

CHARACTER DOWNTOWNS in CENTRAL FLORIDA

A Ten-Town Review

June, 2015

CHARACTER TOWNS

A “character town” is a small city or town with character; character coming from a friendly and inviting physical setting with an active business community all of which supports a sociable and civil society; a society that is proud of its home town, protective of its heritage and committed to its well-being. A character town is a pleasant and prosperous place to live.

CHARACTER DOWNTOWNS

Character downtowns anchor their host communities. They are physically attractive, economically successful and socially engaging.

In general, character downtowns all have the same fundamental assets and form. They are focused on a single street, they are pretty, they have interesting uses and activities and they are safe and convenient to walk, park and drive. Businesses survive and even thrive on the main streets in these character towns.

Central Florida is fortunate to have many character small cities and towns; towns that are attractive with successful retail, entertainment and civic uses on their “main streets”. The survey of 10 “character” towns in Central Florida [[Attachment A](#)] examines these successful cities to ascertain their common attributes. Four new towns were also examined [[Attachment B](#)].

Interestingly, nine of the ten cities were incorporated during the four decades between 1877 and 1916. It was the age of the robber barons, the progressive era and the city beautiful movement.

This inventive period from 1876 to 1920 brought about electricity, automobiles and airplanes along with the plight of the industrial cities. This period also was the time when many Central Florida character towns were designed and built. This period is known by several names:

- The Age of American Empire sponsored by Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt when the United States began to be an important international power,
- The Progressive Era [1890 –1920] when the abuses of the robber barons were being attacked by social service advocates and the trust busters.
- The City Beautiful movement era benefited from Burnham, Olmstead, Saint-Gaudens, the young John Nolen and many other devotees of The City Beautiful movement. It was a part of the Progressive Era with the World Columbian Exposition [1893], the McMillan Plan for Washington D.C. [1902] the Plan for Chicago [1909] and countless other city plans across the nation.

At the turn of the 21st century, three new towns were designed and built in Central Florida; another was discovered as described in [Attachment B](#). These benefited from the approach of the New Urbanism that re-introduced many of the City Beautiful principles back into city design. Each has attracted families looking for a personal, yet civic lifestyle.

[Attachment C](#) is a recommended Character Town Checklist.

Character towns are truly in the eye of the beholder since they are emotional experiences. Effective town planning uses physical assets to evoke an emotional attachment.

The following list attempts to describe the physical factors involved in creating community character, but each town needs its own list.

Character Towns

Great Neighborhoods include:

1. **A Diversity of Housing:** A wide variety of housing types, prices and styles,
2. **Ubiquitous Pedestrian-oriented Connections:** An interconnected system of streets, sidewalks and trails primarily intended for walkability,
3. **Accessible Daily Need Uses:** Accessible shops, schools, parks and civic uses for daily use, with
4. **Organization:** An organization and identifiable boundaries that protect the neighborhood from obnoxious intrusions and facilitate participation in local government deliberations.

Vibrant Downtowns: The main thing is to keep “Main Street” the main street.

5. **Buildings** of two to four stories with active and accessible ground floor retail, restaurants and other uses active beyond nine-to-five weekdays.
6. **Streets** that are not foreboding, but inviting with two travel lanes, wide [min. 10'] sidewalks, on-street and off-street parking with about 100' between building face to building face, bus stops, pedestrian crosswalks, street trees, street lights and business friendly signs; plus local ownership of the street.
7. **Active storefront uses** such as restaurants, bars, ice cream and chocolate shops, fruit stands and farmers' markets with regional foods including convenience shopping, drugs, groceries, books, gifts, clothing, hardware, automotive parts and discount retail.
8. **Personal and Business Services** such as laundries, dry cleaners, barber shops, car care shops, plus tech support and business services like banks, full service copy centers, and business incubators.
9. **Hotels** and other types of visitor accommodations to support “small town” tourism.
10. **Venues for community entertainment and personal gatherings** including theaters for live performances, local history museums, religious gatherings and weddings with **programmed activities** such as book fairs, parades, festivals, car shows, sporting events and celebrations.
11. **Visitor information centers**, physical and virtual, for residents and visitors with guides to local places and activities, notice of non-recurring events and tickets to local events.

Historic and Natural Resources: Amenities that engender hometown pride through the preservation, display, use and celebration of historic stories, places, buildings, monuments, parks, lakes and waterfronts.

Community Pride built on Authenticity using an iconic place or event, unique to the town, such as:

12. The West Orange Trail in Winter Garden, Ocoee and Apopka; Central Park in Winter Park;
13. 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;
14. The Lakeside Inn in Mount Dora or The Gold Mine Museum in Dählonega; the lakefront parks and promenades in Clermont, Eustis, Kissimmee, Sanford and Tavares;
15. The downtown colleges, theaters, art galleries, art festivals and local history museums in DeLand, Eustis, Winter Garden, and Winter Park;
16. Carriage rides touring Fernandina Beach's historic neighborhoods; and
17. Austin's 6th Street music scene; Charleston's Spoleto; or The Miami Book Fair.

In sum, the “character town” is a pleasant and prosperous place with a unique quality and beauty that feels good to residents, business owners and visitors.

Source: wck | planning

GUIDELINES FROM *THE RESILIENT CITY*

The Resilient City is a brilliant piece of work by Vale and Campanella that documents the destruction of thirteen cities of the world followed by their reconstructive attitude and achievement. Despite the devastating demolishments, the cities did not disappear due to their dedication and determination to recapture their hometown's previous grandeur.

Existing character towns can learn from this experience. The resurrection of the described damaged cities responds to the basic idea of what a city is. "A city is more than built form; it is a complex phenomenon of political decisions, economic powers, social structures, cultural experiences and legal heritage. As long as these intangible elements survive, the physical destruction of the city and even the deaths of large numbers of people do not cause the death of the city." [p232]

One of many useful conclusions one can draw from this magnificent book is that there are rules for design that are important. The authors list design ideas employed by many of the cities.

In Chapter 5, Rebuilding Berlin After 1945 [page 117] and Chapter 6, Warsaw Reconstruction as Propaganda [page 135] describes the approach used in the post-war period.

- In Berlin, the post-war objective was to make the city better than it was before; a subsequent movement in the 1990s became devoted to the goal of restoring the destroyed urban fabric as it existed before the war.
- In Warsaw, "As one visitor to Warsaw (during the post-war period) commented, much of the socialist realist planning 'would make Daniel Burnham and the City Beautiful movement happy with its wide, tree-line[d] boulevards flanked by rows of controlled, cornice lined buildings.'"

The lesson for character towns that are seemingly sound and safe in the beginning of the 21st century is that spirit, pride and civic commitment are the town's most powerful assets. Budgets for physical improvements should evaluate the power of each to promote civic pride, engagement and enhancement.

Design Guideline Elements for New Towns and Redevelopment Areas

- Set uniform limits on building height and cornice lines.
- Restore the street grid with its narrow streets, or connections to the existing grid.
- Insist on masonry facades or other enduring materials of quality.
- Attempt to mimic (if not actually restore) or respect the scale and diversity of individually owned and constructed parcels of land and buildings.
- Use memorials and civic history to selectively remember and forget civic achievements.
- Recognize the strength of fine grained building and landscape features.
- Use established cultural features appropriately, such as, side or enclosed porches, balconies, arches, colors, sounds, town squares and recognized symbols.
- Encourage housing that serves the towns' workforce.
- Landscape the public spaces extensively with trees, flowers, walkways, lights and furniture that serve social, economic and cultural activities.

Inspired by and drawn from many chapters of: *The Resilient City. How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, Vale, Lawrence J. and Thomas J. Campanella, Oxford University Press, 376 pages, 2005.

Compiled by wck | planning.

THE SURVEY

Ten small cities in Central Florida were identified as “character” towns based on their physical form and aesthetic qualities. A survey form was constructed [Attached C].

The survey was conducted based on site visits, Google Earth observations, the factors reported in *The Resilient City* and discussions with city officials. The summary of attributes can be used to preserve and enhance existing character towns, and to design new ones.

SUMMARY OF ATTRIBUTES

Factoids:

- Every town has an active main street.
- Populations of the ten towns range from 13,000 people to 56,000 people.
- Nine of the ten cities surveyed range from 138 years old to the younger cities now approaching the century mark, except,
- Lake Mary, the only neophyte town of the bunch, was established in 1973. It has taken on many of the traits of the old timers which were neglected by many newer suburban cities and towns in the region.

The “main street” attributes in every town:

- The main street is active, pleasant and walkable with streetscape improvements including safe cross-walks, wide sidewalks, attractive landscaping, seating, signs, street lights and street trees.
- Every main street accommodates a mix of uses, including retail shops, restaurants, offices, civic buildings and cultural activities with local history museums and galleries.
- The length of the main active street ranges from the extremes of 350’ in Mount Dora to 3,500’ along US 441 in Apopka; the heart of the range is 1,000’ to 2,000’ in length.

- The number of blocks varies, but the core of the active main street is confined to a few blocks; the zone of active retail, restaurant and civic buildings ranges from 4 to 6 blocks.
- City Halls are on the main streets or nearby cross-streets in every case.
- Civic buildings [community centers, post offices, theaters, museums and libraries] are common, but not universally present.
- Building heights in the ten towns are also pretty uniform.
 - The predominant building height is 1 to 2 stories with 3 story buildings scattered along many of the main streets.
 - Occasionally, buildings taller than 3 stories are found, but in the ten towns there are collectively only six “tall” buildings, i.e., buildings over 4 stories:
 - DeLand’s 5 story building at “main and main”,
 - Kissimmee’s City Center at 7 stories,
 - Sanford’s 5 story building and 4 story building at the intersection of Park Avenue and 1st Street, and the 6 story lakefront condo, and
 - Winter Park’s 5 story former Barnett Bank Building on Park Avenue.
 - Interestingly:
 - In the new “downtowns” of Avalon Park, Baldwin Park and Celebration, 3 to 4 stories are the norm.
 - In College Park, The Wellesley is 7 stories among mostly one story buildings along Edgewater Drive.
 - The “urban transect” approach counsels that adjacent buildings should not have extreme variations in height.

The “main street” attributes in most towns:

The attributes found on or near main street in about half of the ten towns are:

- Nearby single family neighborhoods within walking distance of several downtowns.
- Apartments or condominiums within walking distance of the main street in half the towns.
- Two towns have downtown SunRail Stations and two more are scheduled to have stations in the near future.
- About half of the towns have a theater on or near main street; usually an old style one-screen theater that have been transformed for live performances.
- Colleges anchor the main streets in Winter Park and DeLand.
- Six towns have hotels on or near main street,
- Several towns have recreation trails near downtown; two feature the West Orange Trail; five have regional parks; seven have significant lakefront parks, and
- Four are county seats with county buildings located downtown.

Places emulating “downtowns” with “character” include Avalon Park, Baldwin Park, Celebration and College Park. Additional character towns within Central Florida yet to be surveyed are New Smyrna Beach, Cocoa Village and Melbourne. Daytona Beach and Lakeland also have terrific downtowns not yet surveyed.

The definition of “character” is personal and driven by the vision of each individual town. Some towns have strong positive character while others are lacking. But, understanding that character exists is important as a town undertakes activities to determine its community-driven vision.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Main street needs to be inviting, meaning it is crossable, walkable, pretty and active. Main street should be a physical place:
 - a. Owned by the city,
 - b. Develop as an active mixed use place,
 - c. Partnered with a merchant association,
 - d. Dominated by trees, on-street parking, sidewalks, street lights and crosswalks.
2. Trees make a difference:
 - a. Oaks and hardwoods are prettier and create protection from sun and rain.
 - b. Palm trees are a bad option; they never look better than when first planted.
3. Uses and activities should include those that serve and attract people, including: post offices, libraries, utility bill payment offices, galleries, theaters, local history museums, colleges and universities.
4. Offices are great to have downtown, just not on the first floor of main street.
5. Development standards and design guidelines are necessary to allow diversity within a single holistic concept.
6. Building heights of 2-3 stories seem best; one story is too weak, 4+ is too much. An occasional tall building is ok if properly sited and served.
7. A downtown hotel is absolutely necessary to turn visiting day-trippers to week-enders.
8. Residents’ access to downtown is important whether on foot, bike or car; residents must identify with downtown activities.
9. Parks, plazas and public waterfronts are great for businesses and the town; places for casual and formal community gatherings are good for downtown businesses in addition to being healthy for the town.
10. Incentives work.
11. Organizations are necessary; they can make strong, supportive partners.

ATTACHMENT A
EXISTING CHARACTER TOWNS WITH SUCCESSFUL MAIN STREETS

Towns in Central Florida that have a certain charm, or character, have been surveyed to study the physical aspects of their “main street”. Interestingly, each was designed and established during the four decades from 1877 to 1916, during the Age of American Empire from the end of Reconstruction to the Great War. In addition to the towns in Central Florida, the character coastal towns are also well over 100 years old: Cocoa Village – 1895; Melbourne – 1888; and, New Smyrna Beach – 1887.

CLERMONT, south Lake County, Incorporated 1916.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Population [2013]: | 30,000 |
| Main Street: | W. Montrose Street [West Ave to 5 th] |
| • Blocks/Length | 4/2,300' |
| • Predominant Building Height | 1-2 stories |
| • Special Features: | |
| ○ Lakefront park | |
| ○ City Hall, 3 stories | |

DeLAND, west Volusia County, Incorporated 1882.

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Population [2013]: | 28,000 |
| Main Street: | Woodland Bv [Michigan to Voorhis] |
| • Blocks/Length | 9/3,300' |
| • Predominant Building Height | 2-3 stories |
| • Special Features: | |
| ○ 1 bldg, 5 stories [NY and Woodland] | |
| ○ Theater, hotel and college [Stetson] | |
| ○ Future SunRail station | |
| ○ County seat | |

EUSTIS, Lake County, Incorporated 1883.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Population [2013]: | 19,214 |
| Main Street: | E. Magnolia Ave. [Bay to Grove] |
| • Blocks/Length | 2/650' |
| • Predominant Building Height | Almost all 2 stories |
| • Special Features: | |
| ○ Lakefront park | |
| ○ Theater, local history museum | |

KISSIMMEE, Osceola County, Incorporated 1883.

- Population [2013]: 55,000
Main Street: Broadway
- Blocks/Length 5/1,750'
 - Predominant Building Height 2-3 stories
 - Special Features:
 - Lakefront park
 - City Center 7 stories [a block to the east]
 - City Hall 4 stories [a block to the west of main street]
 - County Administration 4 stories [to the south on Emmett]
 - SunRail, Amtrak and Lynx Superstop Multi-modal station area
 - County seat

LAKE MARY, Seminole County, Incorporated 1973.

- Population [2013]: 14,807
Main Street: W. Lakeview Ave. and N. 4th Street
- Blocks/Length 2/1,200'
 - Predominant Building Height 1-2 stories
 - Special Features:
 - City Hall park
 - SunRail station

MOUNT DORA, Lake County, Incorporated 1910.

- Population [2013]: 13,000
Main Street: Donnelly Street
- Blocks/Length 2/350'
 - Predominant Building Height 2 stories
 - Special Features:
 - Lakefront park and Donnelly Park
 - Lakeside Inn

SANFORD, Seminole County, Incorporated 1877.

- Population [2013]: 56,000
Main Street: 1st Street [Sanford and Elm]
- Blocks/Length 6/2,000'
 - Predominant Building Height 2 stories
 - Special Features:
 - Lakefront park and promenade
 - 3 Buildings, 4 and 5 stories [1st and Park]; 6 story lakefront condo
 - Theater and hotel
 - County seat

TAVARES, Lake County, Incorporated 1885.

- Population [2013]: 15,000
Main Street: W. Main Street [Roundabout to Roundabout]
- Blocks/Length 6/2,100'
 - Predominant Building Height 1-2 stories
 - Special Features:
 - Lakefront park, Sea Plane terminal
 - County Admin. Bldg. 5 stories
 - Courthouse 4 stories [west end of retail zone]
 - Lakefront Hotel 4-5 stories
 - County seat

WINTER GARDEN, West Orange County, Incorporated 1903.

- Population [2013]: 38,000
Main Street: Plant Street [Woodland to Henry]
- Blocks/Length 5/1,800'
 - Predominant Building Height 1-2 stories
 - Special Features:
 - 4 Buildings 3 stories
[Edgewater Hotel, Church, Garden Bldg, City Hall]
 - Theater
 - Regional bike trail, West Orange Trail

WINTER PARK, Orange County, Incorporated 1887.

- Population [2013]: 29,000
Main Street: Park Avenue [Fairbanks to Canton]
- Blocks/Length 8/2,600'
 - Predominant Building Height 1-3 stories
 - Special Features:
 - Central Park, approximately 5 acres
 - Barnett Bank [fka] 5 stories
 - Theaters, museums and galleries
 - Hotels
 - Rollins College

**ATTACHMENT B
NEW TOWNS IN CENTRAL FLORIDA**

Three new places in Central Florida have built downtowns: Avalon Park, Baldwin Park and Celebration. Additionally, College Park is well established as a downtown setting in the City of Orlando. They each are useful examples of contemporary efforts to build mixed use centers with character.

AVALON PARK, East Orange County

Population [2013]:	30,000
Main Street:	Avalon Park Boulevard, Avalon Lake Drive
• Blocks/length	2/1,000'
• Predominant Building Height	4 stories
• Small lakefront park, man-made	

BALDWIN PARK, Orlando

Population [2013]:	10,000
Main Street:	New Broad Street [the lake to Chatfield]
• Blocks/Length	4/1,500'
• Predominant Building Height	3 stories
• Lakefront park	

CELEBRATION, West Osceola County

Population [2013]:	8,000
Main Street:	Market Street and Front Street
• Blocks/Length	2/1,400'
• Predominant Building Height	2-3 stories
• Lakefront park	
• Theater and Hotel	4 stories

COLLEGE PARK, Orlando

Population [2013]:	13,000
Main Street:	Edgewater Drive [Hazel to Golfview]
• Blocks/Length	17 blocks/5,200'
• Core Commercial Zone	4 blocks/1,200' [Yale to Vassar]
• Predominant Building Height	2 stories
• Wellesley Condo, recent	7 stories
• Small central park	

**ATTACHMENT C
CHARACTER TOWN CHECKLIST**

CITY _____

Population [2013]: _____

“MAIN STREET” ASPIRATIONS

- Consensus-driven vision of downtown adopted by elected board. yes no
- Mixed use zoning requirements for downtown. yes no
- Development standards and design guidelines. yes no

“MAIN STREET” ASSETS [describe details on a following page]

- **Uses and Activities:**
 - a. Restaurants, shops, ground floor retail yes no
 - b. Offices and banks yes no
 - c. A hotel yes no
 - d. Apartments, walkable to main street yes no
 - e. Close in neighborhoods, w/residents relating to downtown yes no
 - f. Bike paths connection to a regional bike trail yes no
 - g. A park, waterfront or another place for community events yes no
 - h. A museum for local history, art or other subject yes no
 - i. A public library yes no
 - j. A post office yes no
 - k. City Hall yes no
 - l. County Courthouse yes no
 - m. Street [main street] with:
 - € Trees, street lights, wide sidewalks yes no
 - € 2-3 traffic lanes yes no
 - € On-street parking yes no
 - € City ownership of main street yes no
 - € Main Street [name]: _____ [from _____-to_____]
 - € Blocks/Length [ft.]: _____/_____'
 - € Predominant Building Height, Range: ____ - ____ stories
 - n. Recent new development on main street:
 - € Private yes no
 - € Public yes no
 - o. Inactive, negative space yes no
 - p. Vacant parcels on main street, size and number yes no
 - q. Vacant buildings on main street, % yes no
- **Programs** or activities that encourage private investment yes no
- **Incentives** for vision-consistent development yes no
- **Organizations:**
 - a. Active merchants or business association [private owners] yes no
 - b. CRA [re-directs existing revenue] board yes no
 - c. Neighborhood Improvement District, or similar [new revenue] yes no
 - d. Active historic society, or other cultural organization [NGO] yes no
- **An active local developer** yes no

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