

SIDNEY BROWER

GOOD  
NEIGHBORHOODS

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*A Study of In-Town & Suburban  
Residential Environments*

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Residential Environments*



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## Introduction

As a whole, the population of the United States is more comfortably housed now than ever before in history. Most of us live in houses that are more convenient, better equipped, and more suited to our own time; and most of us live outside the old city boundaries, in neighborhoods that are less dense, healthier, quieter, greener, and more widely accessible than those of yesterday. Those who create these neighborhoods—developers, public policy makers, individual householders, residents' associations and, sometimes, professional planners and designers—aim for a higher standard of living than in the past. Their plans are guided, perhaps not always consciously, by shared images of the ultimate good neighborhood. This book is about these images.

This is not to say that present-day neighborhoods are without problems. Many of them suffer from crime, noise, traffic, poor schools, and inadequate services. This book does not, however, address these problems; not because they are unimportant (indeed, they can defeat any attempt to create a good neighborhood), but because I am interested here in what neighborhoods *should* be rather than what they *should not*. Crime, noise and traffic are not deliberately introduced to make a neighborhood bad, and removing them does not necessarily make it good. A good neighborhood is one that is as good as it can be, not simply one without serious defects. This normative approach sets the direction of inquiry.

Do we already plan neighborhoods that are as good as they can be, and is it just that our good intentions are confounded by the unexpected, the unplannable? For an answer we may look at recurrent articles in the press, in magazines, and in professional journals, whose authors (as we will discover later) denounce the shortcomings of neighborhood planning. It is

said that our plans lack social focus, discourage meaningful interactions among residents, promote separation among the classes, place unreasonable limits on individual freedom, do not serve the special needs of teenagers, single parents, or the elderly, and create no clear sense of place, uniqueness, or history. We need, they say, to make better neighborhood plans.

Some argue that such plans existed in the past, that time has led us astray, and that past living environments were, in many respects, better than those of today. They point especially to the small towns of the nineteenth century, each relatively self-sufficient, a walking environment, with houses disposed around a central core of community facilities and stores. The new town of Celebration is, at the time of writing, under construction in Florida. Advertised as “just like the town your grandparents grew up in,” it will have its own school, hospital, golf course, and downtown with stores, post office, movie theater, and bank. It will offer a choice of estate, townhouse, cottage, and village lots and six traditional house designs (Marbella 1996). A spokesman for the developers, the Walt Disney company, owns that “Celebration is not for everyone.”

There is a popular argument today that cities should be constellations of nineteenth-century-like small towns. This model has some important flaws. First, it presumes that all city people want to live as part of a small community; I will argue that some city people prefer a way of life that is substantially different. Second, it equates social organization with built form, and community with the appearance of community. I will argue that village-like forms are neither sufficient nor, in fact, necessary to support a sense of community. Third, it follows a tradition that looks for one “best” solution for all people. I will argue that different solutions are best for different people, that different ways of life call for different types of neighborhoods, that there are as many types of good neighborhoods as there are established life-styles, and that a city should provide good examples of all types. One might argue that certain life-styles are less desirable than others, but this decision properly belongs with the general public. Planners should be capable of planning good neighborhoods for all.

What are the qualities that make neighborhoods good? They are, I suggest, the qualities that support residents’ preferred life-style. I will attempt to identify these qualities, focusing the discussion on three areas where, I suggest, life-style and neighborhood come together. The first is *Ambience*, by which I mean the kind of land uses, the grain of the mix, and the spatial and formal arrangement of the physical environment. These influence neighborhood activity and give the place its look and feel. The second dimension is *Engagement*—the way that residents engage and avoid engagement with one another and the extent to which they are facilitated or obstructed in this



by the physical and social features of the neighborhood. It is true that the quality of residential life also depends on engagements within the household, but my interest here is the neighborhood rather than the housing unit, neighborhood planning rather than house design, the adequacy of stores rather than plumbing, the sufficiency of outdoor space rather than closet space. Clearly, I do not deal with all facets of housing. The third dimension is *Choicefulness*, by which I mean the extent to which individual residents are able to choose where, how, and with whom they will live and the range of different types of living environments from which they may choose.

This approach to neighborhoods, with its focus on life-style, does not take into account all of the factors that influence residents' housing decisions. For example, the pattern of segregated housing and services in U.S. cities effectively eliminates certain types of neighborhoods as a choice for some residents and other types of neighborhoods as a choice for others. Consider also homeowners' concerns about property values. Studies of housing choices show that people decide on the right neighborhood before they decide on the right house. Their financial investment, however, is more directly tied to the house than the neighborhood, and it is more secure in a neighborhood where nothing happens than in one where something happens that may possibly go wrong. Residents who prefer diversity, activity, and liveliness may be persuaded to choose a neighborhood that is reduced to known and predictable uses, people and relationships, a *cordon sanitaire*, not because that is where they most want to live, but because it is where they feel their investment will be protected. There are economic, social, and political forces that encourage people to settle for neighborhoods with which they will never be altogether satisfied. One may say that these forces preclude real choice, and that something more radical is needed than fine-tuning the present system as this book recommends.

Several additional points of clarification are necessary. First, my approach is to define neighborhoods as they are seen by residents—which is to say from the inside—and not as regional geographic, economic, or political entities. Second, I am concerned with neighborhoods that residents consider their permanent address, which means that I am not concerned with the special conditions of resorts and time-shares. Third, for reasons to be discussed later, I do not accept “city” and “suburb” as labels for distinctively different types of settings. I do not want to refer to the urbanized area in these terms. The question is, what term do I use? *Urban region* is awkward, as are *metropolitan area* and *urban area*, and they are limited: Can one refer to the medieval city as the medieval urban region, and does it really mean the same thing? My approach has been to use the word “city” to refer to the entire urbanized area, including center city, suburbs, and

exurbs. I will use “center-city,” “in-town,” and “downtown” to refer to the older, higher-density, streetcar areas of the city, some of which may well be, or may once have been, its suburbs; and I will use “suburban” to mean the newer, lower-density, automobile-oriented areas, some of which may be, although they may not always have been, in the same jurisdiction as the center city. Sometimes I am inconsistent. For example, I use “city people” in the generally accepted sense of people who prefer in-town to suburban living. I hope I can get by without undue confusion.

There is a tendency to think of good neighborhoods as being expensive and exclusive, but this book is not only about housing for the well-to-do. I measure the goodness of a neighborhood in relation to the life-style of its residents, which means that neighborhoods that are good for one income group are not necessarily good for another. Good neighborhoods are possible at all income levels, although they may have different features; and while good high-income neighborhoods are easier to find than good low-income ones, certain types of good neighborhoods are harder to sustain in wealthy areas. The concept of a good neighborhood is relevant to all groups of the population.

I began this work in search of an explanation. I had conducted some interviews with in-town residents in Baltimore in order to understand why people who could easily have lived in suburban areas—and the “better” ones at that—had made a deliberate choice to live in the center city. The old neighborhoods had obvious problems, and they contradicted present-day principles for planning residential areas, principles that have guided the development of the suburbs. Actually, these same principles are now being used to guide the redevelopment of in-town neighborhoods, and I felt that they did not strengthen—that, in fact, they destroyed—the qualities that had made the residents choose in-town neighborhoods in the first place. Our concepts of good neighborhood planning, it seemed to me, were far too narrow. And so I began to collect ideas about good neighborhoods from as varied a set of sources as I could find. I tried to reconcile sometimes inconsistent, sometimes contradictory ideas. I worked on different hypotheses until I found one that seemed plausible, and I tested it in a series of interviews with residents. This book is the result. I have tried to present my explorations as a linear and orderly development of ideas. It would be nice to think that this is the way they really evolved.

The first two chapters lay the groundwork for the discussion.

Chapter 1 discusses the inadequacy of a city/suburb/country typology of neighborhoods and points to the need for a typology that is based on differences in residential life-style rather than geographic location.

Chapter 2 discusses the interrelationship between housing unit and neigh-

by the physical and social features of the neighborhood. It is true that the quality of residential life also depends on engagements within the household, but my interest here is the neighborhood rather than the housing unit, neighborhood planning rather than house design, the adequacy of stores rather than plumbing, the sufficiency of outdoor space rather than closet space. Clearly, I do not deal with all facets of housing. The third dimension is *Choicefulness*, by which I mean the extent to which individual residents are able to choose where, how, and with whom they will live and the range of different types of living environments from which they may choose.

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American cities, and my study findings, I believe, hold true for them. To what extent the findings hold true in other cities in other countries is a question that I hope readers will attempt to answer for themselves. To help them in this I have included, as an appendix, a copy of the Baltimore interview form.

borhood and suggests a family of definitions. Three nested definitions of neighborhood are suggested: Home settings, neighborhood settings, and compound neighborhoods.

Chapter 3 looks at how our present neighborhoods got to be the way they are. Under the headings of Ambience, Engagement, and Choicefulness, it traces changes in residents' attitudes toward housing and neighborhoods over time.

The next three chapters explore concepts of a *good* neighborhood. I start by looking at popular images of desirable places in which to live.

Chapter 4 discusses real-life neighborhoods that have been built and that are considered to be models of good design. The models are divided into three categories to illustrate different ways of dealing with Engagement.

Chapter 5 discusses concepts of the ideal neighborhood — qualities that people aim for but will never achieve. Ideal schemes are arranged to illustrate different approaches to the matter of Choicefulness.

Chapter 6 discusses mythical neighborhoods, places that exist only in the imagination, that are celebrated in literature, paintings, movies, comics, and real estate advertisements. Four types of mythical neighborhoods illustrate the dimension of Ambience.

The next four chapters develop, test, and elaborate on a typology of good neighborhoods.

Chapter 7 discusses the qualities that residents say are necessary for residential satisfaction. From these qualities and those that emerged in the earlier chapters, I derive a list of thirty qualities that are associated with good neighborhoods. These are the building blocks of a typology.

Chapter 8 considers the nature of typologies and discusses typologies based on aspects of place, activity, and the personality and culture of residents.

Chapter 9 offers a four-part typology of good neighborhoods as a working hypothesis and describes several studies whose findings support the hypothesis. Each type triggers images of real places, is associated with a distinctively different set of qualities, and is attractive to a different section of the population.

Chapter 10 discusses and elaborates on the four types.

Finally, Chapter 11 discusses the need for type-specific public policies, the goals that are appropriate to each type, and the utilization of the typology by public planners.

The reader will not fail to notice that the places I have studied and many of the places I have cited as examples are located in the city of Baltimore. That is where I live. Baltimore is typical in many respects of larger older

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## *Urban Residential Environments*

It will be such a relief to know that Motty is safe with you, Mr. Wooster. I know what the temptations of a great city are. Hitherto dear Motty has been sheltered from them. He has lived quietly with me in the country.

P. G. Wodehouse

*Selected Stories by P. G. Wodehouse*

Ask people where they live, and they will give you their home address or the name of their neighborhood. Most people think of themselves as living in the place where they reside, that is, the geographic area in which they have their home, whether or not they also work, shop, or recreate there. Ask people to describe a good neighborhood, and what you get if you add it up is a place with one door on Fifth Avenue, another on a New England common, and a window looking out to the mountains. People have different, quite divergent images of a good place to live.

Most Americans live (that is, have their homes) in cities of all sizes, and the percentage of people who live in cities is growing. Cities attract people because they offer unusual opportunities for employment and for personal and professional growth. This is no less true today than it was in the past, when cities were the centers of civilized life and anyone who wanted to get ahead in trade, government, society, religion, art, learning, fashion, or entertainment had to live in a city—had to be at hand, physically there. Today, merchants do not live above the store, traders do not go down to the docks to learn when the ships are in, citizens do not gather in the square to hear public proclamations, civic leaders do not haunt coffeehouses to sound out



public opinion, and the social elite do not have to promenade in public places in order to be noticed. Frederick Law Olmsted noted in 1870 that the main effect of the railroad had been to educate country people in “familiarity with and dependence on the conveniences and habits of towns-people” (Olmsted 1871). Today, cars and planes make it even easier to be there without actually having to live there; and newspapers, radios, telephones, television, computers, and telecopiers make it possible to inform and be informed without having to be there. The whole country has in a sense become urbanized (Hays 1993). But with all that, the city is still the place where most central activities originate, where they are shaped, and where they come together; it is still the place where hopes, ambitions, frustrations, and efforts are concentrated, where new ideas are bred, new possibilities are tested, and changes and adventures are launched. And it is the place where most people want to live.

The size, concentration, and diversity of the city create unparalleled work and career opportunities. They also create possibilities for unexpected relationships and lively experiences and for a certain amount of disorder and chaos, which can be fascinating and liberating (Goffman 1967; Sennett 1970). The unpredictability of the city allows one, in the words of Baudelaire, to give oneself utterly “to the unexpectedly emergent, to the passing unknown” (quoted in Schorske 1966). All of this stimulates the creative mind. Some people find that the constant stimulation and challenge of the city keep them active and questioning and make them feel more alive. The feeling of being included as participant, spectator, or bystander in world-class events lends importance and immediacy to their everyday lives. The diversity of people and ideas loosens the ties of convention and creates the freedom to do extraordinary things.

Few have expressed this as well as the sociologist Robert Park, who described the city as a mosaic of little worlds that touch but do not interpenetrate. This makes it possible for individuals to pass quickly and easily from one moral milieu to another and encourages the fascinating but dangerous experiment of living at the same time in several different contiguous, but otherwise widely separated worlds. All this tends to give city life a superficial and adventurous character; it tends to complicate social relationships and to produce new and divergent individual types. It introduces, at the same time, an element of chance and adventure that adds to the stimulus of city life and gives it, for young and fresh nerves, a peculiar attractiveness. The lure of great cities is perhaps a consequence of stimulations that act directly upon the reflexes. As a type of human behavior it may be explained, like the attraction of the flame for the moth, as a sort of tropism.