SMART COMMUNITIES
HOW TO APPLY SMART GROWTH PRINCIPLES TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

PRINCIPLE 2: Take advantage of compact building design

A product of

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Smart Growth for Small Towns Series

Smart Growth for Small Towns is a cooperative project between the Extension Service faculty of the Department of Landscape Architecture and the Stennis Institute of Government and Community Development at Mississippi State University.

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Introduction

Smart Growth for Small Towns relates the principles of Smart Growth to towns and rural communities, providing examples, discussion, explanation and advice on community design and development.

The educational information provided on this site is intended to contribute to an understanding of the intent and purpose of the Smart Growth principles. However, planning for the future of our small towns requires input from a variety of fields and includes issues of design, policy making and governance. This series is focused primarily upon design issues associated with small towns and is intended to serve as a resource for government officials, teachers, designers, and the general public.

The explanation of each Smart Growth principle includes the following:

A. Discussion of the purpose of the principles and why it is important.

B. Strategies that communities can use to help achieve the goals of the principle.

TEN PRINCIPLES OF SMART GROWTH:

1. Mix land uses
2. Take advantage of compact building design
3. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
4. Create walkable neighborhoods
5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
7. Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective
10. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions
A. DISCUSSION

Why are “compact” buildings important?

While the word “compact” might make life sound cramped or unpleasant, the intent of this principle is to improve quality of life and environmental outcomes. There are many complicated and unforeseen tradeoffs involved in building the large, low-rise buildings that dominate the suburbs. Compact building design can save money, energy and time while making places more livable. Compact buildings use land efficiently and wisely, allowing residents to be closer to work, school and businesses thereby reducing commuting times and aggravation. Efficient use of land also can provide more room for the things we care about, like parks, bike trails, playgrounds and environmental amenities. Most importantly, efficient design makes efficient use of our time thereby providing more leisure time to spend with friends and family. Compact buildings play a critical role in developing dense, livable communities.

Multi-story buildings provide more space and potential funding for amenities like parks and preserve areas. These buildings from WaterColor in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida, are great examples of multi-story buildings and an adjacent park. (Photograph: ©2014 Michael Seymour).

Compact buildings can provide a very high quality of life. This residence in the Cotton District of Starkville, Mississippi, integrates interior and exterior spaces creating a manageable courtyard garden and a compelling adjacent porch. The home is reminiscent of the Charleston single house style originated in Charleston, South Carolina (Photograph: ©2014 Michael Seymour).
What is density and why does it matter?

When planners, designers or developers discuss “density,” they’re usually talking about the number of housing units per acre of land. Obviously, this is a number that has to be reviewed carefully because there are places where much of the land shouldn’t or can’t be developed. While there is no magic number when it comes to units per acre, the overall idea is to try to make towns and urban places efficient, livable and dense to reduce the amount of spread into the suburbs and surrounding rural areas. These surrounding areas often contain critical farmland, natural areas and wildlife habitat. Creating density in towns and urban areas helps to preserve these areas for future generations, but it also can help to create an improved quality of life for residents.

B. STRATEGIES

Make efficient and appropriate use of space

More space isn’t always better. The larger our homes and properties are, the more time and money is required for commuting as well as furnishing, cleaning, maintaining them. Smaller, well-designed indoor and outdoor spaces can often provide greater satisfaction. Would you like to spend your weekends cleaning, maintaining and repairing? Or have more free time to spend with friends and family? It’s easy to forget these tradeoffs when choosing a place to live, but our happiness depends on understanding the long-term consequences of our design and development choices both individually and as a community.

Consider the long-term consequences of development decisions

Inefficient use of land has long-term impacts in the form of additional infrastructure costs for roads, bridges, utilities and police and fire protection. Efficient, compact design can help to keep everyone’s tax burden lower by reducing the amount of infrastructure required. While it may be tempting for communities to develop on inexpensive land in suburban or rural areas, the true cost of such development must be weighed and carefully considered. This is especially true for civic facilities like schools, libraries and public buildings that can be used to promote compatible private development when located properly, but can be a long-term liability when the location isn’t carefully considered.

Use multi-story buildings to define space, create character and keep streets active

One of the ways that we can distinguish Main Street or downtown from the rest of the community is through the use of multi-story buildings. Taller buildings create a more well-defined, urban and distinct spatial character. For downtown streets and retail districts, it’s useful to consider the ratio of building height to street width. The basic idea is that the wider the street is, the taller the surrounding buildings need to be to create a well-defined character for the street. Typically, the upper floors are used for either office or residential use; these residents and workers provide regular customers for downtown businesses and help to keep the area safe and active even when businesses are closed.

Locating civic buildings in the existing town center provides spillover effect as employees and visitors dine at local restaurants and shop at adjacent stores. The courthouse square in Oxford, Mississippi, has local, state and federal government offices in close proximity. (Photograph: ©2015 Michael Seymour).

Canal Street in New Orleans, Louisiana, is a great example of multi-story buildings providing a sense of enclosure to create a walkable space despite the extremely wide roadway. In this case 3-5 story buildings along with strategic street tree plantings are able to create a sense of enclosure for a 12-lane (approximately 130-feet wide) street and make the space pedestrian-friendly and walkable (Photograph: ©2008 Jeremy Murdock).
The famous Neshoba County Fair in Mississippi is an excellent example of utilizing compact building design to create a unique sense of place. Thousands of visitors attend the fair every year to experience the event. The centerpiece is a village of unique and eccentric cabins that have been built to temporarily house the residents for one week every year. The cabins surround large greens and gathering spaces similar to a traditional town. Many components of the fairgrounds design can be seen in the central philosophies of New Urbanism (Photographs: ©2014 Michael Seymour).
Jeremy Murdock is a Research Associate II with the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Community Development at Mississippi State University. He is heavily involved in ground-level community development issues, especially those related to design and planning. His current work is aimed at educating the communities of Mississippi about sound design and planning principles and their impact on economic development.

Mr. Murdock, a native of Olive Branch, Mississippi, obtained both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in landscape architecture from Mississippi State University. Following graduate school, Mr. Murdock entered the world of community development and has worked with numerous Mississippi communities. He is passionate about downtown revitalization and small town development, and he uses design as a tool to enhance the quality of life in the communities of the state.

Mr. Murdock is heavily entrenched in community development, both professionally and personally. He is an active volunteer and advocate for quality of life issues and serves on numerous boards and committees in his own community of Starkville, Mississippi. These include the Planning and Zoning Commission, Convention and Visitors Bureau Board of Directors, and the Starkville Main Street Design Committee. In recent years he also served on the Starkville Area Arts Council Board of Directors, Starkville in Motion Board of Directors, and the Starkville Beautification Committee among others.

Michael W. Seymour is an Associate Extension Professor and the Graduate Coordinator in the Department of Landscape Architecture at Mississippi State University where he has taught a wide variety of courses including landscape graphics, history of landscape architecture, golf course design and both undergraduate and graduate design studios. He has an undergraduate degree in fine art from Centenary College of Louisiana and a Master’s degree in Landscape Architecture from Louisiana State University. He is a licensed landscape architect and has prior professional experience in the public sector as the Director of an Arts District and in private practice at Lucido and Associates in Stuart, Florida. His practice experiences included a wide variety of neighborhood, commercial, civic, institutional and residential developments. His research has focused on landscape history, including the evolution and growth of small towns and the courthouse squares of Mississippi. Professor Seymour’s teaching has been recognized with a number of awards including the university’s highest teaching honor, the Grisham Master Teacher award, and the national Excellence in Teaching recognition of the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture. He has been involved in many teaching training sessions and workshops for faculty and currently serves as Faculty Associate with MSU’s Center for Teaching Learning.