


What Makes a Community Livable?

# Livability 101


THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE
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## About the AIA – The American Institute of Architects

Since 1857, the AIA has represented the professional interests of America's architects. As AIA members, more than 75,000 licensed architects, emerging professionals, and allied partners express their commitment to excellence in design and livability in our nation's buildings and communities. Members adhere to a code of ethics and professional conduct that assures the client, the public, and colleagues of an AIA-member architect's dedication to the highest standards in professional practice.

## About the AIA – Center for Communities by Design

The Center for Communities by Design is a catalyst, convener and source of information that helps AIA members work with citizens and other stakeholders to envision and create more sustaianable, healthy, safe and livable communities.

To learn more about the AIA Center for Communities by Design, visit *www.aia.org/livable*

## Livability 101 for Communities

Livability 101 offers communities the resources to develop a vision for the future and enables them to be engaged in a successful process with the expertise offered by the architectural profession. As designers of the built environment, architects play an important role in shaping our communities. Their design affects our safety, health, and the environment as well as the quality of life in our neighborhoods, towns, cities, and regions. This publication seeks to strengthen the relationship of citizens and architects by sharing a common vocabulary to create a sustainable framework for building more livable communities.

## Livability 101 for Architects

Livability 101 engages architects as members of their communities, to use and share their knowledge, skill, and experience to participate in civic life. Architecture expresses the values of society and has the power to enrich the human spirit and ensure livability for this and future generations. Livability 101 provides architects with the necessary vocabulary and elements needed to empower communities and make decisions that will shape more livable communities.

Helene Combs Dreiling, FAIA, Hon. SDA,
Team Vice President, AIA Community

# A Sense of Place



*By William A. Gilchrist, AIA*

In the quest to improve conditions in urban, suburban, and rural communities, citizens are becoming ever more engaged with elected officials and government agencies in public processes. These lively forums, which weigh special interests against broader public concerns, often generate heated debate among permit applicants and the public officials charged with enforcing laws and synthesizing solutions.

One common thread that allows an effective discussion of such issues to occur is the shared interest among all stakeholders in the creation, conservation, or enhancement of a community's particular character. This character evolves from the weaving together of many elements to create a sense of comfort, function, and attractive appearance. Summarized below are five elements that help establish a community's unique sense of place.

## Natural Features and Systems

In a sense, every city is simply an extension of the natural landscape upon which it is sited. This landscape is composed of watersheds, aquifers, and geologic formations, and may be part of a rich rain forest or an arid desert. Consideration of the natural setting is essential in every decision a community makes about how it should build.

In some cases, the natural setting is intrinsically linked to an area's community character and, in fact, defines a key aspect of its economic vitality. This fundamental relationship is reflected in many of the country's most popular resort towns, such as Hilton Head, along the Atlantic Coast in South Carolina; Sedona, in the Arizona desert; and Vail, in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

In other cases, the protection of natural resources comes out of a planning process that identifies a range of assets that need to be protected or restored. In Portland, Oregon, for example, a participatory process led to the adoption, in 1981, of a comprehensive plan affirming that every citizen should have a view of Mount Hood. Having identified this major, natural feature as a community asset, the city established protective view corridors that, in turn, guided the heights of new buildings and shaped Portland's urban form.

## The Public Domain

While natural features are the initial and often most compelling components of a community's character, the existing patterns of public circulation and assembly—which have typically developed in response to regional climate and topography—play a significant role in establishing a town's identity. This network of public spaces—from well-scaled streets for movement to public destinations such as parks, plazas, or waterfronts—sets the man-made framework for community character.

In terms of a place's physical elements, it is through streets, sidewalks, and public spaces that public officials have the greatest opportunity to directly create and conserve the cityscape in a manner that contributes to a community's overall quality of life. A case in point is the historic district in Savannah, Georgia: Its urban grid, square, and sidewalk design are stellar examples of how a pedestrian-friendly city should work from front door to street edge. Streets are organized around a clear system of squares that create public destinations and unique identities within the historically rich districts. The sidewalks maintain one level for the public's movement and then shift up slightly to form a continuous landing for either stairs or street-level doors, thus

**One of Savannah's famous squares**
Courtesy Kathrin Moore, Assoc. AIA, AICP

**A sidewalk in Savannah's historic district**
Courtesy Kathrin Moore, Assoc. AIA, AICP

Millennium Park in downtown Chicago has become a popular destination for residents and tourists.

transitioning elegantly and effectively among public, semipublic, semiprivate, and private zones.

In addition, one of the best ways that the public sector can assist in the enhancement of a city's character is to strategically place and contextually develop its own building projects. Cities and counties have the opportunity to set the standard for public parks and public institutions, including libraries, schools, fire and police stations, and the public spaces that adjoin these structures. In all cases, the placement and design of such new elements should conserve and support the existing natural and historic features of the place.

## Historic Preservation

In many U.S. cities, the first "urban design" policies ever enacted were those for historic preservation. Far from being an impediment to revitalization, historic preservation has proven to be one of the best tools given to public officials to preserve a neighborhood's sense of place and then to leverage that authenticity for new investment, tourism, and smart growth. Many cities have identified what is valuable about a particular place and have established development regulations, including those that restrict demolition and encourage sensitive rehabilitation, to ensure that place-defining buildings will be maintained for future generations.


A sign identifies the Mount Vernon neighborhood in Washington, D.C., as a historic district.

While people often associate historic preservation with the rescue and restoration of a single landmark building, the broader application of historic designations over entire districts has been key to the successful urban revitalization of many cities. For example, historic designations of several districts in Charleston, South Carolina, which went into effect in the 1960s, not only preserved what has since evolved into one of the world's most engaging urban designs but also land-banked, or protected individual properties, until economic forces aligned to reinvest in this area.

## Pedestrian Scale

The use of the word scale simply addresses whether a built feature is sized appropriately for its location and how it will be experienced. From sidewalk widths to building heights, size does matter in the creation of places that make us feel comfortable. To appreciate this, consider the experience of walking along sidewalks that are too narrow to feel safe near zooming cars or along endless blocks of walls that generate unpleasant feelings because of their severe monotony.

Wherever pedestrian scale needs to be championed, its adversary is usually the automobile or, more appropriately, the typical design response often engendered by development regulations that place motorized vehicles at the top of the user hierarchy. As a rule, we should ensure that every pedestrian experience is a positive one, no matter the local climate. This can vary from tree-lined streets in a temperate zone to ample continuous-built canopies in an arid area. The guiding principle is that paths

These buildings and streets are exceedingly out of scale for pedestrians.

An engaging, pedestrian-scaled residential street

With places to play, rest, stroll, people watch, and eat, this sculpture garden provides a variety of activities for a range of users.

A sign to orient users of a riverfront trail

Courtesy www.pedbikeimages.org/ photographer: Dan Burden

Interpretive signage for a neighborhood heritage trail

Expressive, commercial signage along U Street in Washington, D.C.

along which people move—whether sidewalks, bike paths, or trails—should feel safe, engaging, and appropriate for the climate so that pedestrians feel comfortable along the route.

Another guiding principle for pedestrian scale is that the public places we create should be as comfortable for one person as for many. Parks, for example, should have spaces and paths that invite and functionally support multiple activities and audiences—from an individual sitting alone to hundreds attending a large event.

## Signage

Even with the clearest design and most coherent development, signage is needed to direct people through their communities. Signs may be used on private commercial property to locate businesses or to advertise the products and services they sell. Signs may also be used in the public domain to direct pedestrians, identify historic and entertainment districts, and point out cultural institutions. And, of course, there are always the basic signs of traffic management, from yielding rights of way to identifying parking spaces and garages.

Taken as a whole, these various signage components play as important a role as any other architectural or urban-design element. Signage scale, style, and sometimes even content should be guided by the local context. The neon billboards and 40-foot-tall signs that work so well along the strip in Las Vegas would not be fitting on Charles Street in Boston.

As public agencies grapple with enforcing codes while also encouraging quality development, it is important to balance commercial interests with design guidelines that enhance the positive attributes of a place. In many instances, clever and innovative signage solutions are born of this tension. For example, in keeping with the character of Sedona, Arizona, a McDonald's restaurant in that southwestern city replaced its standard golden arches with turquoise ones.

Simply stated, signage must be seen as an integral design component and not as an after-the-fact add-on to a community's design.

*William A. Gilchrist is director of the Department of Planning, Engineering and Permits for the City of Birmingham, Alabama.*

# AIA's 10 Principles for Livable Communities

## 1. Design on a Human Scale

Compact, pedestrian-friendly communities allow residents to walk to shops, services, cultural resources, and jobs and can reduce traffic congestion and benefit people's health.

Good sidewalks create an environment where people feel comfortable walking.

## 2. Provide Choices

People want variety in housing, shopping, recreation, transportation, and employment. Variety creates lively neighborhoods and accommodates residents in different stages of their lives.

Farmers' markets bring a community together, provide healthy food, and support the local economy.

## 3. Encourage Mixed-Use Development

Integrating different land uses and varied building types creates vibrant, pedestrian-friendly, diverse communities.

First-floor retail and commercial uses, like this restaurant at the base of an office building, contribute to street life.

## 4. Preserve Urban Centers

Restoring, revitalizing, and infilling urban centers take advantage of existing streets, services, and buildings and avoid the need for new infrastructure. This helps to curb sprawl and promote stability for city neighborhoods.

A former auto shop is converted to a neighborhood supermarket.

## 5. Vary Transportation Options

Giving people the option of walking, biking, and using public transit, in addition to driving, reduces traffic congestion, protects the environment, and encourages physical activity.

Bike lanes and sidewalks are important elements of transportation infrastructure.

## 6. Build Vibrant Public Spaces

Citizens need welcoming, well-defined public places to stimulate face-to-face interaction, collectively celebrate and mourn, encourage civic participation, admire public art, and gather for public events.

A small canal flows through the Lurie Garden at Chicago's Millennium Park.

## 7. Create a Neighborhood Identity

A "sense of place" gives neighborhoods a unique character, enhances the walking environment, and creates pride in the community.

The arch in Washington Square Park in New York City makes this an instantly recognizable place.

## 8. Protect Environmental Resources

A well-designed balance of nature and development preserves natural systems, protects waterways from pollution, reduces air pollution, and protects property values.

Wetlands help control storm water runoff in Ladera Ranch, California.

## 9. Conserve Landscapes

Open space, farms, and wildlife habitat are essential for environmental, recreational, and cultural reasons.

The Bay Trail waterfront promenade along Chrissy Field in San Francisco.

## 10. Design Matters

Design excellence is the foundation of successful and healthy communities.

Frank Gehry's amphitheater at Chicago's Millennium Park.

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Main Street Program, www.mainstreet.org

Mayor's Institute on City Design, www.archfoundation.org/micd

National Trust for Historic Preservation, www.nationaltrust.org

Project for Public Spaces, www.pps.org

The Townscape Institute, www.townscape.org

## Mixed-Use Development

Affordable Housing Design Advisor, www.designadvisor.org

Congress for the New Urbanism, www.cnu.org

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Form-Based Codes Alliance, www.formbasedcodes.org

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Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, www.lincolninst.edu

## Effective Planning for Regional Transportation

Atlanta Friends of the Beltline, www.beltline.org

Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, www.brook.edu/metro/

Car sharing: Flexcar, www.flexcar.com, and Zipcar, www.zipcar.com

Envision Utah, www.envisionutah.org

Smart Growth Network, www.smartgrowth.org

Texas Transportation Institute Urban Mobility Studies, mobility.tamu.edu/ums/

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Smart Growth Program, www.epa.gov/smartgrowth

## Street-Saavy Design

Bikeability checklist, www.bicyclinginfo.org/cps/checklist.htm

Context Sensitive Solutions, www.contextsensitivesolutions.org

Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center, www.pedbikeinfo.org

Walkability checklist, www.walkinginfo.org/cps/checklist.htm

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AIA/COTE Top Ten Green Projects, www.aiatopten.org

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