

ZONING **PRACTICE**

DECEMBER 2010



AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

➞ **ISSUE NUMBER 12**

PRACTICE COMMUNITY CHARACTER



Defining and Measuring Community Character

By Bret C. Keast, AICP

Everyone knows character when they see it, but few can clearly define it.

In communities across America lines are being drawn in the sand, so to speak, in defense of certain qualities that make a place unique and worth saving. Whether it is a neighborhood fending off the perceived—and often well-founded—ills of an adjacent development, or a community defending its “special charm and small town character,” community character is becoming a more pronounced part of the public vocabulary. This is so among those of us in planning practice, but more pointedly, it has become a term that is both widely observed and, apparently, highly valued in our communities.

Take for instance, Springfield, Utah, reportedly among the “20 Prettiest Towns” in America according to a 2008 *Forbes* magazine travel article, where an ordinance banning “formula restaurants” was crafted to protect the community’s “charm” and is now being challenged by the investors for what is being argued as a constitutional right. “The National League of Cities supports leaders who want to protect their community character and economic development,” says Gregory Minchak, a spokesman for the league (“Lawsuit asserts right to fast food,” *USA Today*, August 18, 2010). Here, and in many other places, the term “character” is being used with purpose, only its meaning is without clarity. Everyone knows character when they see it, but few are able to clearly define it.

What does this term mean? How can it be clearly defined and used to describe or defend the qualities of place when it means different things to different people and is interpreted differently from place to place? Even among professionals the term is used to articulate different perspectives, be it architects who speak of the vernacular, landscape architects who reference native or cultural elements, or planners who rely on terms like livability, sense of place, and quality of life—more unclear and undefined terms. There have been many dif-

ferent definitions of the term. Nearly always, they acknowledge the interdependence of many factors, including a range of hard-to-define terms that may relate to history, culture, and social interaction, among others (see the sidebar for anecdotal definitions). Because of this, Lane Kendig and I authored the books *Community Character, Principles for Design and Planning* and *A Practical Guide to Planning for Community Character* (Island Press). These books spell out the means and methods for both defining and determining community character in different contexts.

ANECDOTAL DEFINITIONS

Community character is “the distinctive identity of a particular place that results from the interaction of many factors—built form, landscape, history, people and their activities.”

—New Zealand Ministry for the Environment

“Community character is the sum of all the attributes and assets that make a community unique, and that establish a sense of place for its residents.”

—Norwalk, Ohio, *Comprehensive Plan*

First and foremost, the purpose of this article is to give a clearly defined means for categorizing distinct classes and types of community character. This is important to give insight to both professional and citizen planners on the principles of community character and the well-founded reasons for using it in lieu of the conventional measures of land use and density in creating comprehensive plans and, ultimately, their implementing regulations. This is a significant—and essential—shift in the way of thinking after years of education and practice under a land-use system now largely considered ineffective. Instead, we must understand the context of how our communities have been developed, and more importantly, how they may be more deliberately planned, regulated, and built—or

rebuilt—in the future. This article lays out a framework to describe the general characteristics of each class and type of character in addition to their relative perceptions and the means and metrics used to define them.

There are a number of well-defined measures that may be used to characterize the distinctions and differences between environments. These are identified together with other tangible and sometimes intangible variables that are essential contributors to different development outcomes. How these variables are applied matters. In other words, intended character outcomes simply will not manifest themselves without deliberate planning and even more deliberate regulations.

Too often, land-use plans are vague in the distinctions between districts (commonly using low-, medium-, and high-density) and overly broad in the range of allowable densities. In turn, the zoning for developments of different character is allowed—often by right—within the same district. Effectively, the decision of character is left to individual landowners who may, but often do not, share the same vision and expectations of the city and adjacent home owners. This, and for many other reasons, is why community character must be clearly defined.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY CHARACTER?

As used in this article, the term “community character” describes a continuum from rural to urban. To put it simply, this continuum relates to a relative scale of development intensities, stretching across a spectrum from undisturbed natural settings to the most intensively developed urban centers. Defining these intensities of development is a series of variables, where the relative balance changes along the continuum.

Community character is a system that defines three classes of development: urban, sub-urban, and rural. Each class is further

ASK THE AUTHOR JOIN US ONLINE!

Go online during the month of December to participate in our “Ask the Author” forum, an interactive feature of Zoning Practice. Bret C. Keast, AICP, will be available to answer questions about this article. Go to the APA website at www.planning.org and follow the links to the Ask the Author section. From there, just submit your questions about the article using the e-mail link. The author will reply, and Zoning Practice will post the answers cumulatively on the website for the benefit of all subscribers. This feature will be available for selected issues of Zoning Practice at announced times. After each online discussion is closed, the answers will be saved in an online archive available through the APA Zoning Practice web pages.

About the Author

Bret C. Keast, AICP, is president and owner of Kendig Keast Collaborative, a national planning firm with offices in Chicago; Sugar Land, Texas; Denver; Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin; and Sacramento, California. Keast had more than 20 years' experience with a regional planning commission, municipality, and international planning and design firm before forming his partnership with Lane Kendig in 2003. He has consulted local and county governments across the United States in the areas of comprehensive and small area planning, zoning and land development codes, and a broad array of other studies and master plans. Keast received his Bachelor of Science in Community and Regional Planning from Iowa State University and his Master of Urban Planning from the University of Kansas. He is a frequent speaker at national, state, and local planning conferences. He is co-author of *Community Character, Principles for Design and Planning* and *A Practical Guide to Planning for Community Character* (Island Press) and “Meeting Procedures and Liability Issues for Public Officials,” published in the *Guide to Urban Planning in Texas Communities*. The author extends his appreciation to Lane Kendig, Gary Mitchell, Todd Messenger, and Elizabeth Austin for their help and contributions to this article.

delineated by design types. These types include urban core, urban, and auto-urban within the urban class; suburban and estate within the sub-urban class; and countryside, agricultural, and natural within the rural class. Of course, there will be variations among the design types depending on a multitude of factors including, but not limited to, topography, geology and soils, climatic conditions, and the context of the environment, together with the laws and common practices of different states and places.

Use of a community character system is essential if a community is to achieve intentional outcomes. While land use and density are considerations by way of their influences on traffic, parking, and utility capacity, they are poor surrogates for character. Instead, it is how the use is designed and density is applied that determines its character. By using community character to organize develop-

ment, better land-use and regulatory strategies may be formed and measures may be established to ensure deliberate outcomes.

The Premise

Simply, community character is rooted in the premise that the same or similar land uses may be designed to meet a number of different character types. This is done by using landscaping, street design, lotting patterns, and the arrangement and amount of open space—together with land use and density—to create the desired character. In each case, if designed in context, land use does not necessarily disrupt or even determine development character. While the focus of this article is on residential development, Illustrative 1 depicts a relevant application of community character in a nonresidential context. In this illustration, the use is the same but the character is much different by way of the building scale, position,

and orientation; provisions for parking; and its site design. In the same way, this use could also be designed to reflect a suburban character with increased open space and vegetation and different building and site standards.

Illustrative 2 on page 4 demonstrates that land use, lot size, and density are equally irrelevant as independent measures of character. The small-lot, single-family dwellings (left) are three times more dense than the detached single-family dwellings (right), yet the neighborhood shown on the left is perceived to be more rural in character. This goes against conventional wisdom to those (professionals and laypersons alike) who have been conditioned or unintentionally trained to think of increased density as being less desirable. Again, it is a multitude of design factors that relate to character.

Community character is based on a relative balance of design elements. This means that, within reason, development may have

ILLUSTRATIVE 1 | SIMILAR USE, DIFFERENT CHARACTER:
Same use in urban and auto-urban settings (Valparaiso, Indiana)

⊕ (Left) Drug store,
urban context
(Right) Drug store,
auto-urban context



**ILLUSTRATIVE 2 | MISCONCEPTION OF DENSITY:
Higher density in suburban settings does not adversely affect character
(New Seabury, Massachusetts and Jefferson, Missouri)**



⊕ Attached residential, rural context



⊕ Detached residential, suburban context

different uses, mixed housing and building types, varying densities, and different lot and street patterns while being of the same character. Of course, good outcomes warrant good plans and clear and well-calibrated standards. This is accomplished by maintaining a balance among a series of control measures. Generally, these control measures include the relative proportions and relationships between green spaces, gray spaces, and buildings, which each vary according to their character context.

The Rationale

The rationale of this system is depicted in Illustrative 3 to indicate that a decrease in lot size or a change in housing type may be offset by a relative proportion of open space. By holding the density neutral, or allowing a modest increase as an incentive for good, sustainable development practices, the character may be preserved. In this way, community character rewards design that is in harmony with the environment, whether it's to preserve a natural feature, conserve environmental resources, reconcile the character with that of abutting developments, or to meet "green" or low-impact design objectives. In short, community character produces rather than prevents good outcomes.

Class and Type Profiles

The distinction among the three character classes and between each character type is outlined by the following profiles. Each includes a narrative description to explain the nature and intent of the individual character types, which is followed by the means and metrics that may be used to measure and accurately categorize different residential land uses. The table is divided into three sections, which

ILLUSTRATIVE 3 | RATIONALE OF COMMUNITY CHARACTER

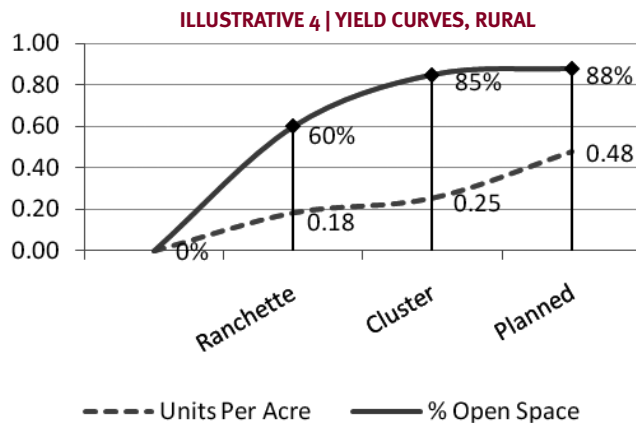


⊕ A relative balance of lot sizes and open space holds the density and character neutral.

relate the visual perceptions, dimensions, and yields that are applicable to each development type (reflected by the columns). The different development types are used to illustrate that there are different means for achieving the same rural, suburban, or urban character. This is an essential foundation of the community character system. The dimensions and yields are relative—not absolute—as they must vary from community to community to account for their respective environments, regulatory provisions, and development practices.

The profiles demonstrate the range of dimensions and yields relative to each character class. The intent is to define typical low and high ends of the spectrum. The points in between representing individual character types, which can be translated into land-use or zoning districts, may vary in their dimensions and yields (as applicable to each community) provided they are within the class range and of relative proportions when plotted along the yield curves (see Illustrative 4 on page 5).

The metrics that define character relate to the relative proportions and design relationships between green spaces, gray spaces, and buildings. These are highly interdependent; when calculated individually, they mean little in defining character. Together, though, each may be varied to maintain a balance necessary to achieve a certain character. This balance is dependent on the percentage of open space, lot size (and particularly lot width), setbacks, and building, facade, and street spacing. These variables yield the percentages of impervious and pervious cover; private, on-lot green space; and gross and net density. Definitions of these metrics and descriptions of their use may be found in *Community Character, Principles for Design and Planning*.



⊕ A development with a combination of density and open space that falls anywhere along the yield curve is of a rural character.

The control measures are generally defined as follows (see Illustrative 5):

- **Green space** refers to pervious surfaces that may include common spaces, such as nature reserves, conservation areas, and parks or other open spaces. In the rural and sub-urban classes they also relate to private, on-lot green spaces. Green space also refers to green mass representing the relative volume of vegetation. In a sub-urban context, green mass should exceed building mass. In an urban context, green mass may “tip the scales” to a suburban character. In the community character system, green space is defined by an open space ratio or, for nonresidential uses, a landscape surface ratio.

- **Gray space** relates to the impervious area of a lot or tract, generally those consumed by parking and loading areas, as well as the building footprint. In relationship to character, the amount of on-site surface parking is a significant determinant, as is its relationship to the building and street(s).

- **Buildings** relate to both two and three-dimensional space. The amount of site area they consume and their relationship to other buildings, open spaces, and the street is among the factors that determine character. The height and mass of buildings are equally important as they relate to scale, building enclosure, and intensity.

Using Community Character

The dimensions and yields reflected below may be used to inventory and accurately categorize residential areas according to their character. By doing so, planners, public officials, and neighborhood leaders alike may better understand what elements produce a certain character. This may be used to develop a land-use plan that is more definitive as to the intended character outcomes of individual areas and the community. Ultimately, these dimensions and measures may be used to calibrate densities and open space percentages, establish dimensional standards, and determine yields in creating regulatory provisions that relate to character. Ordinances that fail to achieve their intended outcomes are due to an overemphasis on land use and lot size, a lack of emphasis on site and building design, use of uniform setbacks and lot dimensions across districts, and unrelated standards for resource protection, among many others.

Tipping Points

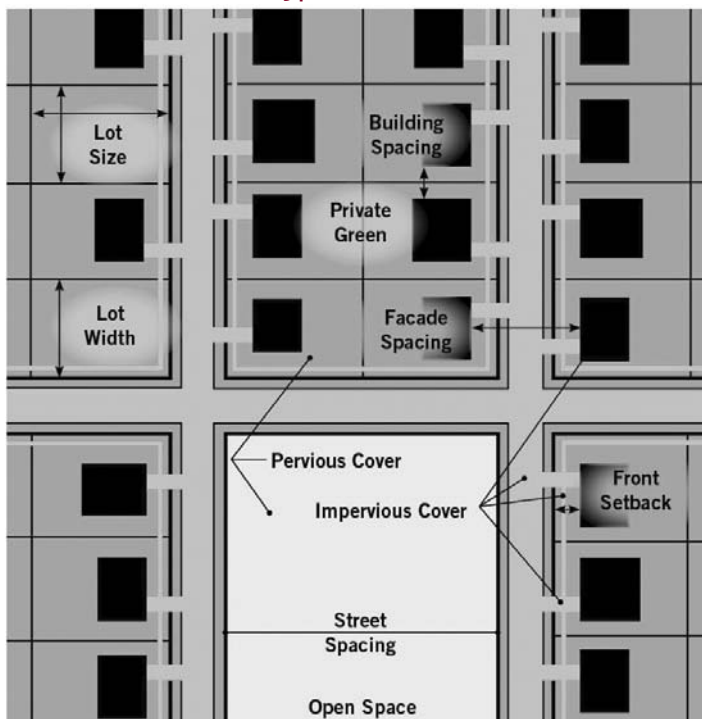
Sometimes character is not easy to categorize, particularly when a neighborhood was built according to standards that, at the time, did not relate to character. In this way community character is a tool to ensure that future neighborhoods have an identifiable character. Specifying character is also made difficult by unique site conditions that create tipping points. These are tangible and intangible variables that “tip the scales” from one character type to another. By way of example, what is an auto-urban neighborhood by reason of its street and lot layout and spacing may be classified suburban if there is significant open space; large, well-landscaped and treed front yards; and no garage or one situated to the rear or accessed via an alley. The most common tipping points include:

- Lot size and width, side yard setbacks, and building separation
- Front yard depth and amount of landscaping and green mass
- On- or off-street parking and front, rear, or alley-accessed garage
- Percentage and distribution of common open space

CHARACTER CLASS: RURAL

Natural and agricultural character types are defined by their uses: wooded or savannah lands, plus creeks and wetlands for the natural; crop and ranching, plus scattered, rural homesteads for the agricultural. Development within these areas is clearly accessory to the

ILLUSTRATIVE 5 | APPLICATION OF MEASURES



KEYS TO RURAL CHARACTER

- Wide-open landscapes with no sense of enclosure, and views to the horizon mostly unbroken by buildings
- Structures are in the background or invisible entirely as they blend into the landscape
- Very high open-space ratios and very low building coverage
- Great building separation, providing privacy and detachment from neighboring dwellings
- Much greater reliance on natural drainage systems, except where altered significantly by agricultural operations

principal use and of a very low density. Countryside is a transitional area with low densities that usually consists of an informal arrangement of larger acreages and smaller ranchettes, although the same character may be achieved by smaller, more formally organized lots that are nestled around common open space. The rural types are as follows:

- **Natural areas** are constrained for development due to features such as streams and floodplains or densely vegetated areas. When suitable, natural areas are ideal for public parkland acquisition or as a nature preserve. Natural areas may accommodate development at very low densities requiring sensitive planning and design.
- **Agricultural** is defined by its uses. Homes are clearly accessory and secondary to the agricultural operations. The landscape is accented by farmsteads, barns, fences lining fields and livestock areas, and a virtually unbroken horizon, all of which contribute to its rural character.
- **Countryside** is a rural fringe or exurban residential living environment that typically reflects the early signs of suburbanization. It has larger lots and lower densities than that of the sub-urban class.

KEYS TO SUB-URBAN CHARACTER

- More horizontal development than the rural class with broader spacing than the urban class
- Space enclosure, if any, is provided by trees and vegetation rather than buildings
- Large building setbacks from streets with more “green” and open space versus on-lot driveways and on-lot parking surfaces
- More building separation, through larger setbacks and, in some cases, larger lots
- Much lower lot coverage and a correspondingly higher open space ratio on lots
- More extensive vegetation and landscaping
- More opportunity for natural drainage and stormwater absorption versus concentrated stormwater runoff and conveyance



Means and Metrics	Natural/Agricultural	Ranchette	Cluster	Planned
Green Spaces	Predominant	Predominant	Predominant	Still Predominant
Buildings	Insignificant	Very infrequent	Infrequent	Frequent, clustered
Grey Spaces	Insignificant	Insignificant	Insignificant	Nominal
% Open Space	0%	90%	95%	96%
Lot Size	40 acres	2 acres	0.5 acre	8,000 sf.
Lot Width	800'	250'	100'	75'
Front Setback	200'	100'	45'	25'
Building Spacing	100"	40'	16'	12'
Facade Spacing	440'	240'	130'	90'
Street Spacing	4,350'	700'	430'	220'
Impervious Cover	1.06%	0.96%	1.29%	2.14%
Pervious Cover	98.94%	99.04%	98.71%	97.86%
Private Green	98.94%	9.04%	3.71%	1.86%
Density, Gross	0.024	0.046	0.091	0.159
Density, Net		0.457	1.823	3.969

The predominant characteristic of the rural class is the vast openness of the visual landscape. Development within the rural class generally includes farmsteads on very large acreages or broadly scattered home sites with a sizeable distance between them. Development within areas that are intended to remain of rural character must either be acreages or intensely clustered with high degrees of open space. As illustrated above, rural character may be achieved by protecting natural areas, preserving agricultural operations, or by allowing development at limited densities while preserving open space.

CHARACTER CLASS: SUB-URBAN

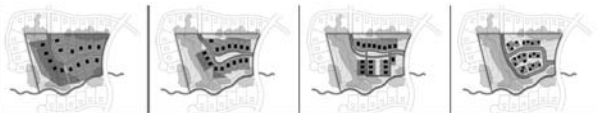
In this character class the dominant visual feature is “green” or open space versus structures. Where there is a sense of enclosure along streets, it comes from a tree canopy or dense vegetation and landscaping, in effect being “garden-like.” The openness contributes to recreation opportunities and natural resource protection. The sub-urban types are described as follows:

- **Suburban** development is characterized by larger front and side yard setbacks, greater space between dwellings, and abundant landscaping and green space. Street trees and front yard land-

scaping may create a mass of vegetation that is greater than that of the buildings.

- **Estate** is a larger lot version of suburban, where the open space is private yards rather than common open space. The lots in wooded areas can be as small as one acre; on rangeland, three- to five-acre lots are needed to achieve an estate character. With the trend of larger homes, a street tree planting program that creates a hedgerow effect along the road is needed in open land to screen the homes. In wooded areas, the street frontage should be left natural to establish and maintain an estate character.

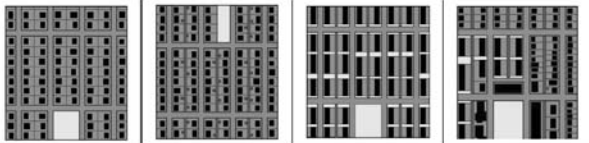
The distinguishing factor of the sub-urban class is a relative increase in the amount of “green” and open space. The open space may be in the form of the yards of larger, private home sites (together with pocket parks, preserved natural areas, etc.); a higher percentage of common open space such as neighborhood parks, greenways, retention lakes, paddocks, or a golf course; or a combination thereof. Clustered and planned, mixed housing developments may be sub-urban in character by way of their increased percentages of open space and the “green” design in the form of tree preservation, street trees, and on-lot landscaping and vegetation.



Means and Metrics	Estate	Large Lot	Cluster	Planned
Green Spaces	Predominant	Predominant	Predominant (with buildings)	Predominant (with buildings)
Buildings	Secondary	Secondary	Secondary (with open space)	Secondary (with open space)
Grey Spaces	Secondary	Secondary	Secondary	Secondary
% Open Space	0%	35%	40%	50%
Lot Size	1 acre	12,500 sf.	8,000 sf.	5,000 sf.
Lot Width	175'	90'	80'	50'
Front Setback	75'	40'	25'	20'
Building Spacing	30'	16'	14'	10'
Facade Spacing	200'	130'	100'	90'
Street Spacing	500'	280'	200'	200'
Impervious Cover	15.19%	21.17%	26.08%	25.75%
Pervious Cover	84.81%	78.83%	73.92%	74.25%
Private Green	84.81%	43.83%	33.92%	24.25%
Density, Gross	0.836	1.728	2.234	2.880
Density, Net		2.658	3.723	5.760

KEYS TO URBAN CHARACTER

- Streets and other public spaces are framed by buildings
- Housing types range from small, narrower single-family lots dominated by driveways and front-loaded garages (auto-urban) to attached residential (e.g., brownstones, town houses) and multifamily dwellings with alley access or rear garages (urban). Yard and landscaped areas are reduced
- Higher lot coverage and floor area ratios leading to increased stormwater runoff
- Smaller front and side setbacks with a tighter building spacing
- Most conducive for pedestrian activity and interaction



Means and Metrics	Auto-Urban	Urban (with alley)	Urban Attached	Urban Mixed Use
Green Spaces	Secondary	Secondary	Predominant (with buildings)	Predominant (with buildings)
Buildings	Secondary	Predominant	Secondary (with open space)	Significant, but secondary
Grey Spaces	Predominant	Significant, but secondary	Secondary	Secondary
% Open Space	20%	15%	25%	12%
Lot Size	7,500 sf.	7,000 sf.	2,500 sf. (per unit)	Mixed
Lot Width	75'	70'	25'	Mixed
Front Setback	30'	25'	20'	15' average
Building Spacing	14'	12'	20'	20'
Facade Spacing	110'	90'	100'	130'
Street Spacing	200'	200'	150'	160'
Impervious Cover	33.36%	40.78%	39.09%	62.93%
Pervious Cover	66.64%	59.22%	98.94%	37.07%
Private Green	46.64%	44.22%	50.12%	25.07%
Density, Gross	3.177	3.250	8.513	19.00
Density, Net	3.971	3.824	11.351	—

CHARACTER CLASS: URBAN

There are three urban character types: auto-urban, urban, and urban core, each of which has increasing densities, heights, building coverage, and floor area, respectively, and less open space. Often, open space is in the form of civic squares, pocket parks, or urban plazas. The urban types are described as follows:

- **Auto-urban neighborhoods** are usually highly patterned and characterized by narrow—and often identical—lot widths with modest front yard setbacks, narrow side yard setbacks (meaning a tighter spacing of homes), and a high percentage of the lot devoted to driveways and on-lot parking. Depending on the width of lots, the location and visibility of garage doors and parked cars largely determines its character.
- **Urban neighborhoods** refer to those with smaller lots, setbacks, and building spacing, or those of attached or multiunit buildings with alley access or on-street or structured parking, all of which have an increased building coverage and floor area. Higher density buildings usually have a minimum of two or three stories.
- **Urban core** is reserved for intensive residential development including multistory or mid- and high-rise buildings. These may include vertical mixed use buildings with a mixture of commercial and residential uses. An urban core must have structured parking to achieve this character type.

Urban areas are characterized by the closeness of buildings, which encloses space—whether it is a street, alleyway, walkway, or public space. There is a strong relationship among and between buildings and the street, with an increased emphasis on building design and the

COMMUNITY CHARACTER AND THE COURTS

Berman v. Parker, 348 U.S. 26 (1954)

In this case the Supreme Court broadly construed the public welfare: “The concept of the public welfare is broad and inclusive. . . . The values it represents are spiritual as well as physical, aesthetic as well as monetary. It is within the power of the legislature to determine that the community should be beautiful as well as healthy, spacious as well as clean, well-balanced as well as carefully patrolled.” The Court had held in *Nectow v. City of Cambridge* (277 U.S. 183 (1928)) that zoning provisions must bear “a substantial relation to the public health, safety, morals, or general welfare.”

Glisson v. Alachua County, 558 So. 2d 1030 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1990)

In this case the court held: “The interests purportedly protected by the regulations at issue in this case are appropriate subjects for exercise of the police power. For example, among the interests deemed legitimate for exercise of the state’s police power are such matters as: (1) *protection of aesthetic interests*, . . . ; (2) *preservation of residential or historical character of a neighborhood*, . . . ; and (3) *protection of environmentally sensitive areas and pollution control*.”

Village of Belle Terre v. Boraas, 416 U.S. 1 (1974)

In this case the court held that a zoning ordinance will not violate equal protection if the law is *reasonable and bears a rational relationship to a permissible state objective*. Additionally, a zoning ordinance can withstand constitutional scrutiny upon a clear showing that *the burden imposed is necessary to protect a compelling and substantial governmental interest. (emphasis added)*

pedestrian precinct. By nature of the uses and their relative intensity, urban areas are more connected and walkable. The difference between an auto-urban and urban character type, as illustrated above, is the handling of parking. An auto-urban type has a front-loaded garage, whereas the urban type is accessed via the alley. The lot size and open space is reduced to recover and slightly increase the density lost to the alley. Lots with on-street parking and alley access are typically urban in character, provided there is relatively high density and building cover.

Cover image © iStockphoto.com/lolon; design concept by Lisa Barton.

VOL. 27, NO. 12

Zoning Practice is a monthly publication of the American Planning Association. Subscriptions are available for \$90 (U.S.) and \$115 (foreign). W. Paul Farmer, FAICP, Chief Executive Officer; William R. Klein, AICP, Director of Research

Zoning Practice (ISSN 1548-0135) is produced at APA. Jim Schwab, AICP, and David Morley, AICP, Editors; Julie Von Bergen, Assistant Editor; Lisa Barton, Design and Production.

Copyright ©2010 by American Planning Association, 205 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200, Chicago, IL 60601-5927. The American Planning Association also has offices at 1030 15th St., NW, Suite 750 West, Washington, DC 20005-1503; www.planning.org.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the American Planning Association.

Printed on recycled paper, including 50-70% recycled fiber and 10% postconsumer waste.

ZONING PRACTICE
AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

205 N. Michigan Ave.
Suite 1200
Chicago, IL 60601-5927

1030 15th Street, NW
Suite 750 West
Washington, DC 20005-1503



WHAT IS COMMUNITY CHARACTER?

12