

# New Take on Neighborhood Design

*Good urban planning meets three critical human needs and may work well for military communities.*

By Jim Flanders, Ph.D.

I became interested in urban design when my father Dwight, an instructor during WWII at West Point, declared he would never move from his house in his remaining years, no matter what. Dad did stay at home until the end, but his insistence to stay put sent me on a life-changing quest.

I became obsessed with planning an ideal place for Dad to live out his sunset years. That place had to be the best imaginable neighborhood and be built around basic human needs, starting with safety.

Then my planning hit two brick walls. First, the usual conventional, or sprawl, design discourages the foot traffic that would have kept Dad physically alive and in touch with neighbors. Sprawl design also makes elders and kids totally dependent on other people who can drive. Second, New Urbanism, or small town design, is nice but so expensive to build that most builders simply settle for sprawl.

There seemed no good solution. Having already switched careers from social to clinical psychology, I decided to embark on a third career and create a truly different, third type of design.

## Direction Number Three

Having written a 1976 college text based on human needs, I used principles from the text and asked a different question, "Why not use the same reverse engineering approach used to design airplane cockpits or automobiles based on human ergonomics?" I decided to reverse engineer a neighborhood design based on human needs: safety,



*U-shaped blocks that back up to a perimeter and face inside promote socialization.*

socialization, and peace and beauty.

Concerning safety, I soon discovered that during the last century, neighborhood planning for civilians largely ignored safety. By definition, sprawl lacks clear or defensible boundaries beyond the occasional gated community that has the usual problems of sprawl within its boundaries. And New Urbanism provides many escape routes, but these can be avoided if one follows the principles in Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space*. However, neither design *requires* safety features such as defensible space or force protection, as found in the Army Installation Design Standards.

In "It Takes a Village" (*Defense Communities*, July/August, 2004, p. 8), John Tinoco points out some excellent ways to protect children in military communities. In addition to Tinoco's concerns, vehicle traffic itself may present the biggest danger of all. Researcher Alan Thien During found that: 1) traffic accidents are the leading cause of death among Americans aged 10 to 24, and 2) "Traffic accidents kill more

Northwesterners each year than gunshot wounds or drug abuse do; suburban residents of all ages outside Seattle died more from traffic accidents than city residents from crime." Thus, kindly, protective adults can provide a measure of safety, but protection from traffic can add so much more. Can we find some way out of these dangers?

I believe we produce the safest environments when we build in:

- ◆ Every feature we can from military history ("Secure that perimeter!");
- ◆ Defensible space force protection (with few entrances) that screams "I own this territory";
- ◆ Jane Jacobs' philosophy of "eyes on the street"; and
- ◆ No traffic at all inside.

If we can plan such a neighborhood, we satisfy the most basic human need—safety.

In terms of our second basic need, sprawl works against socialization. However, New Urbanist design does a good job of meeting socialization needs because it requires sidewalks for pedestrian traffic, meeting places,



Every house faces a park in this prototype of Hometown design.

human versus huge scale, and porches and gardens out front.

We produce the best socialization when we build neighborhoods of U-shaped blocks that back up to a perimeter and face inside. Such an arrangement creates instant community and solves the age-old problem of mixing traffic and people in mostly residential neighborhoods. Architects Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, founders of the entire field of New Urbanism, are my heroes. I used some (but not all) New Urbanist features in creating Hometown design.

As for the third need, parks can provide both peace and beauty. I always had to travel long distances by car to get to a park when I lived in suburban Miami in a sprawl-design neighborhood. By comparison, New Urbanist neighborhoods provide parks, and Duany once noted that people will pay as much to face a park as a golf course. With that in mind, I designed the Hometown prototype with every house facing a park. Hometown is a park—it is a series of block parks surrounded by houses on three sides.

To round out its design, I placed a row of elder housing right up and down the central pedestrian promenade known as Main Street. I can just picture my Dad right there on Main

Street. This remarkable man earned his doctorate in economics at Yale in record time with honors, yet in his twilight years, the highlight of his day was when a little 5-year-old skipped down the sidewalk, came up on his porch, and gave him a hug. Old folks and kids are a natural mix. And you better believe if Dad saw any threat to that little girl, he'd do what he could to protect her. That's basic safety.

Why not ease the tidal wave of elder housing by building it into new neighborhoods designed for three generations? Why build special neighborhoods for the old folks? If we do it right, quality of life will go up. And we'll get the world's best security for free in the bargain.

### Back to Basic Psychology

Two years ago, I decided to test these ideas. How do psychologists test their ideas and dreams? They crank out research with dull numbers, right? Numbers yes, dull no. A realtor friend suggested I survey realtors at their meetings. I hoped that 10 percent of the realtors would rate Hometown design high enough to prefer it over other design styles. In four separate surveys conducted in four cities, realtors rated Hometown best, and most (71%) preferred

Hometown to sprawl and New Urbanism designs in all four cities.

The survey also revealed that Hometown design added 22 percent to the estimated sales price for an identical home in conventional neighborhoods, and added 11 percent to estimated value in New Urbanist neighborhoods. Results varied little across a broad geographical range from Wisconsin to Texas to Mississippi.

### Defensible Military Housing

The Military Housing Privatization Initiative places more military housing in the surrounding civilian community. Military standards set a high bar for developers to clear, and the results thus far are promising. It is always good to have options. Current designs give newly privatized military neighborhoods a high-quality product reflecting what is now available in the private sector.

To be honest, I started paying attention to military considerations only after it became clear how crucial they become for satisfying the basic need for safety in all housing. Then I paid a lot of attention. I'd like to see active duty troops like my son-in-law have an option to live in a community designed to meet the three basic needs of safety, socialization, and peace and beauty. Retired military folks also could benefit and gain some added years of independent living. Privatized off-post housing then might actually offer better living arrangements than civilian life—maybe something extra to present when re-enlistment comes up. Hometown adds a third plan. ■

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