



What's Old Is New Again

By Melanie Threlkeld McConnell

City planners say a return to Norman Rockwell style neighborhoods will help people to feel better about their communities.

G

oodbye, suburbia. Hello, Mayberry.

As cities across the country struggle to curb the results of urban sprawl a new, but not novel, trend in city planning is appearing — a return to the mixed-use neighborhoods of yesteryear when a trip to the store meant a hop and a skip down a tree-lined block.

Ah, the good old days.

From New York to California, and Memphis to Boise, city planners are hyping “neotraditional communities,” “new urbanism” and “traditional neighborhood development,” buzzwords for plans to help us recapture our sense of place with land-use designs that make us feel good about where we live and who we are.

These new concepts promote communities where multi- and single-family dwellings coexist and vary in style and architecture; where small shops and homes sit side by side; parks are a dog walk away; grannies live in quaint flats near the kids; big front porches — not garages — greet the street; and cul-de-sacs are replaced by grid-



Boise City neighborhood planner Jeff Jones says Hyde Park exemplifies a good mixed-use area.

designed streets so traffic isn't dumped onto one or two arterial roads, causing congestion.

"Ask yourself what neighborhood in your hometown people are willing to pay a premium to live in," says D.R. Bryan, a North Carolina builder, in a *Consumer Reports* story titled "Neighborhoods Reborn." "It's probably a neighborhood built between 1890 and 1920."

Why the need and demand, as real estate markets indicate, for a step back in time?

"Cultural history has shown that people need community, a marketplace, face-to-face interaction," says BSU anthropology professor Robert McCarl. "It gives you a sense of identity, a sense of place. It provides you with a perspective that allows you to make an impact on people."

"I think there's an element of community that's been missing, and that historically people looked at physical architecture as something that bound them together," adds Jeff Jones, a Boise city neighborhood planner who is helping to redesign Boise's future neighborhoods through his work on the city's comprehensive plan.

That connection between people and their communities has been severed to some degree over the past three decades, he says, as streets, not buildings, began dictating the architecture of com-

munities to accommodate auto-oriented development.

But luckily for Boiseans, some elements of new urbanism have made their way into the city's comprehensive plan, thanks to a cooperative effort by community activists and city planners. The plan was still awaiting approval from city and county officials at *FOCUS* press time.

Specifically, Jones says, the new comprehensive plan includes changes in the city's zoning laws to "create more incentives to encourage better design" of neighborhoods by developers.

"And we're aging as a population," he says. "We're going to have even more older people than we do now. New urbanism allows people to age in place, whereas many of the conventional zoning methodologies have isolated people if they can't drive."

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The new comprehensive plan recommends creating more high-density living areas to free up more open space for parks or other recreational uses. That means allowing "granny flats" or other accessory units to a single-family dwelling while preserving the single-family character of the neighborhood. The plan also encourages use of existing infrastructure rather than adding road extensions, water and sewer lines to newly developed areas.

"New urbanism is not just a planning exercise, it's a way to grow a healthier community, so that you feel you have a sense of belonging," explains Jane Lloyd, a community activist who has worked closely with city officials to help guide Boise's growth. "It's also a way to use our water, sewers and roads more efficiently."

Pat Machacek, architect and BSU professor, agrees with the importance of environmental considerations when developing neighborhoods and communities. "If you can have mixed-use areas then people aren't forced to drive to the mall to get that one thing they need," she says. "Mixed-use means less pollution, less use of limited resources."

But Machacek also warns of the consequences of poor planning for mixed-use areas. "If it's not carefully done, it can escalate the problems,"

Students Find Historic Clues

By Amy Stahl

Drive down Boise's Warm Springs Avenue and you'll see elegant homes and towering trees. But take a closer look and you can find clues to a fascinating past. Street markers etched into the sidewalk, an unusual tree growing in a front yard, a decorative iron fence rimming a water flume.

Four BSU history students are investigating these clues as part of a collaborative project about the Grove Street/Warm Springs corridor. They plan to publish their findings in a book about the cultural landscape of Boise.

Senior Meggan Laxalt and graduate students Suzanne Sermon, Chelli Bradshaw and Michelle Hall began the project more than a year ago in a public history class taught by adjunct professor Bill Tydeman.

As yet untitled, the book will incorporate landscape theory, historical research methodology and oral interviews.

"It will help people read the landscape by seeing what is not immediately visible," says Laxalt.

The book, which is divided into five chapters, is based on a model developed by noted Colorado historian Patricia Limerick. Chapter topics are prehistory/ Native American history, social impacts, vegetation and use of the land, ethnic groups and urban development issues.

Historic photos and black-and-white images by Boise photographer Peter Oberlindacher will supplement the text.

Grove Street and Warm Springs were a natural choice for the project, says Laxalt. Grove Street, which is now home to the Basque Museum and Bar Gernika, was once Boise's most elegant residential neighborhood. Mansions built in the late 1890s lined the street until the neighborhood fell into disrepair and was nearly decimated in the 1970s through urban renewal.

Warm Springs Avenue, now a busy thoroughfare, was once a streetcar line to the popular Natatorium. The same geothermal water that heated the pool also warms many of the houses on the avenue.

Both streets have faced significant changes yet retain historical elements that fascinate the students. Building materials used in the houses, for example, reflect a "transplantation of influences," says Laxalt. Many of Boise's earliest residents brought architectural preferences and tastes westward with them. "A whole mixture of cultures were dropped on the western frontier," she says. As a result, it's not unusual to find Eastern lumber and Midwestern architectural touches on the early homes of the Intermountain West. Many trees and plants were imported, too.

The students feel that the project meets the public history program's goal of producing scholarly professional publications that are accessible to a wide audience.

And they hope it will give people a new perspective on the history that is all around them. "A lot of times we see scenes over and over again but don't truly see what's around us," says Laxalt. "This is a different way of looking at the landscape." □



PHOTOS COURTESY PETER OBERLINDACHER



she says, by packing too many people and businesses in one area without preserving the open spaces.

For examples of successful neighborhood planning that currently exist in Boise, Jones points not surprisingly to the city's north and east end neighborhoods where tree-lined sidewalks lead from a good mixture of home styles with alley-entrance garages to neighborhood schools, parks and on to a corner grocery store. Traffic travels down a number of different gridiron streets that have existed since before World War II.

Changes in the current plan came from a series of community workshops, public meetings and surveys in which participants voted on those elements of a neighborhood they liked best.

"It was very clear to us that Boise would bloom into sprawl if something wasn't done, and the whole valley would go that way without a major change in consciousness and planning and zoning policy," says Lark Corbeil, a founding member of The Liveable Community Group, which has organized a series of lectures and meetings with city planners and officials, developers, bankers, real estate agents and outside proponents of neotraditional neighborhoods. "Urban sprawl does not happen by accident. It's coded, meaning we had to change the zoning codes.

"We tried to help the city staff by bringing in these new ideas that were considered radical and we showed those ideas were historically quite normal."

Currently on the drawing board for the Boise foothills is Hidden Springs, an environmentally conscious planned community by Grossman Family Properties, which builds suburban shopping malls.

The Hidden Springs plan doesn't qualify as new urbanism or neotraditional neighborhood development because it's being built outside an urban area and most residents will commute to work, but the developers say it does promote a sense of self-containment with its proposed village center and other amenities.

"It is to create, with the village center, a sense of — above all else — community," explains company official Jim Grossman. "We can't go out and create community. We can only go out and create the infrastructure that will allow a healthy community to develop. Anytime you put a group of people somewhere it's going to be a community. Whether it's a strong, healthy, diverse community or a monochromatic, fragmented and very weak community is the difference."

Concerned citizens say the same thing about Hidden Springs: It's a good plan, but the traffic is likely to be a problem, and hopefully other developers will use some of the design ideas in Boise's urban areas.

"It's the best development we've seen so

far, but it's still sprawl," says Corbeil, whose group officially supports the plan. "It hasn't adequately addressed the problems in traffic and infrastructure costs."

Boise's not the only place struggling with ways to deal more effectively with urban sprawl.

New Urban News lists more than 100 traditional neighborhood development projects currently under way in 25 states. In San Diego, notes a *Consumer Reports* cover story, "an empty urban-renewal site now boasts a profitable supermarket (with underground parking) linked to streets densely lined with townhouses."

On a small island in the Mississippi River just minutes from Memphis, developer Henry Turley built Harbor Town by asking, what kind of place do people want to live in? reports *Newsweek*. His quaint community boasts a front porch on every house and no golf course. Housing prices vary from \$114,000 to \$425,000.

"Democracy assumes — demands — that we know, understand and respect our fellow citizens," he says in the article. "How can we appreciate them if we never see them?"

In spite of growing support for new urbanism, critics abound:

- Fire departments worry that the streets will be too narrow for their trucks.
- Builders are afraid the houses won't sell as

well as standard suburban models.

- Neotraditionalism doesn't fit standard patterns of financing developments.
- And without a big front parking lot, many retailers won't locate in neotraditional downtowns.

And what about costs? *Real Estate Newsline* reported that lots at the Seaside project in Florida, the first neotraditional neighborhood developed, sold for \$14,500 in 1982. Eleven years later they sold for \$150,000. And "despite a soft housing market, about 70 percent of the first phase of the Laguna West development in Sacramento (Calif.) has been sold to homebuilders."

"That is our biggest worry," writes *Consumer Reports*. "That neotraditionalism will become an expensive 'niche' product for upper-income homebuyers, maintaining the very socioeconomic uniformity that the movement's advocates are trying to undo ... We hope that these neighborhoods — and the lifestyle they make possible — once more are so common and affordable that they're ordinary."

Whether new urbanism takes hold in Boise is yet to be seen. But neighborhood planner Jones is optimistic. "We're rediscovering ways to build neighborhoods incrementally and to preserve those that are already functioning well," he says. "As an extension of building the neighborhood, we're improving the city as a whole." □

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