Designing communities

Where people love to live

◻ By Dena Chandler ◻

I grew up in a neighborhood that was a built upon converted cornfields. Each lot was one-half acre and fenced. We rarely socialized with our neighbors. It's not that we didn't want to get to know each other, but each family spent time outside in their respective backyards and brief encounters were more often in the form of a wave as one drove through the neighborhood.

This seems to be a common theme of planned developments that I've encountered because neighborhoods and developments are typically designed to achieve a certain number of lots, or units, and ultimately to meet a financial goal. This full-yield design approach doesn't offer much in terms of overall visual character or living experience.

Developments of this type are planned as static places, not as dynamic communities of people who will be living there once construction is complete. This is unfortunate because the design strongly shapes the community itself. During community planning, it's the attention paid to these features, from the uniqueness of the site to the usability for its residents once built that really make a community where people want and love to live.

One of the most important first steps in the design of a development is identifying the resources of a site, both natural and cultural. Planners, landscape architects, and other design professionals involved in a project must take the time to understand the opportunities and challenges of the land offers. Natural traits unique to a property, like streams, wetlands, and plant communities, are valuable components to incorporate into the design. It's much easier to wipe the slate clean and start from scratch. This is not a good method. An up-front attempt to better understand the context of the site is an important, but often overlooked, foundation of design. The following is a list of common design criteria that help to create a community where people love to live.

Walkability — A community's internal network of sidewalks and trails, as well as external pedestrian connectivity, determines the walkability of a community. A walking friendly community, whether in an urban or suburban setting, is one where people can set out on foot to restaurants, shopping, parks, and other nearby amenities. A homebuyer survey conducted by the National Association of Realtors and National Association of Home Builders selected trails as the second (out of 18) most desired community amenity by home buyers (2002). This is why so many people live near a downtown — direct access to goods and services.

A low impact development and infill project, Davenport Park is located in west Asheville. **Equinox Environmental photos**

"Let people work where they live" is a legacy that urban planner and author of The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs, spent her adult life trying to instill in urban planning efforts. This development pattern not only encourages a lively street atmosphere that Jacobs admired, but it's also efficient, family-friendly, and concentrated, allowing people to walk to work and return home for lunch, or take a bus to their job just a mile or two away. I can trace several of my friendships and noteworthy experiences in Asheville to taking city transit, walking, and riding my bike to work. With walkability comes the increased opportunity for community interaction, which is essential to the foundation and the very definition of community.

Community Spaces – This can be as simple and as informal as a community garden or as complex as a public, urban courtyard. Gathering spaces can benefit the community in multiple ways whether it fosters community within diverse groups of people or with like-minded individuals. In a West Asheville low-impact development, Davenport Park, people interested in green living find that simple functional elements, like shared driveways, have resulted in valuable informal community spaces.

Resident Jim Grode stated that "one of the things we really love about our development is that the front porches, lack of garages, and proximity of houses create opportunities to interact with our neighbors."

The sense of community in this development is very strong and can be attributed to taking the emphasis off the vehicle and placing it instead on people. Residents Chris and Jessica Larsen claimed that the "neighborhood feel truly brings the community together for social activities" as well as community spaces that "focus on edible landscaping."

Designing to provide opportunities for social interaction when desired and privacy when not desired can help foster a sense of community as occurs in Davenport Park. In an urban community setting such as that found in the downtown Asheville Kress Building, which houses both owned and rented condominiums, people of many backgrounds are living together. Resident Dorothy Foltz-Gray values her friends within the community, "all of whom are so different, and yet who accept difference." Community interactions occur in small functional spaces such as the elevator, the stairwell, and at a rooftop gathering space fondly nicknamed the "living room."

In a rural setting, the principles are the same, but the community spaces can be larger and more adaptable. For instance, Sugar Hollow Orchard in Fairview has a community-shared agricultural space. Resident William Hamilton explains, "the common land increases the value of the home-sites and greatly increases the quality of life for its residents by the simply providing a lot of open space".

Green Space – In rural and suburban settings, preserving open space is important – a lake, a stream, a stand of hardwood forest, or a grove of trees – all become key features of a development. An example is the apple tree grove for which Sugar Hollow Orchard was named. Even in urban settings, it's vital to integrate open space in some form into the design. A connection to green space, no matter how small, is essential to foster a healthy community – people need to decompress and reconnect – and sharing that with others within the community can be a valuable way to build and strengthen relationships.

Sustainable Design Features – More and more people are looking for developments that incorporate "green building" and sustainable landscape features. The general public has even become somewhat savvy or at least aware of these changes. Stormwater design, sustainable building materials, and site design that all focus on efficiency and low impact are beneficial to the overall community, as well as individuals (i.e. lower utility bills).

Julie Mayfield, a Davenport Park resident, enjoys how natural stormwater treatment alternatives like raingardens are used rather than traditional structures, such as curb and gutters and storm drains that flow directly to streams. "It looks much nicer and is better from a water quality perspective." The aesthetic of a place is important and helps shape how you perceive and feel in a place, and if it's driven by ethic, it's even more powerful.

Architecture – Mention of these features must be done within the context of the key role they play in the overall feeling of a development. It's irrefutable that the architecture, including the style, character, materials, and colors of the homes are all important elements that play a large role within the landscape. However, even a neighborhood filled with high-end homes can go to shambles quickly if the residents lack a strong sense of community. If people love their community, they are more likely to watch over it, care for it, and nurture it in the long run.

Dena Chandler is an Environmental Designer at Equinox Environmental in Asheville. Dena's work experience as an Environmental Designer includes sustainable landscape design and low impact development on projects including Davenport Park.