

Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

CHARACTER TOWNS ARE SPECIAL PLACES.

People seem to enjoy living and visiting certain small cities and towns. Bigger cities also have established neighborhoods with a strong appeal. Small places, in settings large or small, are personal and evocative; they possess an authenticity lacking in places that have lost their history and their connection with their purpose. Character towns create an emotional impact that is immediate and palpable.

Character cities, towns and places have great neighborhoods and vibrant mixed-use centers of society and commerce. Their corridors are pleasant and productive. They also have strong, well-funded infrastructure and open space networks that bind the community together.

The mission of city builders - planners, urban designers, urban developers and city officials, elected and appointed - is to understand how to re-capture, enhance and preserve the character of established towns; and how to create this evocative character in new towns. Physical design, supported by socialization and economic activities, can build community spirit, civility, hometown pride and social quality. There are over 2,300 small towns in America; opportunity awaits.



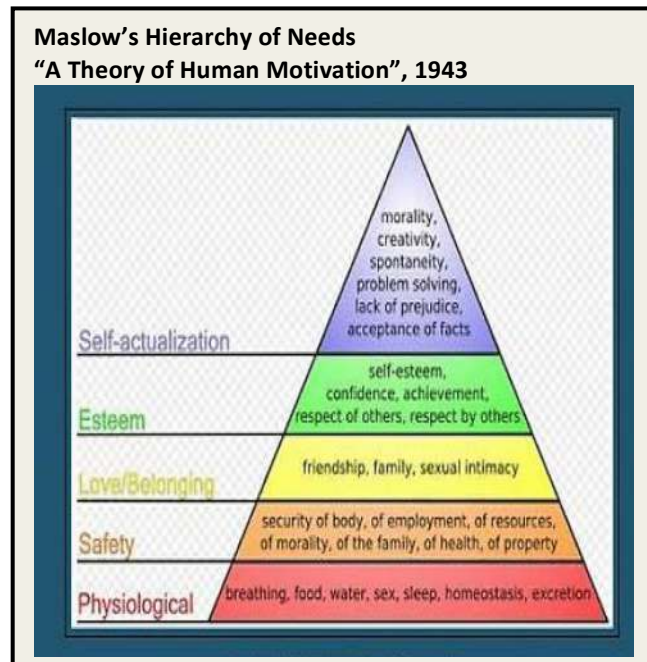
Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

ELEMENTS FOR A PLEASANT AND PROSPEROUS LIFE.

The places where we find lasting comfort are those places that have moved up the pyramid of needs as described by Abraham Maslow in 1943. According to his "Hierarchy of Needs", we need food, water and shelter, at the most fundamental level. We find additional comfort in safety and the feeling of belonging. We then start to find direction in our lives by caring for others. Cities relate closely to the same needs.

These special places give us a sense of confidence in humanity and respect for our surroundings and our fellow travelers. Creativity breeds in places with certain characteristics whether it comes from the "creative class" or from us more humble daily grinders. Character towns provide the sustenance that encourages human achievement and satisfaction.



PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES OF CHARACTER TOWNS.

Character towns are what we aspire to have; they sustain our interest and curiosity; they provide for our physiological needs within a safe, well-served, creative environment; they build our character as we build theirs.

An examination of many small towns and cities in the southeastern United States reveals a common set of physical assets that exist in towns and places with character. A few towns have them all, some have many.

As planning begins in existing towns, an inventory of community assets will reveal the present and missing elements. As planning occurs for new towns, this proscribed array of civic assets can be used to facilitate the emergence of community character.

The people in every setting have the same civic needs, residents and visitors alike. The physical features that contribute to community character are:

- A. Housing of all types found in urban neighborhoods, including visitor accommodations,**
- B. Traditional "main streets" with shops, restaurants, offices and civic buildings, with entertainment, recreation and cultural venues,**
- C. Successful multi-use development corridors,**
- D. A system of parks and trails,**
- E. Schools with well-kept grounds,**
- F. Infrastructure designed for function and appearance, and**
- G. Trees and beauty, history and culture.**

Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

“CHARACTER” HAS MANY ASPECTS.

Cities with character use their physical assets to derive power from their social and economic systems. Clubs, public events, family gatherings and community celebrations use civic assets to serve their needs. Unless they are used, public assets deteriorate physically and then financially.

- **Character places have certain physical characteristics.** While every character place is unique, each character place has many of the same qualities, as presented in the following checklist.
- **Character towns are the places we feel good about.** They are the places we visit, the places where some of us live and the places where we all wish we could spend more time. Character places are safe, comfortable, stable, dynamic, authentic, walkable, beautiful and loved. They engender a feeling of self-satisfaction as we congratulate ourselves for finding an ambiance that exudes well-being.
- **Character places are growing in popularity.** More people are becoming residents of small towns than ever before; there are over 50 million small town residents in over 2,400 towns with populations between 10,000 and 50,000 people.
 - People of all ages want real places where they can know their neighbors, walk the streets, afford a home and raise their families.
 - If people cannot live in such places, they want to visit them. Small town tourism is a growing phenomenon.

- **Character places have character people.** Friendliness, inclusiveness, ease and community civility are generally associated with places of character. While there are exceptions to every rule, most places of character are associated, historically or currently, with people of character. Community interests usually reflect the individual interests of the residents.
 - Bleak, ugly and marginal places usually reflect a lack of town leadership, political bickering or historical social conflicts too hard to overcome.
 - Strong communities usually reflect strong leadership sustained over many years. This sounds like a rich – poor distinction, but many modest towns with sincere people offer a wonderful lifestyle based on traditional values of hard work, fairness, sharing and personal responsibility for the larger community.
- **Towns known for their character are the result of much love and attention.**



Farmers' Markets bring people together.

Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

Examples of character towns that attract residents and visitors are: Charleston, Savannah, South Beach, Blowing Rock, Newburyport, Dahlonega, Fernandina Beach and Winter Park, among many others. Special places in New York, Chicago, Boston, Washington and other big cities have the same appeal.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES.

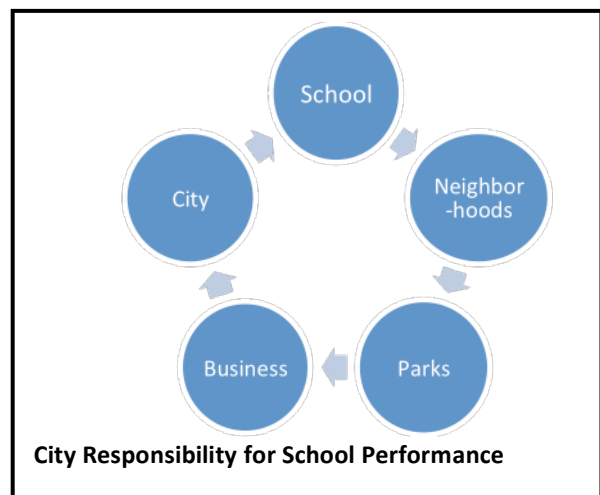
Consider the following strategic objectives to sustain or create character towns as prosperous and pleasant places:

First, build great neighborhoods. The place where people live is the foundational element of the community. Then primary responsibility of every city is to have neighborhoods that are safe, well-served, diverse and comprehensive. Build "great neighborhoods" by:

- Initiating a Neighborhood Planning Process that identifies each neighborhood with a boundary tested with residents.
- Forming an organization to lead the process.
- Adopting the plans and improvement budgets after discussion with residents.

Second, focus on education. Education provides amazing primary, secondary and tertiary benefits to the community. The starting point is to provide quality schools accessible to every neighborhood. Libraries, museums and recreation areas are important elements of the educational system. Start the improvement process by:

- Accepting city government's responsibility for the success of the town's school.
- Partnering with the School Board.
- Adopting a City School Policy.



Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

Third, acknowledge and enhance centers of activity, "main streets". Traditional downtowns and neighborhood centers have a healthy and walkable mix of residences, shops, restaurants, civic and cultural venues, offices and schools consistent with the city's standards. Start by:

- Publicly acknowledging that the city's center reflects the quality and character of the city's residents and businesses.
- Establishing "main street" as the city center for business, government and civic life with the full range and mix of uses and activities.
- Creating a formal city/merchant partnership to strengthen and sustain the economic vitality and aesthetic quality of Main Street.
- Locating all public buildings that engage with the public on or near Main Street.
- Preparing and adopting a long-range downtown plan that includes:
 - Required ground floor retail use,
 - Urban design plans and standards,
 - A comprehensive, long-range finance plan.

Fourth, energize multi-use commercial corridors. Strip commercial districts, many of which exhibit blighted features, are significant sources of revenue for local governments, real or potential. The public mission is to maximize the economic productivity of the commercial strips in the city with enhanced entitlements, infrastructure and standards. Regard them as economic engines that create sales and property tax revenues for the city, as well as jobs and personal incomes. City partnering with owners can increase the productivity of these corridors to everyone's benefit.



Apartments over Shops and Restaurants.



Main Street has Two Story [+] Buildings.



Trees, Ground Signs on a 4-Lane Federal Highway.

Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

The Full Range and Mix of Uses and Activities Traditional "Main Streets"

The main thing is to keep "Main Street" the main street. Every town either has one or wants one; and its absence may, in and of itself, eliminate the possibility of a place being a character town. The full complement of uses and activities to strive for on the main street are:

1. **Buildings** with:
 - € Doors that open to the street,
 - € Two or more stories of height; but not taller than the tree canopy and
 - € Ground floor retail, restaurants or other active uses beyond week-days from nine to five.
2. **Streets** that are not foreboding, but inviting with:
 - € Two travel lanes, with or without a median, with the distance from building face to building face across the street no greater than 100 feet,
 - € Local ownership of the street, not a federal or state highway agency,
 - € On-street parking and
 - € Wide sidewalks [min 10'], bus stops, pedestrian cross-walks, street trees, street lights and business friendly signs.
3. **Food and beverage** outlets including restaurants, bars, ice cream and chocolate shops, fruit stands and farmers' markets with regional foods.
4. **Retail goods** including convenience shopping, drugs, groceries, books, gifts, clothing, hardware, automotive parts and discount retail.
5. **Personal services** such as laundry, dry cleaning, barber shops, car care, tech support, business services.
6. **Business services** including banks, full service copy centers, and business incubators.
7. **Venues for gatherings** including religious gatherings, weddings, funerals.
8. **Programmed activities** such as book fairs, parades, festivals and community celebrations.
9. **Visitor information** centers, physical and virtual, for residents and visitors:
 - € Guides to local places and activities,
 - € Notice of non-recurring events and
 - € Tickets to local events.
10. **Parks, lakes or waterfronts on or near main street** including promenades, café's, carousels, play grounds, fountains and amphitheaters.
11. **Something authentic**, an iconic place or event, unique to the town, for example:
 - € Powell's Book Store in Portland or Haslam's in St. Petersburg,
 - € S. F. Travis Hardware in Cocoa Village or The Little Drug Company on Canal Street in New Smyrna Beach with an "old time" soda fountain,
 - € The Lakeside Inn in Mount Dora or The Gold Mine Museum in Dahlonega,
 - € Carriage rides touring Fernandina Beach's historic neighborhoods, or
 - € Country music on 6th Street in Austin, Spoleto in Charleston or The Miami Book Fair.

In sum, the "main street" is a full service commercial, entertainment, cultural and recreational place and space for residents and visitors.

Source: wckplanning.com

Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

Characteristics of a High Performance "District" along a Multi-Use Corridor

The prerequisites to a "corridor district plan":

1. A multiplicity of engaged stakeholders, private and/or public,
2. A common vision, theme or purpose that binds together most or all entities in the district,
3. A community-wide recognition that the district exists and needs improvement,
4. Identifiable borders,
5. A generally accepted name for the district, and
6. A consensus among the stakeholders that the resources and activities in the district require some level of management.

The strategic objective to achieve a "high performance" corridor:

1. Aesthetic consistency with design standards for landscaping, signs, and graphics,
2. Internally cohesive transportation systems for vehicles, parking, pedestrians, bikes, and buses,
3. District-wide communication networks with websites, newsletters and events,
4. Recurring funding, taxation or fee-based systems for district O&M,
5. Centralized management and a sanctioned organization to address:
 - a. District marketing to attract new investment,
 - b. Security and emergency management resources,
 - c. Stormwater management, parking and wayfinding systems,
 - d. Streets, transit, pedways, bikeways and tram systems,
 - e. Parks and open spaces,
 - f. Trees and beautification,
 - g. Energy and water conservation programs,
 - h. Information technology, marketing and communications systems,
 - i. Museums, colleges, libraries, with civic, educational and cultural activities, and
 - j. Future development locations and standards.

Source: wck | planning, inc.



Typical and Bad in So Many Ways.



Trees Always Help.



Four-lane, Federal highway frontage.

Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

Fifth, connect the city's parks and open spaces as a holistic system. Character towns fully exploit the collective and connective power of their open spaces, built and natural, to drive their social, cultural and their economic development.

- Consider the entire city as a single park.
- Have an expansive definition of urban open space that includes parks, plazas, school grounds, stormwater ponds, wetlands, lakes, streams and landscaped spaces, supplemented by attractive private lawns and gardens.
- Take a “systems” approach when planning, developing and connecting the city's open space assets.
- Use the city's urban open space system to unify and organize the community.
- Leverage the open space system to create rising quality aspirations of overall community and increase property values.
- Promote beauty everywhere.

Sixth, solidify urban infrastructure facilities and services through operating departments and budgets. Vision-driven strategic plans provide for physical facilities, social services and economic development programs that form the essential infrastructure systems of the city. Each part reinforces the other.

Utilities, accessways, stormwater, law enforcement, health care, social services, education and recreation are necessary for successful collective living in an urban environment. Comprehensive, long-range financial planning is the process to best direct the sources and uses of funds.



Beauty Always Matters, A Lot!



Education in the Park.



Stormwater-Park.

Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

Seventh, systematize public engagement.

The ideas, information and insights of residents and business people can contribute greatly to the success of the town if constructively provoked and harvested. Meetings, communications, surveys and a growing array of social media tools are available to foster two-way communication between decision-makers and citizens. Use them. Steady communication builds trust and confidence.

Eighth, simplify the entitlement system and demand more from development with vision-driven standards.

- Regulating the use of property through zoning is important to protect the value of residential homes.
- Regulating use is less important in activity centers and along corridors where a mix of uses is desirable; site design is the critical activity in these areas.
- Vision-driven development standards and design guidelines provide designers and regulators with the community's ideas about what is valued in the city.



Ninth, establish a system for measuring performance. Create a fair, frequent and open system for the community's self-evaluation. Establish a transparent and objective evaluation and measurement process to evaluate the performance of every part of the system against the vision-driven strategic objectives. The goal is a system of feedback and critique that fosters education and innovation.

Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

CONCLUSIONS

- 1. Human needs remain constant over time and provide a fundamental thought about the value cities provide residents.** As Maslow described them:
 - a. Physiological: Breathable air, potable water, food, and the basic needs of life.
 - b. Safety: Security of body, family, health, employment and property.
 - c. Love/Belonging: Friendship and family.
 - d. Esteem: Self-esteem, respect of and by others.
 - e. Self-Actualization: Creativity, morality, values based existence.
- 2. Cities have basic building blocks of its physical presence, each of which commands a specific approach for its protection, enhancement and growth:**
 - a. Housing of all types found in urban neighborhoods, including visitor accommodations,
 - b. Traditional "main streets" with shops, restaurants, offices and civic buildings, with entertainment, recreation and cultural venues,
 - c. Successful multi-use development corridors
 - d. A system of parks and trails,
 - e. Schools with well-kept grounds,
 - f. Infrastructure designed for function and appearance, and
 - g. Trees and beauty, history and culture.
- 3. Effective city management and operation requires:**
 - a. A robust system for engaging citizens in the planning and operation of their city. Social media tools and traditional techniques can support an attitude of inclusion and involvement.
 - b. Land development entitlements as expressed in comprehensive plans, land development codes and permitting processes should reflect the city's vision-driven strategy in order to create the economic, social and physical environment envisioned by the city's citizens.
 - c. Performance evaluation is critical as a learning and innovation measure. Actions must be evaluated, courses corrected and progress made. An unexamined city is bound to repeat failures and avoid innovation in the absence of the confidence that comes from learning through experience.
- 4. The city planning process has a few well-defined steps:**
 - a. Develop a community consensus- based vision.
 - b. Prepare a vision-driven strategic plan with strategic objectives that articulate the basic strategy.
 - c. Implement the strategy with strategic-driven action plans.
 - d. Evaluate the outcomes, learn and proceed.

Character Towns

Protect, Enhance and Create Authentic Character in America's Cities and Towns

READINGS.

1. Barton, Stephen E. and Silverman, Carol J.; **Common Interest Communities**, Institute of Government Studies Press, University of California, Berkeley, 1994.
2. Collins, James Charles; **Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't**. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001.
3. Daniels, Thomas L., John W. Keller, Mark P. Lapping, Katherine Daniels, James Segedy; **The Small Town Planning Handbook**, Planners Press, American Planning Association, Chicago, 2007.
4. Duany, Andres and Plater-Zyberk, Elizabeth; **"The Neighborhood, the District and the Corridor"**, published in **The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community**; Katz, Peter P. and Scully, Vincent, Jr.; McGraw-Hill Companies, New York, 1993.
5. Florida, Richard; **The Great Reset, How New Ways of Living and Working Drive Post-Crash Prosperity**, Richard Florida, HarperCollins Publishers, ISBN 978-0-06-193719-4, 2010.
6. Glaeser, Edward; **Triumph of the City, How our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier**; The Penguin Press [USA], London, 2011.
7. Green, Hardy; **The Company Town, The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills that Shaped the American Economy**; Hardy Green; Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group; New York; 2010.
8. Hinshaw, Mark; **Citistate Seattle**, Shaping a Modern Metropolis, Planners Press, APA, 1999.
9. Lafley, A. G. and Martin, Roger L.; **Playing to Win, How Strategy Really Works**, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass., 2013.
10. LeDuff, Charlie; **Detroit, An American Autopsy**, The Penguin Press, NY, 2013.
11. Miller, Donald L; **City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America**. New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996.
12. Mumford, Lewis; **The City in History, Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects**, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961.
13. O'Mara, Margaret Pugh; **Cities of Knowledge, Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley**; O'Mara; Princeton University Press; Princeton and Oxford; 2005.
14. Peters, Thomas J. and Robert H. Waterman, Jr; **In Search For Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies**, New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1982.
15. Sandweiss, Eric; **St. Louis, The Evolution of an American Urban Landscape**, Temple University Press, 2001.
16. Saunders, Doug; **Arrival City, How the Largest Migration in History Reshaped Our World**, Pantheon Books; New York; 2010.
17. Schwab, William A.; **Urban Sociology, A Human Ecology Perspective**, ADDISON-Wesley Publishing Company, 1982.
18. Schwartz, Peter; **The Art of the Long View, Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World**.
19. Vale, Lawrence J. and Thomas J. Campanella; **The Resilient City. How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster**. Oxford University Press, 2005.

AUTHOR:

Bill Kercher, AICP, LEED®AP
wck | planning, inc.
Orlando FL 32801
bill.kercher@wckplanning.com