

Journal

For America's Municipal & County Planning Boards

Considering Residents' Needs

In many American communities, from cities to small towns, there is pressure to build at higher densities

IN PLANNING FOR
HIGHER DENSITY
HOUSING

by Clare Cooper Marcus

than the standard single-family house with its own front, back and side yards. Land

continued on page 4



Elaine Cogan
on ...

... three ways of measuring your effectiveness as a planning commissioner that start with the letter "P".

3

Planning Law Primer

What the Supreme Court's most recent "takings" decision is all about.

8

The Brunswick Charrette

How one Maine town got hundreds of residents involved in the planning process — and what you can learn from their experience.

10

Talking Transportation

An overview of what transportation plans involve.

15

The Planning Commission At Work

Ten reasons why planning is important.

16



What Residents Want

In the 1960s I started questioning and interviewing residents of medium-density housing (row houses, town houses, walk-up apartments) as to what they liked and disliked about the places where they lived. What I found, time and time again, was that residents' complaints were far more likely to focus on the outdoors, and the spaces between buildings, than on the apartment or house itself. This is not to say that there were not complaints about storage, finishes, room layout, and so on, but much more critical were issues such as lack of parking, security, boring views, unsafe play areas, or "institutional" image. A colleague and I began to collect and summarize all the studies we could find that dealt with residents' responses to medium-density housing. It didn't seem to matter where the study was done, people's needs in medium-density housing were similar.

What do people want? They want a home with visual and aural privacy. They like views onto trees or distant cityscapes rather than onto rows of dwellings just like their own. They want a place where they can plant a garden and be private when they sit outdoors with a cup of coffee. They enjoy having access to some outdoor landscaped space shared with their neighbors as long as it is secure, well-maintained and suitable for their children to play in. They want to be able to park their car within sight of their home, and to have a front door which visitors can easily find



Confronted with these repeated findings, yet observing new medium-density housing which kept repeating the same old mistakes, Wendy Sarkissian and I decided to write-up these common sense resident-preferences in the form of "design guidelines." The result is *Housing as if People Mattered: Site Design Guidelines for Medium-Density Family Housing* (available from APA Planners Bookstore,

continued on page 5

Considering Residents' Needs...

continued from cover

and construction costs are placing much new housing beyond the means of more and more households. The traditional family — mom, dad and the kids — is changing. Concerns about building over agricultural land around our towns and cities, and about long commutes and polluted air, are prompting increased discussion of how and where to build at higher densities. By building for the same number of households but using up less land, we can begin to curb suburban sprawl, build fewer miles of freeway, and lose less productive land. One of the key issues in doing this successfully is the site-planning of such housing: how can buildings, streets, parking, outdoor space and so on, be arranged on a given plot of land so as to ensure adequate privacy, community, security, and pleasant outlooks for the residents?

PERCEIVED DENSITY

A basic design issue relates to what is known as *perceived density*. The term "density" usually refers to the number of units per spatial area — for example, four dwelling units per acre, or two hundred people per square mile. The numerical figure of density and how residents actually perceive or experience it, however, can be two very different things. For example, two town house developments might be proposed, both meeting a zoning or planning criterion of — "no more than 25 dwelling units to the acre." Yet the one with inad-

equated parking or minimal landscaping may be *perceived* as being at a much higher density, compared to a design where each house has sufficient, convenient, secure parking, and views of other buildings or adjacent streets filtered through trees. In a society such as ours, where the ideal of most people — especially families — is low-density single-family housing, the more a designer can do to reduce perceived density, the more satisfied residents of medium-density housing will be with their environment.

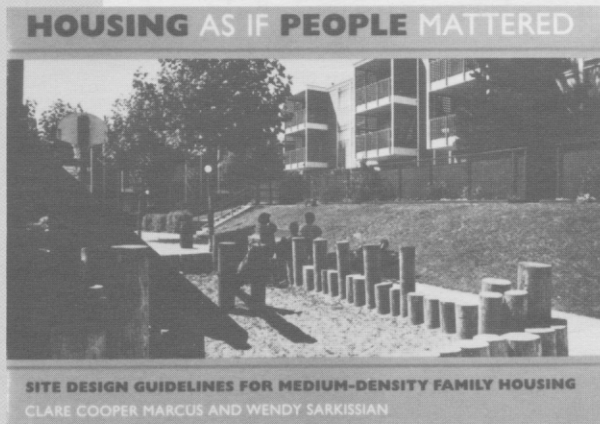
What Residents Want, p.4

Among the design features that help people feel they are living at a lower density are:

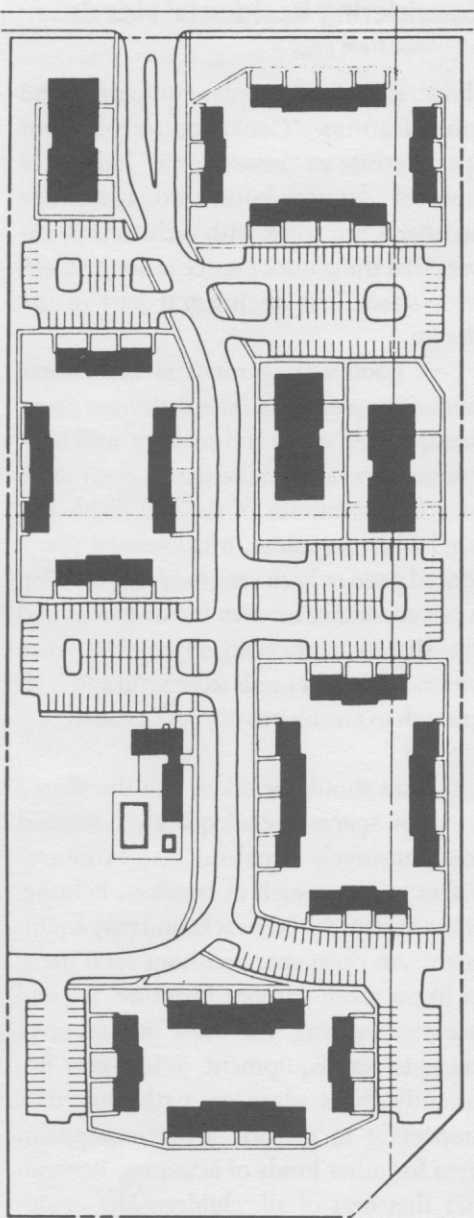
- Not being able to see too many similar buildings or units from their dwelling.
- Looking out onto green space or through trees.
- Not having to search for a parking space.
- Not hearing the neighbors through the wall.
- Not being bothered by the noise of children playing outdoors.
- Not having neighbors or passers-by see into the patio or back yard.
- Not feeling that they are living in a "project."
- Having the opportunity to personalize the exterior of the unit, a porch or front garden.
- Having a dwelling that looks a little different from the one next door.

SHARED OPEN SPACE: SOME GUIDELINES

It is inevitable in medium-density housing that the yard or garden will be smaller than what one would expect around a detached house. For some, this is a blessing — yard work can become a chore. For parents with small children, a small fenced yard can be a great boon, functioning as a kind of over-sized "play pen." But for parents of active older children or teens who want to play basketball or kick a ball around, the small yard can be an annoyance. This is where site-planning sensitive to the needs of residents comes in. When houses or apartments are clustered on a site, it is possible to arrange



St. Francis Square in San Francisco illustrates the cover of Housing As If People Mattered.



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Good site design can provide parking close to the dwellings, along with enclosed, semi-private open spaces. From *Housing As If People Mattered*.

them around a shared or common landscaped space, to which *only residents* have access. This is not a public park — and it is not a private yard. It is something in between: a piece of land designed to be shared by a group of households.

Since this is a relatively new form of semi-private/semi-public outdoor space, designers and those who review and approve their plans often make critical mistakes in imagining how it will “work.” First, the open space has to be surrounded by, and only accessible to, the households

it is meant to serve. If it is easily visible and too accessible from a local street, outsiders may perceive and use it as a public park, upsetting the residents. Second, it must be recognized that although adults may enjoy looking out on it, or walking through it, children at play will be the prime users. As a result, it is essential that this common open space be enclosed, designed, planted, furnished, and detailed to accommodate children. It is *not* sufficient to place a playground or basketball court within it, and expect that children will stay there. Very likely they will not.

A good rule of thumb is: “Children will play anywhere and everywhere; design the site accordingly.” Research shows that children in such a setting are likely to spend much more time playing on footpaths and other hard surfaces (for roller skates, tricycles, hopscotch, etc) than on grass or play equipment. Pathways should be designed with this in mind.

If the development is large enough that a number of shared open spaces are planned, it is important that each be shaped so that the people in the units around it can easily check on their children (a square or rectangle is best); and so that each space is slightly different in

continued on page 6

What Residents Want

continued from page 4

(312) 955-9100). While it is impossible here to describe the full range of the 254 guidelines set out in the book, some of the more critical issues facing residents are discussed in this article.

Editor's Note: For more on design guidelines, see the sidebar on page 6.



A Fence of One's Own

A fence with wooden vertical slats five to six feet high and about a half inch apart is a good solution. The gaps permit air circulation and a “flickered” view of people passing by; solid fencing can create a “pit-like” experience for those inside the patio. Another possible solution is a fence made wholly or partially of a trellis which residents can plant with vines or climbing plants if they desire more privacy. This kind of solution, which residents can add to or finish themselves, is known as “open-ended design.” Research indicates that the more people can lay claim to or appropriate space in and around their home, the more likely they are to feel bonded to it and take care of it.



Play area surrounded by medium density housing in False Creek redevelopment area, Vancouver, B.C.



Kids Need Sand

It is essential that play equipment be located over sand in a large enough enclosure that kids can swing and slide and jump without injuring others, and there is plenty of room for those who want to play quietly. Sand is the safest material on which to fall (asphalt, packed dirt, grass — even rubber matting are less impact-absorbent). It is also a wonderful material to dig in and mold — why else would we all be fascinated with playing on beaches! Since sand can be a maintenance problem if it is spilled over pathways or lawns, it is essential that an area of sand be enclosed with a wooden edge that extends at least one foot above the sand, and preferably is “topped” by a bench to provide casual seating for adults, and a play surface for children.



Design Guidelines

In the 1950s and early 1960s journalists and sociologist-planners began to critique many of the newer medium and high density housing developments. By the mid-1960s, research on the relationship between people and their hous-

ing environment began to proliferate. As the number of case studies grew, it became apparent that certain findings kept coming up. For example, study after study cited problems related to the need for a clear definition between private and shared outdoor space, such as higher rates of burglary where private outdoor space was not well defined by fencing, plantings, walls, or similar barriers.

As these case studies came out, designers became more conscious of the need for a more sensitive “user” orientation. But practicing designers had little time to review the growing number of such studies. As a result, what was needed — and began to emerge — were design guidelines summarizing and putting to practical application the findings of the social researchers.

To give you a sense of the range of design guidelines now available, consider the following examples:

- *People Places: Design Guidelines for Urban Open Space*, Clare Cooper Marcus and Carolyn Francis, editors (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990), a good source of guidelines on the design of outdoor spaces such as urban plazas, neighborhood parks, and mini parks and the spaces between buildings in elderly housing, campuses and hospital complexes. Of particular interest is a section on outdoor spaces for child care centers, based on research concerning children’s and caregivers’ needs.

- *Low Rise Housing for Older People and Mid Rise Housing for Older People*, by John Zeisel, Gayle Epp and Stephen Demos (Washington, DC: United States Department of Housing & Urban Development, 1977, 1981). Both publications are excellent examples of succinct guidelines, based on observation and research. Available from HUD-User, 1-800-245-2691.


- *Holding on to Home: Designing Environments for People with Dementia*, by Uriel Cohen and Gerald Weisman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). This book contains design guidelines for facilities for people with Alzheimer’s and related diseases.


These examples just scratch the surface of the growing literature on design guidelines.

Considering Residents’ Needs...

continued from page 5

shape, size, planting, play equipment, and other features. “Cookie-cutter” outdoor spaces create an “institutional” feel just as rows of identical houses do. Landscape architects can work with architects to ensure that the outdoor space is not just left-over space, but an integral part of the design.

A good arrangement is one where houses or apartments have their front doors facing access roads and parking, and back entrances open onto the shared open space area in the interior of the site. With this kind of arrangement, it is essential that a fenced patio or back yard (with a gate) form a privacy-buffer *between* the dwellings and the shared landscaped space. The fence around this yard needs to be solid and high enough to ensure privacy.  *A Fence of One’s Own, p.5*

Care should be taken that the shared outdoor spaces are adequately furnished and sensitively detailed. “Site furniture” refers to items such as benches, lighting, litter containers, bike racks and play equipment. An open space without such items is like a room without furniture. Beyond security lighting, the most important of these is play equipment. While play frequently takes place on pathways, it is important to provide a play-equipment area for other kinds of activities. Remember that best of all, children like equipment that moves, such as swings or merry-go-rounds, or on which they can move, such as jungle gyms, slides, balance beams, and monkey bars. Static, “cute” sculptural items, are often a costly waste of money.  *Kids Need Sand, p.6*

Detailing is very important in terms of keeping the site neat, and allowing access to all people. Some important “details” include:

- *Designing paths so that the whole site is accessible to resident adults and children who use wheel chairs.*
- *Providing raised edges along planting beds to prevent soil from washing out over adjacent pathways, and to prevent kids on bikes from riding through the beds.*

- *Having benches with arms extending beyond the seating edge, especially if the resident population is likely to include elderly adults who may have difficulty getting up from a seated position.*
- *Providing porch roofs or trellises planted with vines to shade the entryways, also especially helpful for older residents who may be more sensitive to glare.*

PLANNING FOR PARKING

Parking is another area of concern for residents of medium-density housing. Since the typical detached house usually has a driveway with a garage or carport on the property, people living in medium-density developments want a parking arrangement as comparable to that as possible. While a private drive or garage is usually not possible, a satisfactory compromise is a private carport or an assigned space in a small parking lot, within sight of the home. Grouped parking in a lot needs to be a short walking-distance for carrying groceries; well-lit for night use; roofed in climates where excessive rain, snow or heat are problems and well-landscaped with appropriate trees to improve aesthetics and create shade. Parking for visitors needs to be provided and clearly marked.

In reviewing the site plans of medium-density housing, one of the mistakes to look for is an arrangement where all the surface-area not built on is given over to parking. The result may look like housing surrounded by a sea of parking (like a shopping center), or housing grouped around an interior court which is filled with cars. While the provision of sufficient parking can be a tricky problem, it is essential that it not dominate the site, and that the provision of a traffic-free, attractive, landscaped area for child and adult recreation be given equal attention.


LANDSCAPING

Finally, do not skim on landscaping! Too often, clients or city officials perceive money spent on trees, shrubs, flowers, and ground-cover as a "luxury extra." It is not. In fact, research on housing indicates that after reasonable costs, an attractive, well-maintained outdoor milieu is what corre-

lates most closely with resident satisfaction. People care about the image of their neighborhood, what it looks like. A major component of this is planting — streets, yards, and landscaped spaces planted with trees and shrubs appropriate to local climate, availability of water, and maintenance budget.

In the early stages of the design of St. Francis Square, probably San Francisco's most successful medium density housing development, the architects and landscape architect insisted that there be an adequate budget for the landscaping of three interior courtyards. They even skimmed on the quality of interior finishes in order to put in semi-mature trees. This proved to be a critically important decision. Most residents choose to live there because of its green, attractive milieu and the oasis-effect of the courtyards. When I asked residents whether they would have preferred a larger living room, or a private garage, if that meant fewer trees, two-thirds "voted" for the trees.

USING DESIGN GUIDELINES

There is a great deal to know about how people perceive, use and feel about the physical environment. Much important research in this area is now summarized and clearly presented in the form of design guidelines.  *Design Guidelines*, p.6 In choosing designers to create a park, plaza, playground, housing for seniors, or medium-density housing for families, it is important to ask them to read and use an appropriate set of guidelines — not to curb their creativity, but to guard against oft-repeated mistakes or oversights. It is also critical that planning commissioners and officials who review designs before they are built use appropriate guidelines as a check list. This will not result in cookie-cutter environments; sets of guidelines are not "cookbooks." Rather, they are sets of recommendations and suggestions reminding clients and designers about important issues, thus precluding the need each time to "re-invent the wheel," and freeing up time for creative problem-solving. ♦

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Editor's Note

As Editor of the Journal, I'm particularly pleased to run this article. Back in 1976 while I was a student at the University of Minnesota I heard Clare speak about her research findings on what residents said they wanted in housing — as opposed to what many architects and planners were assuming they wanted. After her talk, I went out and purchased Easter Hill Village, Clare's case study — based on extensive interviews of residents — of an award-winning Richmond, California housing project. As Clare put it in the book's introduction, "Despite all the praise and official recognition, one group of people seem not to have been consulted for their opinions: the residents themselves." Her book was a real "eye opener" for me. Easter Hill Village remains on my bookshelf today, alongside Clare's more recent work.