

Design's Role

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DESIGNING LIVABILITY



Smart cities use design to explore community identity and create people-based places

ONE DEFINITION OF LIVABILITY offered by Partners for Livable Communities is this: “Livability is a place-based people strategy.” This definition can also be flipped around to read “Livability is a people-based place strategy.”

It prompts the question for communities: are our places—our streets, our parks, our neighborhoods, our downtowns—based on the needs of people, the goals of people, the comfort of people?

It’s also a definition that can help guide architects and designers as they set priorities for new projects. Truly livable places don’t happen by accident. The design of places influences how they function and how comfortable, convenient and accessible they are. Well-designed places “have the potential to become place-based amenities that create definitions of value for a community,” says Robert McNulty, president of Partners for Livable Communities.

strategies for improving livability

The first step in improving the livability of a community is to take a good look at where it is today. McNulty says livability depends on the needs of the city. “If you need economic development, then that’s where you need to focus your efforts,” he says. “If your downtown is dead, then the liveliness of downtown is your challenge.”

He recommends understanding community challenges and then organizing to find solutions. “A livable community looks toward the future, identifies challenges and works together to solve them,” he says.

However, communities should beware of getting too bogged down in problems, says Sake Reindersma, Carter & Burgess Building Programs Unit manager in Phoenix. “Sometimes, cities identify issues but don’t focus on what’s going right. You need to put effort into both. You’re never going to be able to fix everything, but you can build on your successes,” he says.

An important step is to develop a vision of your goal, says Andrew Rizzo, executive director of the Livable City Initiative in New Haven, Connecticut. “Look at what you have, decide what you want and create a group that will go out and work piece by piece to create it,” Rizzo says.

the role of design

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Design’s Influence

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Only a community can create a community

Livability experts repeat it over and over again: get the community involved in placemaking. Don't impose a solution—develop one out of the community itself. It's a sensible strategy.

"When a community is involved in developing a plan, they feel like they own it," says Sake Reindersma, Carter & Burgess' Building Programs Unit manager in Phoenix. "They're invested in making it reality."

One trick is to avoid politics. "Try to maintain the vision for the community so that it's not a political agenda but rather a civic agenda," says Robert McNulty, president of Partners for Livable Communities. He warns that when political leaders become too closely tied to a strategy, when they leave office, the plan might leave with them. "Everyone needs to believe that this is what we all agreed to do together," McNulty says.

Creative strategies involving the community in developing a vision include the following:

Try innovative strategies.

Spokane County developed what it called a "Meeting in a Box," a self-directed workshop that could be led by anyone in settings such as homes, service organizations and neighborhood groups. A box contained interactive tools required to get citizens thinking about the future of their community and respond with ideas. The concept resulted in the highest public participation rates ever for the county.

Kick-start your community involvement with a "visioning summit."

The city and county of Tulsa hosted the televised "Dialog/Visioning 2025 Citizen's Summit" in November 2002. This televised event was followed by a regional

youth summit as well as meetings on individual issues such as education, downtown and neighborhoods. The process culminated in a list of 32 projects selected by the community as most important. "Vision 2025" was passed by voters as a diverse growth package to improve regional economic health.

Develop leadership invested in livability.

Leadership Saint Paul has been cultivating the skills and knowledge of community leaders for two decades.

Sponsored by the Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce, the organization brings together a diverse group of people to identify and explore community issues, develop leadership skills and motivate participants to assume leadership roles in the community.

Involve the region.

Residents in the Sacramento region decided that issues of land use and transportation needed to be addressed outside of individual cities in a broader context. The Sacramento Area Council of Governments and Valley Vision, a regional nonprofit engaged in land-use issues, created the Sacramento Blueprint: Transportation/Land Use Study, a multi-year analysis of community issues and land-use preferences. The Blueprint developed alternative scenarios of regional growth and sought community input on the different options. The result will be a long-term plan for regional development. ■



signs aren't just aesthetically pleasing. They make people proud to be a part of a city or community and happy to show off their town to guests. Part of building livable communities is building a sense of ownership and pride of place."

Critical design elements in placemaking include the following:

Safety and security. Design helps people feel safe by making spaces feel open, without dark corners or alleyways. Good lighting at night reassures pedestrians.

Comfort. Good public spaces are comfortable to be in, with good places to sit, talk, read or eat.

Convenience. Neighborhoods, downtowns and public spaces need to be easy to access and move around in, particularly for pedestrians. Barriers to pedestrian movement inhibit livability and limit opportunities for interaction.

creating community identity

Architecture also helps establish an image for a city, a sense of the identity and character of a place. "History is so important," says Daniel Perez, a senior project manager for Carter & Burgess in Phoenix. "If we cannot respect the history, the language and the story of a place, the coherence of the city is interrupted by strange elements."

Experts recommend the following steps for creating a sense of community identity and character:

Assess your strengths. Does your city have a park or plaza that gives your community identity? (Think Central Park and you think New York.) A central, hallmark location helps "brand" a community.

Seek out opportunities. If your city lacks a central meeting space, can you create one? Or enhance a weak, nonfunctioning space?

Incorporate elements of your city's history and traditions in design. Places need to feel homegrown. Central Park is great, but it doesn't belong in Sacramento or Minneapolis. Cities need to create places unique to their experience.

Extend the characteristic elements defined for the central location throughout a downtown or a city neighborhood. Consider adapting architectural elements to create "themes" for different neighborhoods so that each has its own sense of self within the larger context of the city.

the importance of feeling

Livability comes down to an emotional response to a place, says Perez. "Some places make you feel like you don't belong," he says. "On the other hand, sometimes you walk into a space and feel immediately at ease."

The role of the architect in enhancing livability, Perez says, is to understand how to provide designs that generate a response of comfort and recognition while fulfilling a community's vision of its identity.



Community Identity
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The New Urbanist approach

If livability is a problem for U.S. cities, John Norquist has a solution: New Urbanism. The aims of the movement, spearheaded by the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU), are to renew existing urban centers, reduce sprawl, create real neighborhoods and diverse districts, and conserve natural environments.

Norquist, president of CNU, says the organization seeks to counter the negative influences of forces such as the dominance of the automobile or the trend of separate-use zoning that artificially divides life, work, shopping and play.

"Lack of livability normally refers to the placeless sprawl on the edge of U.S. cities or decayed central cities with many of the amenities of life stripped out," says Norquist. "Restoring the urban form in all its richness is what CNU is about."

To help communities and developers create new projects that reflect the goals of New Urbanism and support livability, CNU created the Smart Scorecard for Development Projects. Cities can quickly review new projects against the checklist below. The complete scorecard and supporting materials are available at www.CNU.org.

- 1. Proximity to existing/future development and infrastructure** (15 percent of total score). How close is the project to roads or sewer service? To grocery stores or schools? To transit?
- 2. Mix and balance of uses** (12 percent). Does the project provide a new type of development in an existing neighborhood? Do uses generate pedestrian activity? Is the project mixed-use?
- 3. Site optimization and compactness** (12 percent). Is the density of the project high? Is a significant amount of space reserved for gathering and recreation?
- 4. Accessibility and mobility choices** (12 percent). Are pedestrian amenities provided? Are connections to local parks and open space created?
- 5. Community context and site design** (10 percent). Do buildings reflect local historic building materials or styles? Is the existing street pattern continued in the new project?
- 6. Fine-grained block, pedestrian and park network** (10 percent). Is the street network based on a grid? What is the distance from major uses to parks? Does a pedestrian system connect all uses?
- 7. Environmental quality** (8 percent). Are materials recycled? Are LEED standards applied to buildings?
- 8. Diversity** (8 percent). Are residential units priced across a wide range? Do densities vary? Are amenities such as day care centers provided?
- 9. Re-use and development options** (7 percent). Does the project allow for future re-use, adaptation or growth?
- 10. Process collaboration and predictability of decisions** (6 percent). Were neighborhood organizations, adjacent property owners and city staff in all key agencies involved in planning the project? ■



11 STEPS

for creating great community places

*New York-based Project for Public Spaces has been helping cities create places that enhance livability for 30 years. Their tips for designing great places are summarized from their best-selling handbook, *How to Turn a Place Around*.*

Step 1

The community is the expert. Rely on yours for insight.

Step 2

Create a place, not a design. Design is only one tool to help make people comfortable.

Step 3

Look for partners like local institutions, museums, schools, etc.

Step 4

Observe how people use spaces to understand what they like and don't like about them.

Step 5

Have a vision.

Step 6

Start with the petunias. In other words, experiment with short-term solutions that can be refined with experience.

Step 7

Triangulate. Locate different elements in relation to each other so that they bring people together.

Step 8

Ignore those who say it can't be done.

Step 9

Use form to support function. Allow design to accomplish the future vision for the space.

Step 10

Remember money is not the issue. Place is.

Step 11

Know you are never finished. Be open to change and respond to community needs as they arise. ■



Making Places
One critical design element in placemaking is comfort. Good public spaces are comfortable to be in, with good places to sit, talk, read or eat.

Great designs have a way of creating more opportunities, says McNulty. “They become a sign, a billboard that things are on the move and this city is going somewhere.”

case studies in livability:

New Haven, Connecticut:

Making a City Commitment to Livability

Cities struggle with comprehensively addressing livability for their communities. The solution for New Haven is to bring all city functions concerned with quality-of-life issues under one roof. The Livable City Initiative is a city department that includes building, zoning and housing code enforcement, housing development and economic development. Bringing these disparate groups together helps them operate as a team. “We have better interaction,” says Andrew Rizzo, executive director of the Livable City Initiative in New Haven. “Each part of the team knows what’s going on with the others all of the time.”

The department also created the position of Neighborhood Specialist. These staff members go out into neighborhoods, attend community meetings and get involved with residents. “They get to know the neighborhood—and they are known in the neighborhood. They’re part of what goes on, our front line of communication with citizens,” says Rizzo. “They’re able to bring ideas back to the city and get the ball rolling.”

The involvement of these specialists has been instrumental in addressing the challenges of some of New Haven’s dense, low-income neighborhoods. One major focus of the Livable City Initiative has been to increase owner occupancy of New Haven homes. “When people own the house they live in, they take more pride in their property,” Rizzo says. “They care about their home, about trash on the street, about the quality of life in their neighborhood. Suddenly more people want to live on that block.” The result has been a dramatic increase in owner-occupancy rates and a rising sense of neighborhood pride throughout the city.

Chattanooga, Tennessee: From Most Polluted to Most Livable

In 1969, Chattanooga had the worst air pollution in the nation—worse than Los Angeles, Houston or New York. It was a wake-up call for a community still suffering from the loss of manufacturing jobs that had supported the city.

The clean-air campaign was the first step in a long-term process to improve the quality

of life in Chattanooga. Key to the process was the creation of Chattanooga Venture, a non-profit charged with understanding the community’s needs and developing a vision for the future. “What really helped us is that we began to convene meetings where citizens came together and envisioned what Chattanooga wanted to be,” says Todd Womack, communications director for Chattanooga mayor Ron Littlefield. “This process resulted in a 20-year plan for the community.”

An early target for improvement was the city’s downtown. The city embarked on a series of improvements that began with the Tennessee Aquarium in 1992 and extended to the recently completed 21st Century Waterfront redevelopment. Today, Chattanooga’s downtown is vibrant and full of life. Our downtown has been completely revitalized into a cultural, civic and business center,” Womack says. “Downtown housing is in high demand. It’s the place people want to be.”

One result of the process is new confidence in city residents, says Womack. “As we would achieve a goal, people would still say, ‘This can never be a great city.’ Then we’d achieve another goal, and they’d say, ‘Maybe we can be a great city.’ The transformation of their self esteem has been amazing.” ■

Design and Livability
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