Neighbors & Neighborhoods

Elements of Successful Community Design

THE CITIZENS PLANNING SERIES

Sidney Brower

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For Cynthia, Kate, and Gideon

FOREWORD

Parris N. Glendening

In 1997 when Maryland adopted the nation's first statewide comprehensive smart growth program, everything seemed relatively simple and straightforward. We knew what we were for and what we were against. We wanted strong, revitalized cities and communities. We supported protecting open space and farmland. We pushed transit and transit-oriented development. We wanted economically diverse, inclusive, and prosperous communities, each with a strong sense of place. Our enemies were obvious: low-density sprawl, more roads, and cookie-cutter subdivisions.

As we moved to implement the laws, regulations, and policies needed to realize the smart growth visions, the contradictions and inconsistencies of trying to apply a statewide program to diverse local communities quickly became clear. We sought economically and racially diverse communities, but many otherwise successful smart growth revitalizations were correctly challenged as gentrification in a different form. In some cases, the poor and longtime residents were simply "moved out." Likewise, the early goals of many "rediscovered neighborhoods" often focused on landing those "symbols of arrival"—the Starbucks, the Whole Foods, et cetera. These new arrivals come at a cost, though, often forcing longtime neighborhood nonfranchise businesses to close.

Furthermore, increasing vitality in existing communities often requires increasing development densities. Even if smart growth aims only to return a community to its historic density, though, opposition from residents can be intense. Even in the

face of vacant storefronts and abandoned residential proper-
ties, people often fear and resist efforts to increase densities.
These are just a few of the many tensions that arise from the
implementation of smart growth programs.

Understanding and adjusting to these contradictions, incon-
sistencies, and community responses are essential not only for
successful implementation of smart growth, planning, and
design principles—as well as for the future of the smart growth
and sustainability movements—but also for the future of *com-
munities* themselves.

The major demographics of contemporary America com-
pel us to resolve these tensions that arise in bringing smart
growth strategies to existing communities. With expected
national population growth of over 100 million in the next 30
years, the graying and browning of America, and, for the first
time, a majority of our households being headed by a single
person, we cannot continue the current development patterns,
spreading most of our new growth across the landscape. This
is particularly so if we envision communitywide prosperity, in
livable, walkable communities embedded in a green and sus-
tainable environment.

But how do we resolve these conflicts? *Neighbors and Neighbor-
hoods* highlights one major portion of the answer. Communities
are different, gloriously different. Some have long histories
embedded in every corner of the community. Others have
developer-manufactured "histories," as in the mysterious case
of Opa-locka, Florida, discussed in Chapter 5.

Likewise, differences in area, population size, community
experiences, population homogeneity, culture, legal structure,
and so many other variables make each community unique
and present implementation challenges for smart growth lead-
ers, planners, and design professionals. As you read here of the
many different communities and talk with residents in open-
ended interviews you will surely see, as I have, the importance
of clearly understanding a community before attempting to
design its future.

Smart growth or sustainability efforts must be adapted to
the uniqueness of the existing community. An expectation that
a community can be forced into an inflexible mold of a rigid
statewide law or program will almost certainly be frustrated or

end in failure. The great diversity of community illustrated here in places as different as Locust Point or Pigtown in Baltimore, and Carmel, California, and Levittown, New York, and Riverside, Illinois, reinforces this conclusion. For me, these chapters produce not a breakthrough "Aha!" moment but a clearer and reinforced appreciation of earlier insights and observations.

These observations in turn are filtered through my own political experiences. My first real exposure to the sources of the strength of a community occurred when I was elected to the Hyattsville, Maryland, City Council in 1973. For many people in Maryland and the Washington, D.C., area, Hyattsville was simply an ugly stretch of U.S. 1 just outside the District of Columbia, filled with used-car lots and many empty storefronts. What most people did not see was the viable community of 15,000 people, with a history going back to 1859. They missed the strong institutions such as St. Jerome's Catholic Church, where many residents were married, expected to see their children married, and eventually anticipated family funeral services.

Hyattsville High School (later a middle school) served a similar role, having graduated three generations of local business and civic leadership. There were the less formal organizations, such as the Hyattsville Volunteer Fire Department, which not only helped to protect the community but also linked young men (and later women) with the community "old guard," which seemed to have a constant presence at the station. Stewarding all of this was an extraordinary group of political leaders who held office for decades and routinely rose to higher offices such as Speaker of the House for the State Legislature (Perry Wilkinson), U.S. congressman (Hervey Machen), and county executive (Win Kelly and me). Together, these are the forces that gave Hyattsville its strength. They are also the forces that give meaning and direction to the communities observed in this book. The impact of their absence, as Sidney Brower notes, can be felt as clearly as their presence.

After serving eight years on the Prince George's County Council, I was fortunate to be elected county executive in 1982. Most people in the metropolitan area thought of Prince George's as simply the populous county adjacent to Washington, D.C., with the nation's largest suburban African-American population.

To me it is much more. The county is a wonderful mosaic of diverse communities. There are communities like the Town of Bladensburg, which traces its roots to 1732, when it served briefly as a tobacco port, and which witnessed nationally historic events like the Battle of Bladensburg, which preceded the burning of Washington in the War of 1812. Bladensburg is also the site of the infamous Dueling Grounds, which saw among many others the Stephen Decatur/James Barron duel (1820).

Other towns have a more recent but equally proud history. Greenbelt, for example, was one of three Green Towns first proposed by Rexford Guy Tugwell in 1935 and laid out and championed thereafter by Eleanor Roosevelt. Tugwell's idealistic, almost utopian, goal was to use Depression-era public works programs to create a largely self-contained and self-sufficient community. Residents today fight to hold onto this tradition, by protecting not only the original structures, pathways, and parks but also the ideals of the original settlement. Through community festivals, parades, farmers markets, and co-ops, Greenbelt sustains a high level of civic activism. There is, for example, a consumers co-op grocery store. The local newspaper, the *Greenbelt News Review,* is also a co-op. Greenbelt is often cited as one of the most progressive places in the state. The idealism of Greenbelt is echoed in this book in places like Lake Claire Commons in Atlanta, or the Twin Oaks Community in Louisa, Virginia, the latter inspired by the ideas of behaviorist B. F. Skinner.

Areas like Mitchellville, Maryland, just outside the Capital Beltway, are home to some of the wealthiest predominately African-American communities in the nation. A few miles down the road is the Town of Bowie, much of which was an early, and then almost all-white, Levittown.

Why the quick journey into the communities of Prince George's County and the side trip into the political life of Parris Glendening? It is because these communities and what I learned from them are cousins to the many communities covered by Sidney Brower in this book. The lessons they offer are the same. Brower's emerge from serious academic and field research; mine evolved from personal and political observations.

If we are to be successful using community design to create or strengthen a community and implement smart growth

plans or sustainability programs, we must first understand the community. We must understand the history, the people, the culture, and so much more about what makes that community what it is, how it can sustain itself, and how it can prosper. Then and only then will good design work.

Last, good design must involve the community on a continuing basis. Columbia, Maryland, created by famed planner and developer James Rouse, is offered herein as an example of that continuous involvement, ongoing even today as Columbia adds significant additional density to its Town Center. Celebration, Florida, created in 1996 by the Walt Disney Company, is offered as an example of the opposite approach—top down corporate decision making with very little community involvement and, not surprisingly, very different results.

If we rely on good design alone to create walkable, livable places, to create community, or to advance smart growth, we cannot fully achieve our visions. Likewise, if we rely only on understanding the community without adding good design, we will also fail to fully reach our goals. With good design, knowledge of the community, and full participation of the people, we will succeed. These are the lessons to be drawn from *Neighbors and Neighborhoods: Elements of Successful Community Design.*

The former governor of Maryland, Parris N. Glendening is president of Smart Growth America's Leadership Institute and the Governor's Institute on Community Design.

A NOTE TO
THE READER

Large-scale developers are realizing that it's not enough to build a plain subdivision any more. They must also manufacture community itself, which has become an amenity people crave, right along with tray ceilings.

—Stephanie McCrummen[1]

It is not uncommon for developers to promote the idea of community as part of a housing package, and architects and planners write about collaborative communities, gated communities, and the architecture of community.[2] They focus on specialized designs of houses and neighborhoods, clearly implying that good design can generate a sense of community. The evidence that physical design produces community seems to be based more on faith and wishful thinking than on serious research. The premise is not invalid, but it raises a number of questions, especially for me, about the role of design in residential communities. Is there a link between the kind of neighborhood that people live in and their tendency to come together as a community? And if there is, what are the active elements of such a neighborhood, and how do they function?

I began thinking about residential communities in the mid-1990s, when I was working with Ralph Taylor, professor of criminal justice at Temple University, on a study that involved interviews with neighborhood leaders in 58 Baltimore neighborhoods.[3] We asked about local organizations and issues that brought neighborhood residents together. Mary Hyde—who also worked with us on the study and used the data for her PhD dissertation, which compared the concept of sense of community with that of attachment to place—introduced me to the extensive social science literature on community.
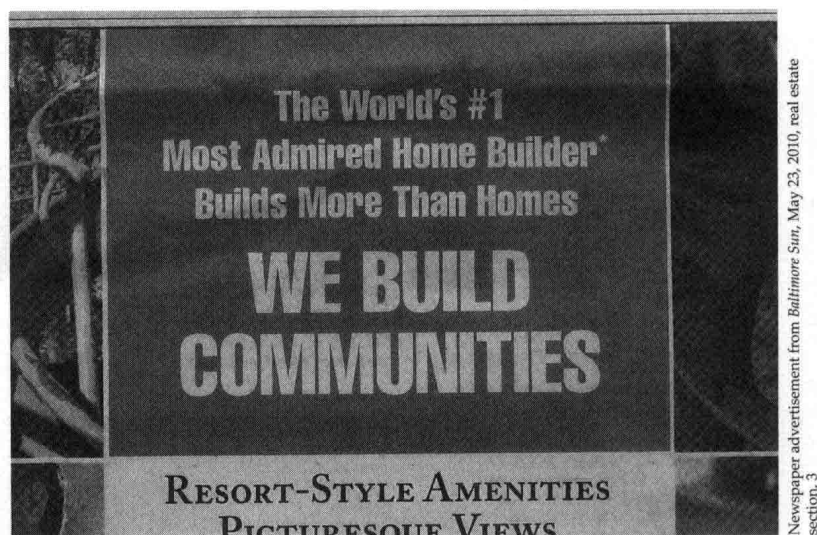
Figure N.1. *"In historical utopias, community was an intentional goal shared by individuals with allegiances to commonly held beliefs. In today's planned development, community is mostly a marketing term, aimed at a consumer niche to be attracted and recruited through effective advertising"* (Ross, Celebration Chronicles, 238).

I knew generally what planners and architects wrote on the subject, but much of what sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and geographers said was new to me. I found their ideas stimulating and enlightening, but their definitions of community did not fit the descriptions that we were hearing in our Baltimore interviews. And so I began to explore the connection between housing and community for myself.

This book is a record of my exploration. The journey led me into questions about scientific methods and artistic principles, what we know and what we believe to be true, and accepted and applied meanings of the words *design* and *designer*. I discovered that the neighborhood–community connection is more real than scientists tend to believe and less direct than designers tend to think it is. I invite the reader to join me on the journey.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Neighbors & Neighborhoods

—It's a close-knit community. Everybody is "family," everybody knows everybody.

—It's good to know you are not alone here.
                              —Residents of Locust Point, Baltimore[1]

There are more than 300 neighborhoods in the city of Baltimore, each a discrete geographic area with its own name. One neighborhood is called Locust Point. Its approximately 1,100 modest row houses are located on a peninsula that juts into the Baltimore harbor, dividing the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River from the Northwest Harbor and extending from Federal Hill to Fort McHenry. The houses sit in the shadow of what was once a huge grain elevator (since converted to condominiums), surrounded by railroads and hemmed in by industries and shipping yards.

A neighborhood is always a physical place, and so the neighborhood of Locust Point can be described by its surroundings, which consist of a cluster of row houses, a school, a park, several churches, and a number of bars and restaurants. But Locust Point is more than geography and buildings. It is also

Figure I.1. *This aerial view of Baltimore shows Fort McHenry on the right and Federal Hill on the left. Locust Point is in the center, a cluster of buildings surrounded by railroad lines. The picture shows the neighborhood, not the community. They are not the same.*

a community: a group of people who have similar interests, know one another, look out for one another, belong to the same organizations, and support the same establishments. This became clear in interviews with 54 residents conducted by students in the Urban Studies and Planning Program at the University of Maryland. The quotations in this chapter, unless otherwise identified, are excerpted from those interviews.[2]

Irish, German, and Polish immigrants settled Locust Point. After their boats docked at the foot of Andre Street, the newcomers disembarked and registered at the local immigration office. Many found employment at the railroad yards and the port, set up house in the area, and never left. A Locust Point resident characterized the settlers as "hardworking men who worked in factories and married sweet women."

They had similar jobs, and so they "knew everybody and could relate."

Many of their descendants still live in the neighborhood, often in the houses in which they were born. Jim Neill, a local historian, quotes a resident who described her attitude as "born on Decatur Street, die on Decatur Street," which is typical of Locust Pointers, as locals are known. Over the years, many families have intermarried and remained in the area, meaning several generations live within a few blocks. Newcomers are warned: "Don't talk about anybody, 'cause they're all related." A resident, discussing a house fire in Locust Point that had happened recently before his interview, said, "There's so much family down here—the first thing you think is whether you know them."[3] Even Locust Pointers who are not related share similar values—which one resident identified as home, family, faith, and beer—and have known one another for a long time. They do not always agree on every issue, but they get along because of their common interests.

Residents care for one another, saying, "If someone needs help, somebody will be there to help them," and "If you stumble here, somebody will be there to pick you up." They socialize in the local bars and congregate in the park. A group of men, who are known as the Supreme Court, can be seen every day on the same park bench. One resident described sitting out on the front steps:

> In the summertime people go out, and Lyn's got a little bench there, and we'll sit on the bench and it's like, you know, Marvin'll come out, Lyn will come out, lady down the street that's widowed, she'll come out, Miss Mary, Mr. Jim, and everyone will come out, and we'll just be like sitting on our steps talking, and it could be like four or five families, and not talking about anything really, but just sitting out.

Because so many residents have grown up in the neighborhood, it is common for locals to refer to married women by their maiden names and to call places by the names they had when they were growing up; people who are new to the area find it difficult to understand this shared community history. In their conversations, residents make frequent references to

the past, and childhood stories are passed down from one generation to the next.

Locust Pointers substantially agree on how to define the physical boundaries of the neighborhood: On three sides it is bounded by industrial land and water, and on the fourth side, where "the Point" meets "the Hill" (Federal Hill), residents draw an imaginary boundary line down the center of Lawrence Street. One resident remembers that as a young girl, she could not bring a boyfriend from "up the Hill" back to Locust Point, because the Locust Point boys would have beaten him up.

At one time, Locust Pointers could find everything they needed without leaving the neighborhood. Older residents remember when there was a bake store, a dry-goods store, a grocery store, or a mom-and-pop store on every corner. Today, most of the small stores have closed, run out of business by chain supermarkets. There is an elementary school, a park, a recreation center, several restaurants, 18 bars, and on the neighborhood's border with Federal Hill, a small shopping center. There are three churches—Lutheran, Episcopal, and Catholic—whose congregations work together for the benefit of the entire community. (A new pastor was told, "Don't schedule anything without checking with the other churches.") There are a number of clubs, including the Honeymoon Pleasure Club (a social and fraternal organization), That Old Gang of Mine Club (for men), the Belles Club (for women), the local branch of the Knights of Columbus, and several senior-citizens clubs that meet at the neighborhood recreation center. The churches and the clubs host regular dinners, and Locust Pointers say you can attend one of these dinners every night of the week.

With approximately 200 members, the Locust Point Civic Association (LPCA) is the largest community organization in the area. The LPCA has committed leadership and excellent political connections, and it represents all of the residents, although "there are just some who won't put forth the effort unless it is a problem that involves them personally."[4] The LPCA keeps residents informed, steps in when residents neglect their properties, and acts as an intermediary in dealing with outside organizations and agencies. A resident described it as the community's "conduit for one voice."

Alain Jaramillo

Figure I.2. *The annual Locust Point Festival is the Locust Point Civic Association's major fund-raiser. Residents say that they work for days in advance to prepare food in the church kitchens for the highly anticipated event. The association uses the proceeds from the event to "put on holiday things for kids," in the words of one resident, and make improvements in the community, such as helping to install air-conditioning and repair the roof in the recreation center.*

In recent years, Locust Point has been changing. Many of the old industrial plants have closed. Many of the younger people work outside the area and, despite their family ties, leave Locust Point in search of better housing and schools. As a result, Locust Point has a relatively high proportion of elderly people and families with small children. Meanwhile, young, white-collar professionals are attracted to Locust Point. They live in new apartments or town houses and work in the revitalized industrial buildings along the waterfront and Fort Avenue, a street whose uses now include high-tech firms, an architect's office, a coffee shop, a wine bar, and a health club. Some are buying and renovating row houses. Longtime residents view these "brass-lampers" (a resident's term for the newcomers) with suspicion and "watch new people tooth and nail" to make sure they are "all right." The general feeling among