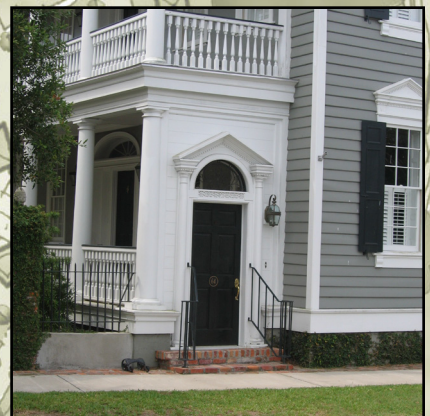


a visual guide to

CREATING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES



Scott A. Miller

Tri-M Design Build

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Forward

It was 2005 and I had been with an architecture firm for two years as their Director of Town Planning and Urban Design. I had developed many successful traditional town plans, and urban designs, for our clients and won a number of RFP's for the firm.

My friend, the owner of the company, had been in the architecture and planning business for 30 years. Often, when he would walk over to my desk to see how things were going, he would question me on my designs; "Why would you place that building there?", "Why is that green space next to that street?", "How were you able to get so many units in the design"? The questions were endless. I suggested we take a road trip to see some traditional planned neighborhoods.

My previous twelve years in the industry consisted of a great mix of architecture and traditional town planning allowing me to see the finished product from both a detailed building(s) design point of view, but also how that structure(s) fit within it's environment and the fabric of a community. I was schooled in urban design and modeled many of my town planning designs on European planning principles, specifically those found in the "traditional planners' bible", *The American Vitruvius: An Architects' Handbook of Civic Art*, by Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets.

We headed south to visit a few communities such as; Wawaset Park, DE, a 1917 planned community by architect Edward Palmer and influenced by Frederick Law Olmsted, Kentlands, in Gaithersburg, MD, designed by the grandfather of New Urbanism, Andres Duany in 1988 and finished our trip in Lakelands (adjacent to Kentlands). We spent the day walking the many neighborhoods taking pictures, speaking with residents and enjoying the well planned traditional communities.

It was on the drive home, when my friend and boss turned to me and said, "so that's what you have been designing all this time?". It was then I realized what was needed for, not only established architects and planners, but developers and the population in general - a visual guide to creating vibrant communities. It was five years later when yet another developer client of mine questioned what was being designed, that I needed to create a guide to somehow relate to them what is possible and actually being built throughout the country (and Europe).

As I travel for business or pleasure, I always take the time to visit a nearby traditional community with walkable streets, neighborhood greens, civic elements, open space, a mix of uses, housing variety and has a sense of place. I am always inspired by great planning and document my visits in order to share with my colleagues and clients alike. I hope you are inspired by what you see and learn just a little about what is possible when designing and building a great traditional community or urban environment.

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Civic Amenities

provide communities with needed gathering places. Civic amenities can be as simple as a fountain or as substantial as a school. Any node, which brings members of a community together, is important. Sometimes also known as “relief”, in the context of a community, “relief” is a term used to describe a break in the fabric (the consistent, redundant and/or repetitive pattern of buildings and/or landscape elements in a neighborhood or community), generally where special design elements, events and community oriented structures/areas are located as destinations.



Pavilion



Dock



Fountain



School

Civic Amenities



Neighborhood Green and Fountain



Fountain and Garden



Waterfront Promenade

Civic Amenities



Active civic amenity



Natural Amphitheater

Open Space

Contrary to some thinking, a private backyard is not considered *open space* in terms of building a strong community. Unless the space is public and can be used by the community, it is not open space. The value of open space within a community is immeasurable. Like civic amenities, open spaces provide communities with an identity and sense of belonging. Open spaces can, and should, come in a variety of forms.



Tot-Lot

Open Space



Open Space separating neighborhoods



Round-a-bout as Open Space



Developers should not consider backyards as Open Space



Residents sharing their yard with the community

Open Space



A towns 'main street' used as Open Space



Not all front yards are created equal - Some transition into Open Space



It's more traditional to hold a corner with a structure, but this playground is a great way to add relief to the fabric of the neighborhood.



Open Space needs to be designed into the fabric of the community and not be considered left-over space.

The Town Green

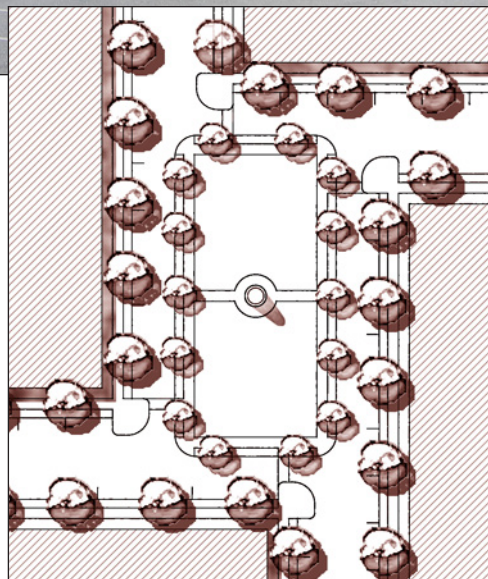
should be pedestrian in scale. Town, or neighborhood greens should become outdoor rooms and maintain a public presence. The most effective town greens are wrapped with one-way streets to pull the architecture close to it's edges and create an edge to define the space and create a sense of enclosure. *Traditionally, the residential units surrounding town greens command higher sale prices for the builder.* A well designed town green will provide townhouse units or a multi-family product along its edges. This type of product defines the space better than a detached, single family unit. Greens should relate directly to the pedestrian and not to the automobile.



A neighborhood green with passive recreation, on-street parking, one-way streets and surrounded by townhouses.



Town greens should not be over-scaled, resulting in an unused and uninviting outdoor space.



A town green does not need to be more than 150' x 75'. This dimension allows for a variety of activities from passive (lawn) to active (gazebo, playground and sport courts). Paths and sidewalks in and around the green will help the connectivity for pedestrians. On-street parking works best along the residential frontage of the street. Street trees can be placed along the green or simply on the interior of the green to create intimate areas within the space.

Creating a Sense of Place

will provide a community with a valuable sense of ownership. Correct placement of street trees, on-street parking and modest front yard setbacks provide homeowners with a sense of ownership of the space between their home and the street while also providing pedestrians with a safe environment.



Traditional village example



New community with no sense of place.



New traditional village example

Traffic Calming Devices

are important to create a *pedestrian friendly* environment. Studies have shown that reducing traffic speeds and creating a continuous network of streets greatly reduce accidents and promote public safety. There are many (and very simple) ways to slow traffic and promote pedestrian movement. Narrow car-ways and on-street parking will slow automobiles. On-street parking also provides a buffer for the pedestrian from the automobile.



Developers and Designers Should Not be Afraid to Introduce a Variety of Traffic Calming Devices



Round-a-Bouts Are Very Useful to Slow and Control Speeds, Provided the Architecture Relates to the Space



Although round, this attempt to slow traffic does not provide the visual impact and becomes more of a nuisance

Traffic Calming Devices



A divided median is often an attractive entrance feature in rural villages or to separate neighborhoods



A round-a-bout used to create a sense of place



Do not use street paint or paving to slow traffic. This attempt rarely works and becomes a visual nuisance

Alleys were traditionally used to provide a place for “back door” uses. Alleys have since grown to become usable spaces for communities, as well as, a means to have rear loaded parking and garages. Alleys are not required to assist in removing those unsightly two-car front loaded garages from the typical subdivision. Narrow lots can still provide a driveway for rear parking and rear and / or detached garages.



Alleys can provide unique spaces and opportunities for kids to play and still utilize the parking and “back door” uses needed.



Garages provided in alleys can still depict interesting architecture. If cost is an issue a garage out of sight can be handled differently.



This alley provides rear loaded garages for multi-family, single family and townhouse units

Alleys



This alley, with detailed architecture, plantings and enhanced paving could pass for the front entrance of these townhouses.



Sadly, this is a street, not an alley.



When possible, and when visible from an arterial road, the architecture within the alley should respect the overall vision of the community.

The Atypical Context

of older towns and village are what makes them so special. It is still possible today to create quirky, sometimes eccentric, differences in scale, size, texture, architecture, color, character and placement of buildings. A lot of new developments, even the 'so called' (TND's) Traditional Neighborhood Developments, tend to have a 'cookie cutter' approach. Neighborhood greens do not have to be rectangular. Townhouses do not have to be all the same size. Structures do not need to relate to the street the same way.



Sometimes a random building placement can add character to an otherwise typical residential block.



To help create green space, this row of attached townhouses does not follow the street setback.

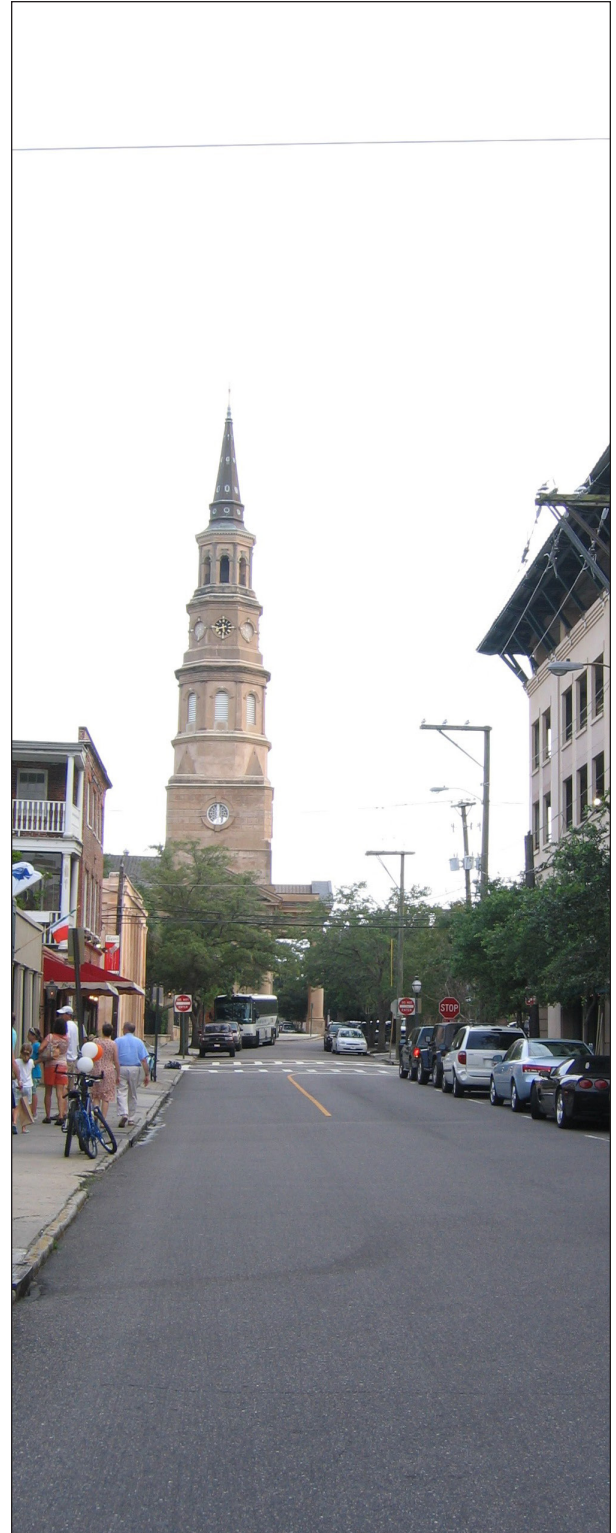


A residential block with single family homes can have atypical setbacks to create a dynamic pedestrian and vehicular experience.

Atypical Context



Sometimes where streets meet will provide builders an opportunity to create unique architecture.



Historic towns have many unique building placements for civic structures. Here the driver is forced to drive around the civic amenity where he may experience it from multiple angles.

Atypical Context



These new residential units were built around existing mature trees.



Residential entrances do not always need to be located along the street line.

Connections are very important within a neighborhood or village. Sidewalks are imperative to create a sense place and help provide neighbors a chance to cross paths and interact with walkers and residents on their front porches. Connections can come in all forms and should be located in as many locations as possible. Pedestrian and bicycle paths should be considered an additional layer to sidewalks.



Connections in established towns and villages, such as, Savannah, GA, are common place.



Similar connections in new towns unfortunately are not as common, but add needed connections and create great spaces.



Established towns create connections where possible.

Connections



Pedestrian and bike connections can be located in the rear of lots.



Pedestrian connections can also serve as front entrances to residential units.

Connections



This path calls very little attention to itself, but is very effective in providing a connection to open space.



Connections can come in all forms.

Streetscapes

will often define a neighborhood or village, for this is the “front door” to our homes and shops. There are a number of viable options for designing the right streetscape depending on the density, character or arterial the streetscape is located. A number of elements should go into the creation of a great street. The architecture should relate to the street. A combination of street trees, plantings, sidewalks, on-street parking, lamp posts and planting strips will enhance any street.



The most important element to create a successful streetscape is correctly relating the architecture to the street.



Sadly, this street feels more like an alley than the “front door”. The architecture does not relate to the street, too many curb cuts, no street trees and no sidewalks

Streetscapes



On this “main street” established towns often have the right sidewalk width, street trees, a number of places to sit and on-street parking to create a very usable and vibrant streetscape.



New communities can also provide the right mix of elements to create a great sense of place. Once the trees have matured, this commercial neighborhood street will resemble the 100-year-old street to the left.

Streetscapes



The canopy of street trees can often create an outdoor room for pedestrians.



Sidewalks are important to any neighborhood, because they provide opportunities for people to meet, and in this case to play.



This historic street in Philadelphia can easily be replicated in new towns, providing the zoning is not too restrictive.



On-street parking, a planing strip and street trees provide the pedestrian a great buffer and sense of safety from passing vehicles.

Housing Variety

in new developments and traditional villages provide a rich mix product and increase neighborhood vibrancy, while providing the developer a number of diverse products to market. Historic villages naturally grew and provided a number of residential styles, types and price ranges. These different products would often be located along the same street and neighborhoods. Developers of new traditional villages are often financially or forced by zoning regulations to provide the same product type on the same street and / or neighborhood.



A residential mix of multi-family and townhouses in an historic neighborhood in Annapolis, MD.



A residential mix of single-family, multi-family and townhouses in a new traditional neighborhood.

Housing Variety



If a street (or neighborhood) is to be designed with the same product mix, the product should change in shape, material and scale.



When the product design remains too stagnant, and the same material is used too much (even if it is brick), the street will lack vibrancy.

Housing Variety



The two photos on this page show the three housing variety examples located at one corner of a new traditional village. The upper photo shows multi-family and single family product. The bottom photo shows townhouse product and the same single family unit.



Housing Variety



If developing a single product neighborhood, the opportunity to provide variation in color and material should still be considered.



A monochromatic design does not provide the home owner with a sense of place or ownership. One could forget which house is theirs.

Entries & Gateways

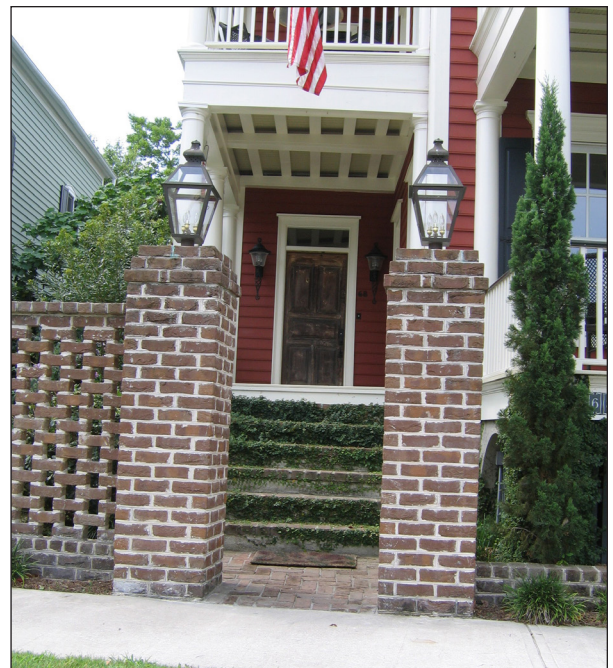
come in all forms and scales and define a structure's architectural style and a location's importance. The importance of the gateway to a community cannot be overstated. Gateways may act as ceremonial entrances, define community boundaries and assist in orientation. In addition, gateways often give the resident, and visitor, a first impression of the community. The design of gateways and entries should be both conscious of the image that the community maintains and be responsive to the role a gateway plays at different community locations.



A residential mix of multi-family and townhouses in an historic neighborhood in Annapolis, MD.



This historic street in Philadelphia can easily be replicated in new towns, providing the zoning is not too restrictive.



On-street parking, a planing strip and street trees provide the pedestrian a great buffer and sense of safety from passing vehicles.

Entries and Gateways



Multiple entry styles and locations enrich the neighborhood.



*Ummmm, where is my front door?
"Welcome to my garage"*

Contrast in scale, material, use and architectural style is what defines pre-zoned America from today's unfortunate segregated and automobile driven designs. We weren't meant to live in a stagnant, monotonous and boring environment.



Why not add a single family detached dwelling at the knuckle of a turn to break up the monotony of a row of townhouses?



Developers and specifically municipalities (zoning ordinances), should allow for a rich mix of contrasting lot sizes and building types.



Not all attached dwellings need to look alike - A change in scale and height adds to the vibrancy of a street.

Contrast



Many municipalities only allow for groups of 7-8 attached dwelling units - If so, why not change up the architecture to help create a more pleasing streetscape?



The contrast here is too repetitious - Allowing for the same material to be side-by-side, changing the roof line or different entry design would break up the already poorly scaled townhouses.



A typical suburban zoned community - No individuality, the garages define the front of the house, no street trees, all the same housing type, no sidewalks, no traffic calming and no community space.

Contrast



These attached units are broken up by a subtle setback in facade, as well as, differences in material, color, style and contrasting roof lines.



Showing these townhouses in color would not even help. Everything from siding to doors to shutters are all the same color.

Mixed-Use Centers are special neighborhoods that serve as the centerpiece of communities. Generally, they have a mix of retail uses that serve the daily needs of residents and workers, as well as, the surrounding community. Mixed-use centers also encourage civic uses and community interaction by providing gathering places, such as, “main street”, plazas, gazebos and greens.



This historic town center in Pennsylvania has a perfect mix of commercial, residential and civic uses. Designers and Developers should encourage similar designs.



Kentlands, Maryland is a great example of a new traditional neighborhood designed and built to traditional planning principles.

Mixed-Use Centers



A new town center with residential over commercial.



Are we really going to call this a "town center"?

Mixed-Use Centers



While this center does not incorporate any residential, it does provide a good mix of office and retail while also providing civic elements.

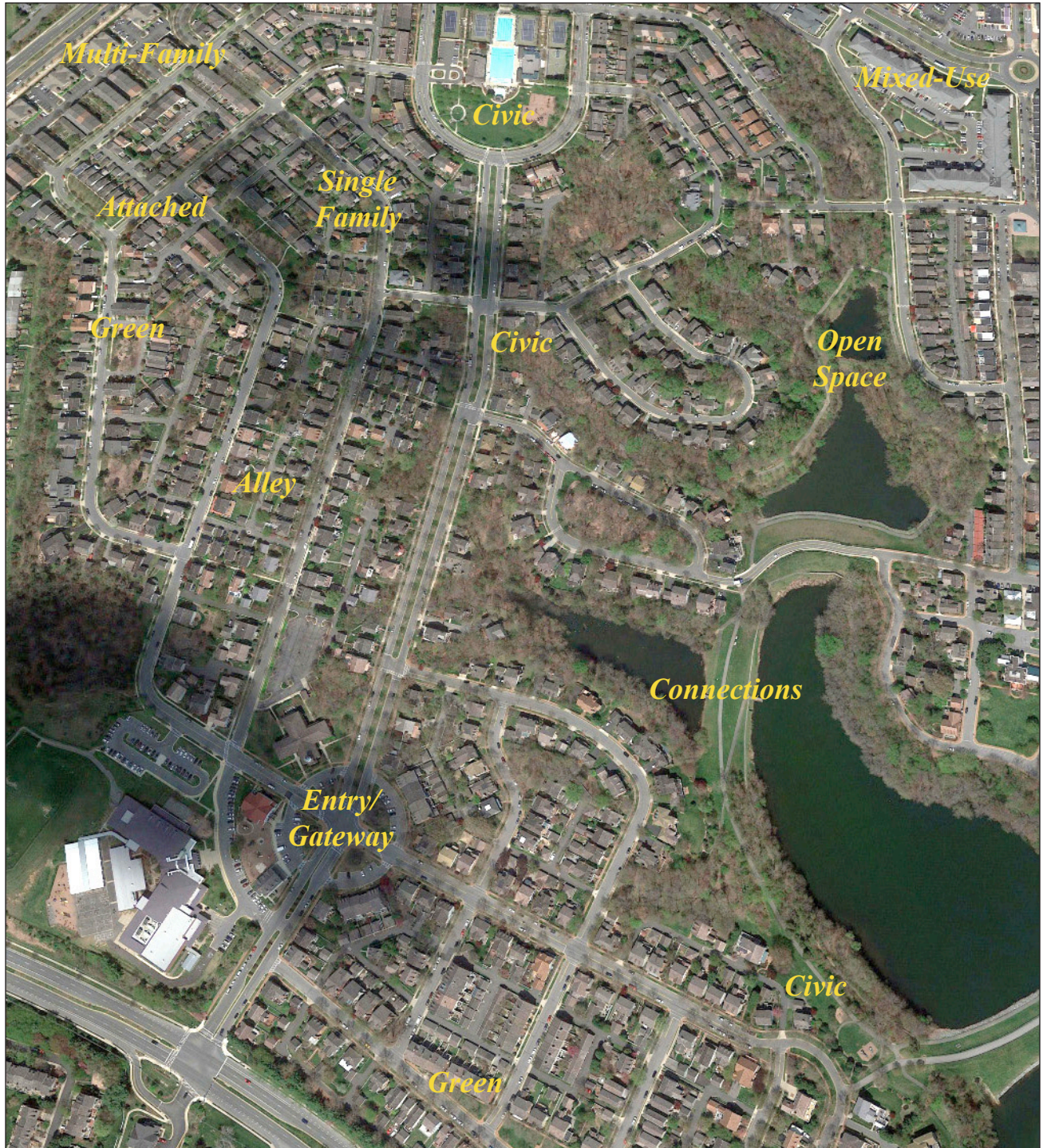


No, new mixed-use centers should not be constrained by limited access by delivery trucks - Kentlands, MD



Mixed-use town centers shall also incorporate green space when possible.

Traditional Neighborhoods



New Community - Kentlands, MD

Traditional Neighborhoods



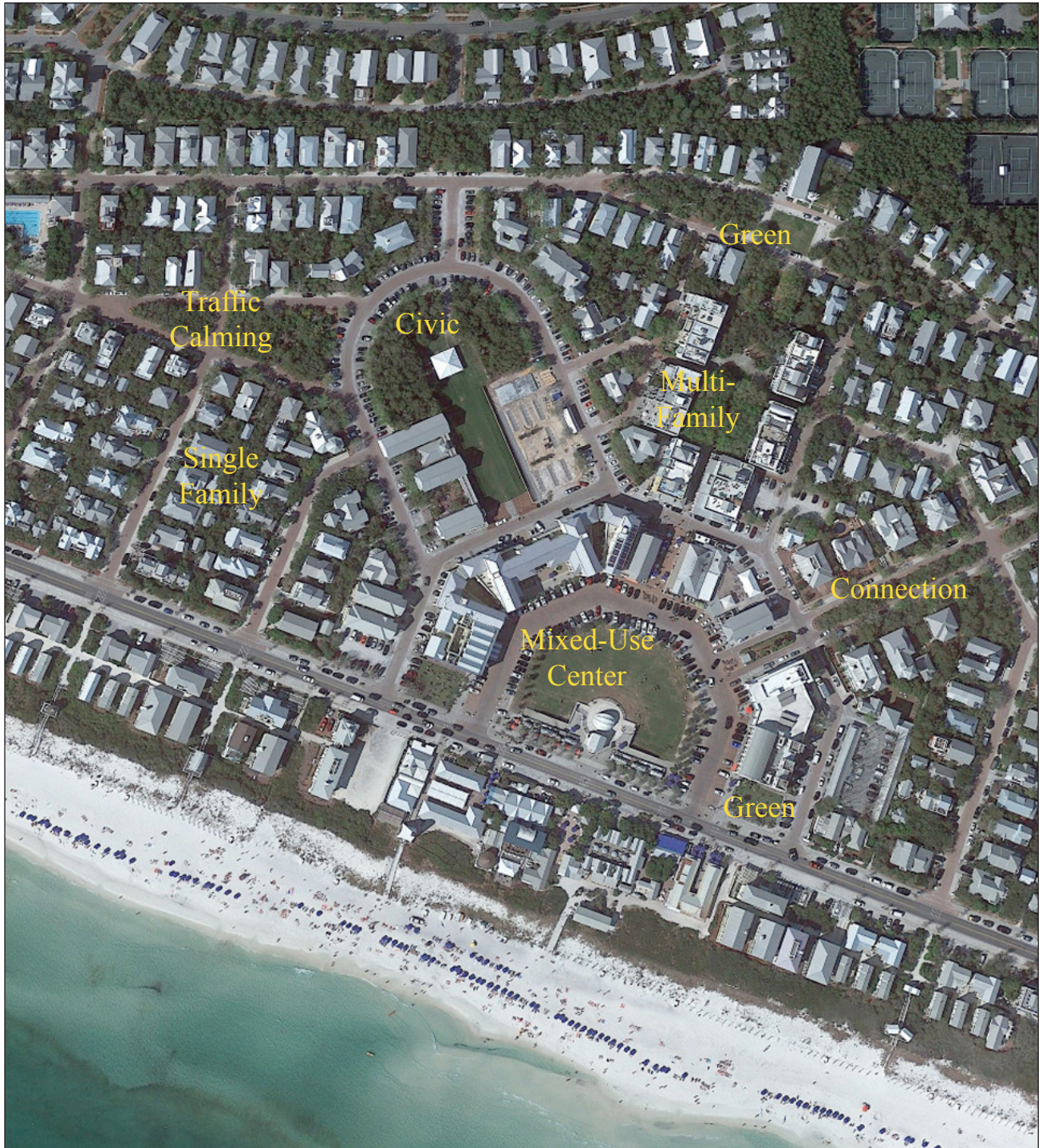
New Community - Lakelands, MD

Traditional Neighborhoods



Traditional Community - Wawaset, DE

Traditional Neighborhoods



Traditional Community - Seaside, FL