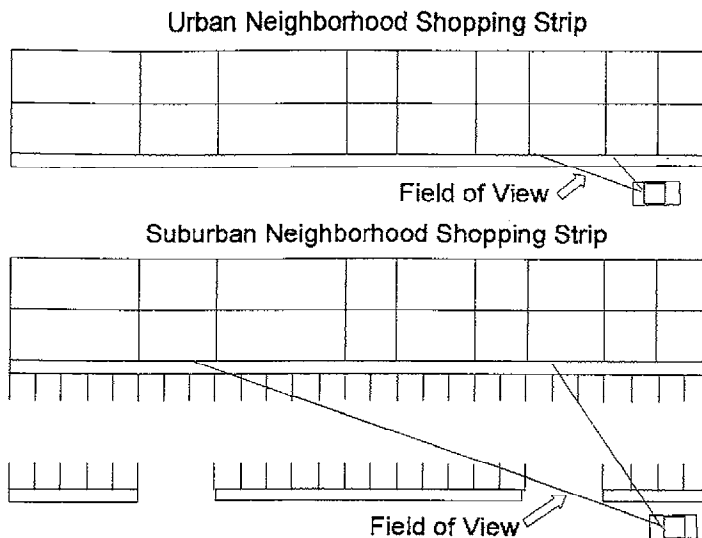


Making Older Urban Neighborhoods More Competitive With The Modern Suburbs

INSIDE

- Case Summaries, *Mark A. Eidelson*, 2-4
- Reinventing Urban Neighborhoods, *Albert A. Bogdan*, 5-12
- Michigan Development Strategies Conference, *John Warbach*, 13-16
- MSPO Trend: Future Reports Order Form, 17
- Michigan Clean Air Act Update, *Robin Reed*, 18-19
- Calendar, Jobs Available, Back Cover

Figure 2 - Field of View Auto vs. Non-auto Responsive Shopping Center



mass transit, and a road structure that permitted ease of travel. In 1920, there was only one car per every three households. By 1950, the number of cars still only averaged one car per household. Therefore, the retail establishments served smaller geographic markets. Today, there are an average of two motor vehicles per every household. The same consumer can travel significantly greater distances in the same time.

In 1920, the average household in the United States contained 4.34 persons. In 1950, it was 3.54. Today, the average household size is less than 2.6 people. Over 40% of the housing built in the Detroit metropolitan area in this period has been to accommodate the growing number of smaller households. There are now 1/3 less people for the same number of houses than the early part of the century—less mouths to feed and less teeth to brush.

During the earlier part of this century, parking was provided by on-street spaces in front of the store. See Figure 1. Customers came from the high-density, small-lot (30 foot) houses located in nearby neighborhoods. Many smaller stores had apartments above the store for the owners. Commercial buildings built in that era had 20 to 40 foot frontages with service alleys to the rear separating them from their residential neighbors.

The location of the retail stores along the main roads was further reinforced by the utilities under the streets and alleys containing water lines, sewers to take the waste water to the nearest waterway, power lines, gas lines, and other infrastructure devices. The size of the stores was reinforced by the lack of modern technology. Poor refrigeration meant the stores could not hold a large amount of food products nor could the nearby homes hold much in their ice box or later their small refrigerators. Again technology and social forces acted to create the paradigm for that time.

But, it also put in place the physical infrastructure that acted to impede the changes necessary to create the new paradigm.

In Detroit, Hazel Park, Ecorse, River Rouge, and other older Southeast Michigan communities developed in the early part of the century, side-by-side buildings were constructed. The 100 foot deep buildings abut each other. A rear alley provided easy access for delivery of inventory. There was no room left for parking. People only have to drive along 6 Mile (McNichols) Road, 7 Mile Road, 8 Mile Road, Visger Road, and John R among others to view the leftovers. The buildings have become technologically obsolete. They are no longer convenient or inviting to their now car riding customers.

Land uses adapt to technological change very slowly.

Land uses adapt to technological change very slowly. Urban properties have a fragmented ownership with no one owner having an adequate stake in enough property to convert the property to modern needs. As the buildings became obsolete, their uses changed. The buildings no longer support the old rent structure. But they still have a rent structure that supports a value higher than bare land values, especially when the cost of demolition is taken into consideration. By this time, property owners start to reduce maintenance costs, stop paying property taxes, and become scavengers—they try to get the most out of the property before they abandon it. They become blighted monuments to the community's inability to respond to change.

Automotive technology obsolesces older retail strips

In some cases, when enough property becomes totally economically obsolete, the properties are privately purchased and new facilities with adequate parking take their place. The key to the recycling is that blighted areas need to be redesigned to become part of a strong neighborhood. Only too often, they remain to blight the neighborhood. They become hangouts, drug dens, or just dangerous nuisances. Their lower values and negative impact further reduce the ability of the property tax poor city to manage its resources. The remaining residual value and fragmented ownership get in the economic way of the land being purchased for more modern uses. Too often, the cost of land assembly is well beyond the ability of local government to respond.

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In order to receive funds for road improvement, communities had to make the Hobson Choice. They had to remove parking from their streets to speed cars' past their businesses. In trade for street efficiency and rebuilding, communities had to accelerate the decline of their already obsolete properties—they removed customer access. Society has found it relatively easy to spend billions of dollars to build new roads, to build new interchanges to serve new economic clusters, to expand road networks serving new subdivisions. It has not figured out how to upgrade its older communities to the new technologies.

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Convenience is a continuing consumer trait. In the time of horse transportation, the horse was tied up to the hitching post ("parked") in front of the store. The so called "urban design", of suburban buildings hugging the sidewalk are in most cases a "rural design" squeezed in by expanding road widths. Many of the buildings were "rural" buildings located on two lane country roads

with front yard parking in the 20's. Even into the 1950's, the small stores had front parking. No developer would ever build a commercial property unresponsive to the demand of the consumer. Communities need to do the same when considering redevelopment.

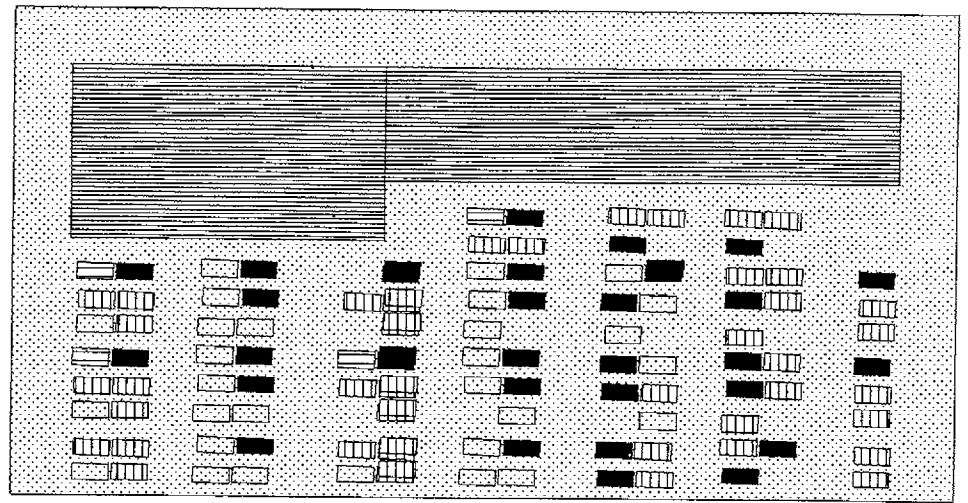
No developer would ever build a commercial property unresponsive to the demand of the consumer. Communities need to do the same when considering redevelopment.

Over ninety years after the birth of the automobile and forty years after the birth of the interstate system, community land uses of the older neighborhoods and communities have not been upgraded to serve the auto using customers. Forty years after the transition to single story manufacturing facilities, cities developed in the early part of the century have not been able to re-sort their land uses to be responsive to the new market environment.

Commercial areas built after the mid-50s for the automotive age have responded to market demands just as buildings built in the 20s were responsive to the market of its time. The 1920 pedestrian could look into windows to see the products. Slow moving vehicles could see the signs. Walking distance was kept to a minimum. The consumer market of the 90s (or even the 50s) requires that commercial buildings be set-back from the road so that the auto-driving consumer can see the signs (Figure 2). For convenience, the consumer wants to get as close to the front door as possible. This is no different then a half century ago—the difference is that we need to place the car close to the door before we become pedestrians. The front window and front parking lot double by providing an added sense of security. People in the stores can see inside and those inside can see outside. If both are well lighted, then the business hours can be extended into the early evenings or in some cases to 24 hours.

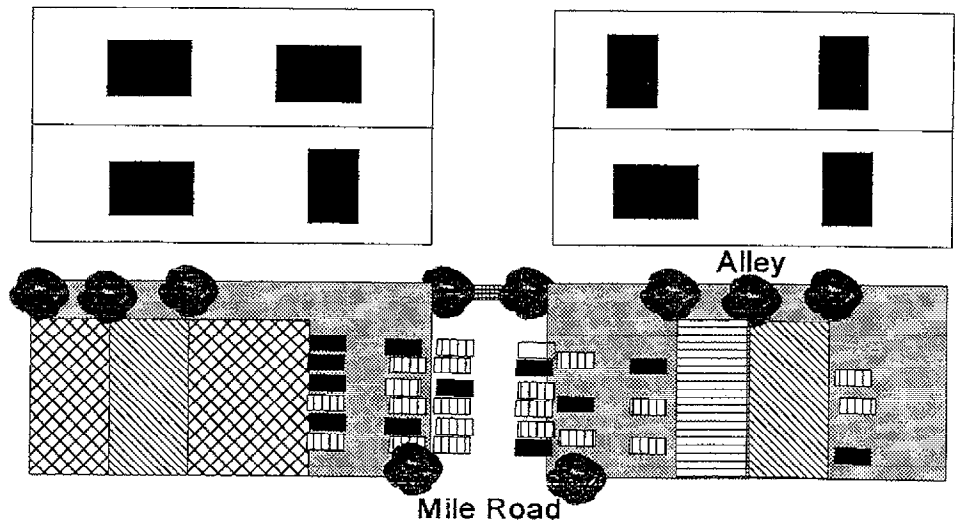
Today, the average new grocery store (supermarket) in a suburban shopping center is 50,000 to 60,000 square feet with a sea of parking in front. See Figure 3. In response to customer preference, suburban buildings are designed to isolate the delivery, waste disposal, and shipping areas from the customer. For efficient handling, the storage of inventory and production activity is conducted toward the rear of buildings. Trucks, workers, and garbage are isolated from the customer.

Figure 3 - Typical Suburban Shopping Center



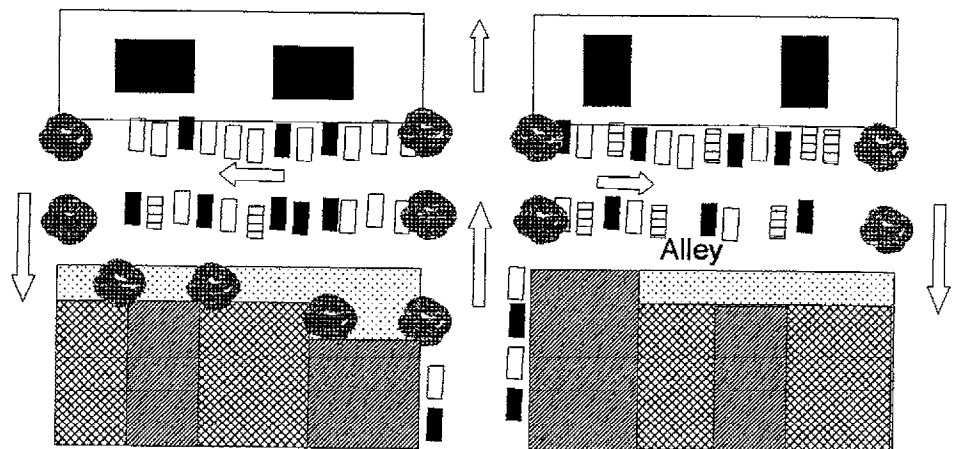
Mile Road

Figure 4 - Replace Obsolete Buildings with Parking



Mile Road

Figure 5 - Parking at Rear of Commercial Strip



Mile Road

Figure 6 - Town Houses on Collector Street

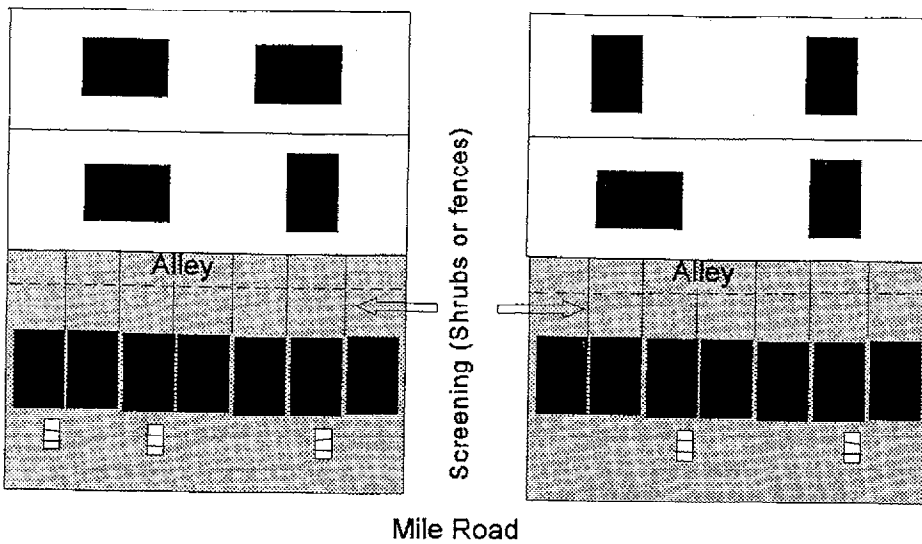


Figure 7 - Extending the Single Family Neighborhood

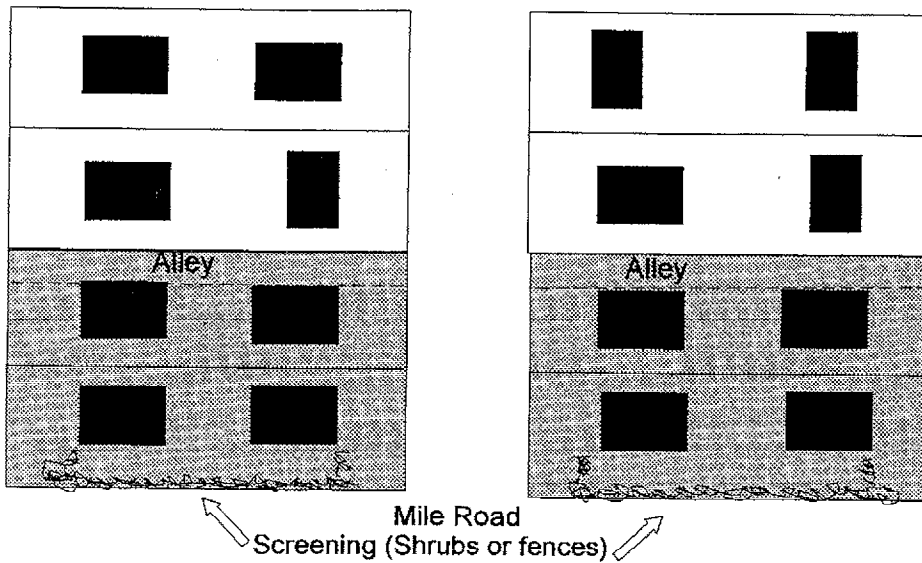
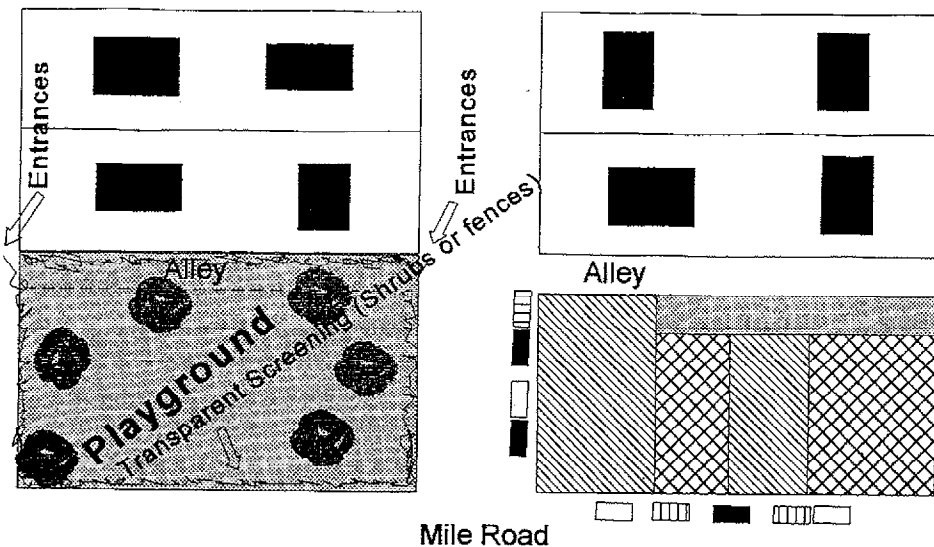


Figure 8 - Vest Pocket Park Replaces Obsolete Buildings



Commercial Strip Modernization

Figure 1 represents a typical older neighborhood commercial strip. The buildings front on the street that has been expanded to the building's edge. Parking is limited and is located on-street in front of the buildings. Single family housing borders the commercial edge. Although not shown, overflow parking extends into the neighborhood. The automobile conflicts tend to have a blighting influence and create an opening for crime in the neighborhood due to an increase in strangers and opportunity.

One of the solutions is represented in Figure 4. Several of the commercial buildings are removed to create expanded parking for the other buildings. The removal of commercial buildings reduces the total amount of retail along the corridor and improves access to the newly strengthened existing retail. The visible off-street parking provides shopping center style visibility and access. Through a planned clustering of synergistic businesses, attractive shopping clusters can be developed. The clustering reinforces the business district and permits alternative land uses for the rest of the obsolete commercial strip.

The street can be closed at the alley to permit added parking on the side street. The street closure increases the attractiveness of the residential neighborhood by reducing traffic conflict and the number of strangers on the streets. It can also isolate the neighborhood from strangers and the land uses in the commercial corridor.

If properly done, the parking lot will be well landscaped with transparent material (wrought iron fences, low hedges, etc.) And have excellent lighting. The entire parking lot and the front door will be visible from the street. No shrubbery or other obstacles that can hide a person should be added. Signs that prevent a clear view will be removed. If at all possible, additional window space should be added to make the parking lot and the inside of the store visible to the other.

Another popular method for maintaining the older commercial strips is to add rear parking to the strip as shown in Figure 5. Normally, it is created by purchasing and removing housing to the rear of the commercial area. Parking in the rear suffers from many significant problems. It requires the acquisition of what in many cases is good housing. It intrudes on the residential neighborhood. It also has a tendency to turn its back to the street. Unless there is a strong pedestrian activity, as in some downtowns, the business entrance moves to the rear. Since businesses can ill afford to provide double staffing to monitor front and rear entrances, the rear entrance becomes the main entrance. In some communities the street door has been locked. Rear parking area is not as friendly to the customer. Unless part of a larger development, it does not have the security of front parking. Since

the parking is not visible until approached, it is not watched by passing autos. The parking is not visible from inside. The isolated parking lots tend to attract predators. To be successful, stores need to create a rear entrance visible from the entrance to the parking area and the entire lot should be visible from the store's entrance.

The toughest task, due to costs and community reluctance to give up the "good old days" of the past, is to replace the commercial areas completely with new uses. The old strips are obsolete. If there is a commercial market, buildings should be moved to the rear and front parking expanded. If there is no significant market for them, the buildings must be replaced with viable new uses that improve the neighborhood. Three of the proposed reuse ideas are centered on the addition of new housing.

Housing & Parks Form New Creative Reuse of Older Urban Commercial Strips

The construction of **town houses** (either rentals or condominiums) facing the main street (Figure 6) is one effective reuse. Although the traffic on the main drag may be small it still isn't conducive to family living. The town houses, serving as apartments, tend to house young adults, empty nesters, or seniors. They act as a good buffer to the residential neighborhood behind them. Its commercial value is maintained by the residential character of the area. Town houses permit tenants to enter the neighborhood prior to becoming homeowners.

Another development approach is the extension of **single family housing** to the street. This approach maintains the character of the neighborhood (see Figure 7). The houses face the residential street and not the former commercial street. The side yards need to be heavily screened with shrubbery or a fence to provide privacy and noise reduction. The new houses would tend to have lower market values than other houses on the street because of the desire of people to live away from traffic and traffic noises. At the same time, it would increase the value of the homes now adjacent to the former commercial district.

In conformance with the changeover from a commercial street to a residential street, another very effective use is **small vest pocket parks** targeted at children (see Figure 8). A small playground with entrances located at the furthest end from the street makes a lot of sense. By being located on the main street, it is highly visible. That means that it is more likely to be maintained and is more secure. It is being watched by lots of people. It reinforces the new residential character of the street.

Another approach is to create **public open spaces**. However, these spaces are difficult to maintain, if the community's budget is already being stretched. Unmain-

tained open spaces will only increase the sense of a neighborhood where people don't care. An approach that can work is when a neighborhood feels strongly enough about the open space that it is willing to create a special assessment district to support the maintenance of the space. It becomes the responsibility of the local homeowners association or that of an adjacent business.

Changing Neighborhoods

As the automobile became the personal conveyance of choice, it conflicted with the neighborhood. Residents no longer worked in the neighborhood. The residential area filled with strangers. Instead of being synergistic, the land uses conflicted. Business parking flowed into nearby neighborhoods. Neighborhood streets became cut through passages for cars searching for faster routes to their destination. In some cases, industrial and commercial firms purchased adjacent houses for conversion into parking lots. The parking lots further created auto-pedestrian conflicts in the neighborhoods.

Neighborhoods can no longer be viewed as an employment core with people living around them. We have instead developed employment clusters surrounded by isolated residential neighborhoods. All are physically isolated and interconnected by road networks. Although we are in love with the automobile, we work hard to protect our neighborhoods from them. They can bring noise, danger, strangers, and predators.

The market forces of today have created a new neighborhood model. Some of the concepts are based on focus group meetings with urban residents and some on the success of suburban neighborhoods. Preferred residential areas are designed to be destination communities isolated from traffic conflicts of employment centers. People want their home to be a safe and quiet sanctuary from the every day bustle of the outside world. It is their place to relax. It is a place they can raise their children safely. The home is preferably located on a cul-de-sac or at least on a limited access street. They want a neighborhood that has clear borders with clearly defined entrances. Well manicured lawns, shrubbery, and landscaping indicate a neighborhood in control.

The same has become true of industrial and business centers. The market demands they be physically isolated from residential areas. Neighborhoods can no longer be viewed as an employment core with people living around them. We have instead developed employment clusters surrounded by isolated residential neighborhoods. All are physically isolated and interconnected by road networks. Although we are in love with the automobile, we work hard to protect our neighborhoods from them. They can bring noise, danger, strangers, and predators.

Urban Neighborhood Grid Street Network

The street network in our urban centers was designed to meet the needs of the pedestrian. The rectilinear street pattern gave the residents the most efficient access to the main roads from their home. The grid pattern is a very efficient street pattern. It diffuses the traffic throughout the neighborhood. But, in an automotive based society, homeowners do not want other people's diffused traffic in their neighborhood. Limiting traffic flow caused by strangers improves their sense of safety and security.

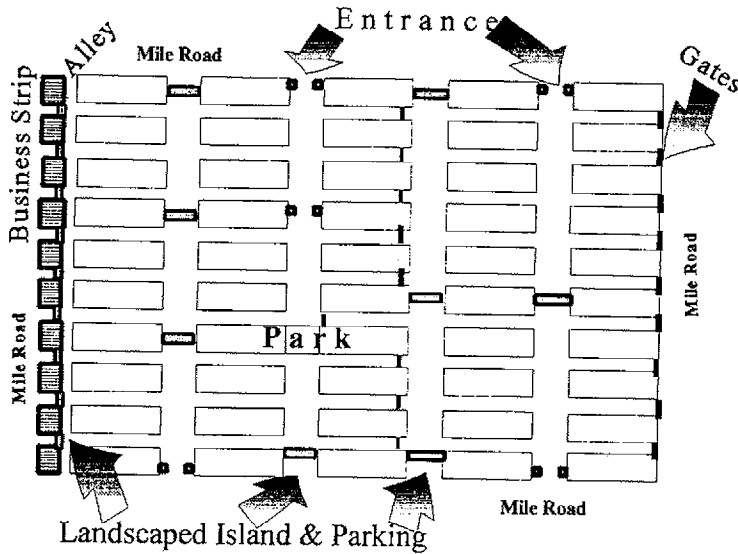
Reinvented Neighborhoods Need Sense of Arrival With Defined Entrances

The automobile changed the pattern of subdivisions from the grid to the now famous suburban "dead worm" design. The new residential market wants protection from the automobiles of strangers. The residents want a neighborhood that is a destination and not an artery. They want a street where their children can play in safety. They want a street where the auto users are concerned with protecting their own children. They want a neighborhood where roaming predators can easily be identified. They want neighborhoods with limited access.

The neighborhood design of the early part of the century was designed with major industrial plants surrounded by nearby residential neighborhoods close to work. The grid network permitted the workers to walk to the plant or to nearest mile road to catch the trolley. Smaller plants and retail strips were built along the major arteries and the homes of the workers located in the residential neighborhoods behind the business. Many of the small buildings are still there.

The businesses instead of being an attraction become a blighting influence on the neighborhood. In turn, the closeness of the deteriorating neighborhood creates a blighting influence on the businesses. The fear of crime, real and perceived, reduces the value of the business real estate. Again, in today's marketplace the businessman prefers an industrial park or business park isolated from residents. It exudes safety

Figure 9 - Reinventing the Grid Neighborhood - Modified Oscar Newman Approach



and isolates the businesses from the conflicts with neighborhoods.

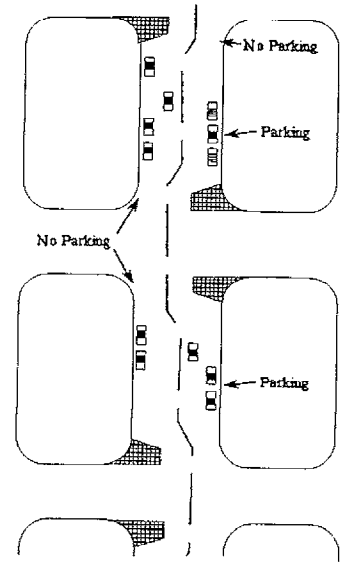
Neotraditional design that supports a street grid network is a rationalization of the older communities. It converts what many consider a problem into a benefit. A Florida architect named Duany is nationally promoting the use of densely-populated, grid-network, rectilinear street communities. One example of a Duany neotraditional project is Seaside in Florida. Although using a rectilinear street pattern with high density residential dwellings, the neighborhood is enclosed. It is a destination. It meets the automobile safety concerns of the residents. The designs of the buildings, their setbacks, and other considerations are a variation that many will find attractive. As in older communities, the commercial focus doesn't work well because the design does

not provide a population base large enough to support a modern super market.

Redesigning the Neighborhood

The rectilinear grid network of streets need to be converted into neotraditional destinations to reduce stranger intrusion into the neighborhoods. The corridor improvement program stated above will reduce conflicts at the edges. Figure 9 presents several concepts modeled after Oscar Newman's works. Mr. Newman is the guru of "defensible design" concepts for communities. Some straightforward ideas include closing some streets along the edges where shallow depth streets parallel the corridor. This reduces the number of entrances into the neighborhood. **Cul de sacing** of the grid street network is difficult to do and very expensive when done.

Figure 12 - Chicane



Newman proposed dividing neighborhoods into approximately 8 to 10 blocks. In Dayton, Ohio's Five Oaks district, Newman divided the neighborhood by using gates to create each neighborhood. Gates are an inexpensive method of creating cul-de-sacs. A suburban style cul-de-sac would require the removal of at least four houses and the construction of a turn circle. Gates prevent traffic through the street but can permit emergency and garbage trucks to pass through. As shown in Figure 9 each small neighborhood has only one entrance. Each cluster of 8 to 10 blocks is truly a destination.

In Dayton, Ohio, Newman's gated community reduced traffic accidents, crime, and increased property values. It has been termed a huge success. Newman's approach, although effective may be too extreme for many areas. Neighborhoods

Figure 10 - Diverter

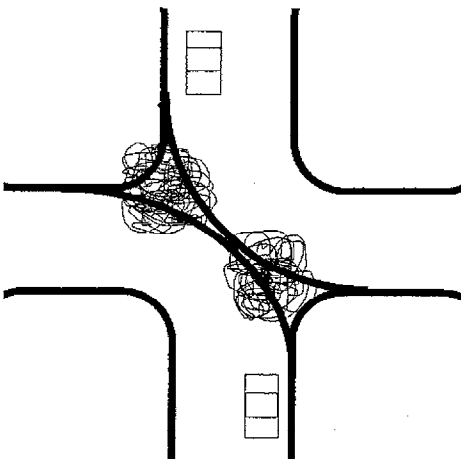


Figure 11 - Round About

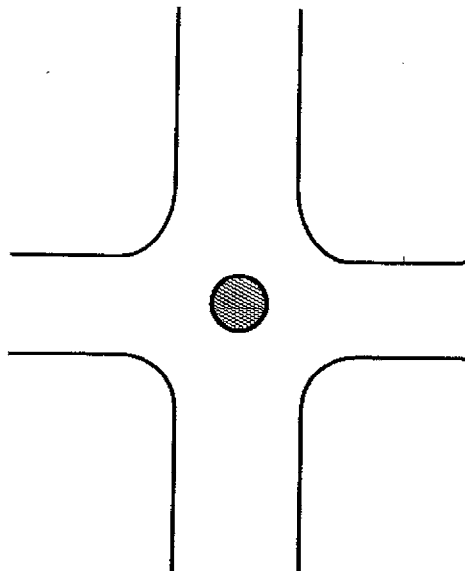
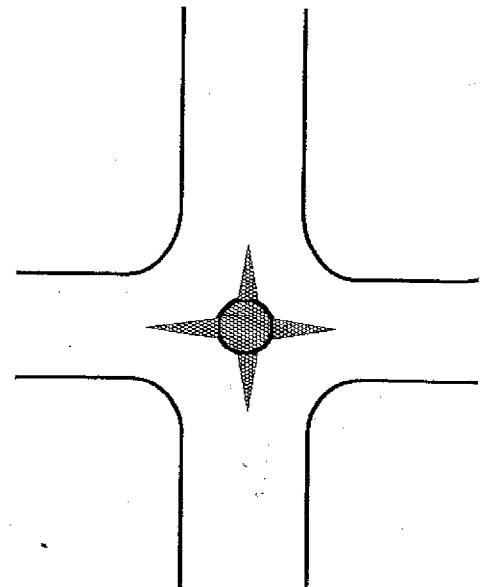
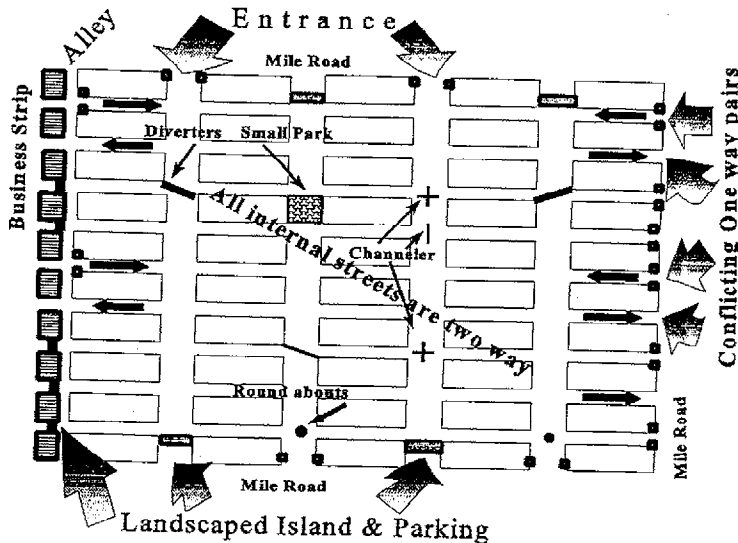


Figure 13 - Channeler



**Figure 14 - Reinventing the Grid Neighborhood
Additional Choices**



In Figure 14 the gates are eliminated and some of these other concepts are also introduced. Conflicting one way streets are used to turn the neighborhood into an artificial maze of streets that creates confusion for strangers but permits ready access for residents. This approach is not as restrictive as Newman's one entrance to each cluster. However, it does create a sense of arrival—"A There." It does so without the use of gates. It is a softer approach to the same problem.

Pillars, signs welcoming people into XYZ neighborhood, additional tree plantings to reinforce the residential character of the street, compatible street lighting should reinforce the neighborhood character of the area.

The City of Detroit experimented with the concept of creating suburban style cul-de-sac streets approximately twenty years ago in response to the growth of the suburbs. However, a cul-de-sac required the acquisition of four houses, their demolition and the construction of the cul-de-sac. The cost of each cul-de-sac became prohibitive. The costs killed the extension of the program.

The above ideas, if implemented, help to reinforce the sense of neighborhood. However, successful neighborhoods are made up of people that develop a sense of common interest—sense of community. Therefore, to be successful, organizing efforts are necessary to create and reinforce that sense of community. No urban neighborhood should be redesigned without the popular involvement of its residents. Neighborhood organizations should be encouraged whether it is for the purpose of fighting crime such as a Neighborhood Watch, or to encourage the City to eliminate blighted structures, or clean up empty lots, or just for social reasons. Neighborhood people working with each other is helpful toward creating both peer group pressure and community pressure on local government to maintain the quality of the neighborhood.

**Neighborhoods are people,
they live there, they must
design them.**

Neighborhood Education

The neighborhood should be educated as to all of the various programs that may be available to improve residential dwellings. This should include the availability of rehabilitation loans, mortgage programs available for housing acquisition for homeowners, grant programs that might be available to people that cannot afford to make the necessary housing improvements, to the creation of neighborhood enterprise zones to encourage new construction on empty lots, to the use of concentrated code enforcement programs, to encourage people to improve their housing.

need to be destinations with limited access. They need not have only one access. Gates tend to create negative responses for many people (including me). The bars tend to create that sense of being fenced in.

Therefore, where businesses border the neighborhood, another alternative is using **landscaped islands** and permitting the alleys to be used for turnarounds (Figure 4). Where the businesses are in conflict with a neighborhood (such as adult entertainment areas) it may be officious to build a wall to separate the conflicting land uses. The business side of the island or wall can provide additional parking for adjacent businesses. In the mean time, the residential neighborhood can maintain an independent character.

Landscaped islands can also be used on the narrow portion of each block where there are no houses facing the street. Similarly, another use that can separate, yet join the neighborhoods, is to construct **small parks** as street closure. They permit people from more than one cluster to meet each other with their children while limiting auto access.

In addition, every neighborhood cluster should have a **clearly defined entrance**. People should know when they are entering the neighborhood. It helps define that sense of territoriality. This is someone's space. This can be done with pillars that form an entrance or by landscaping or signs. In some neighborhoods, block club signs and neighborhood watch signs help define neighborhoods that are clearly organized.

**Reinvented neighborhoods
must create a "there".**

Other mechanisms that help design smaller neighborhood clusters are: A Di-

agonal Diverter is built by placing a barrier diagonally through an intersection (Figure 10). It is an effective means of subdividing an area into several neighborhoods. It channels traffic through a neighborhood without blocking off streets. It converts two intersecting streets into two pair of unconnected streets. It helps make the neighborhood circuitous and permits closure without the use of obtrusive barriers.

A **Chicane** is a means of creating curvilinear street patterns from a grid network street (Figure 11). It does so by necking down the street at both ends on opposite sides of the street. It helps transform a straight away race course into a slower curvilinear pattern. It reduces sight lines thereby causing people to slow down as they travel the neighborhood. Parking is kept on the street to further calm traffic in the neighborhood.

Countervailing one way streets are a new option for reducing access into residential neighborhoods. Conventional one way streets are generally destructive of residential neighborhoods. They tend to convert streets into speedways. Countervailing streets are one way streets that go in opposite directions at the two extremes of an area. The streets in between can be two way streets. The pattern forces drivers to make turns from one parallel street to another, if they want to make it through the neighborhood. They act as inexpensive diverters.

Roundabouts are essentially traffic circles in the center of a residential neighborhood (Figure 12). They force traffic to slow down to drive around the obstacle.

A **Channeler** is a roundabout that is extended to the middle of each street (Figure 13). It acts to channel all traffic to the right. By excluding the right and left extensions, the channeler will permit straight through traffic and right turns—it will exclude left turns.

The residents should be educated on what the various zoning regulations and housing codes are in the community. They should also be educated on what is possible, such as appearance codes, permission to allow day care in residential housing or home business enterprises, on the use of occupancy permits to require upgrading of properties to code when they are sold, and so on. The residents should be encouraged to use community development block grant programs to solve the problems that they have identified. It is amazing how the availability of a small amount of resources can encourage the participation of people in their neighborhood.

The key to reinventing an urban neighborhood is the involvement of its residents.

Organizing

The key to reinventing an urban neighborhood is the involvement of its residents. Designing a neighborhood that is more responsive to the needs of its residents can only be done if the residents clearly define the characteristics of that neighborhood. A visioning charette process can be used to design that neighborhood using the techniques outlined in this article. Redesign of

urban neighborhoods will fail unless its residents demand the changes. Do not change a neighborhood unless the people insist.

Each neighborhood has differing problems ranging from criminal activity, traffic cut through, numbers of children, conflicting land uses at its edges or even in the neighborhood, the diversity of the residents, the numbers of tenants versus homeowners, and their views on the kind of place they like to live. The residents can outline where historic relationships between different streets must be preserved or changed.

By bringing together the residents and design professionals in a creative charette process a neighborhood can be created that is more responsive to its residents. New neighborhoods that are urban villages that bring people together can be designed. The people can make the neighborhood more competitive with suburban subdivisions. The neighborhood can become a quiet, vibrant, secure sanctuary from everyday pressures.

But no neighborhood should be changed without the active participation of its residents. It will fail. Neighborhoods are about people and their families. New urban villages can only be successful if the residents actively help to reinvent them and then continue to participate to make them work. □

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