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Neighborhood Patterns

The character and quality of our neighborhood streets and parks are, in large part, created by the design of the houses and buildings which line them. For example, standing on the sidewalk of a traditional neighborhood street in Baltimore, Maryland, we find ourselves in a public space that is the result of the cumulative contributions of privately owned, individual houses with their porches and front lawns, as well as the publicly owned street trees, sidewalks, and street. The facades of houses are all in the same plane which defines the urban space, but each facade is different, as are the porches and landscaping in the yards.

The key to understanding this space is in its cross section. Although the physical form of the public space is defined by the facades of buildings, the legal definition of public and private is the property line located at the inside edge of the sidewalk. The space between the property line and the facade, which includes the front lawn and the front porch, is owned by the individual but is also a contribution to the public realm. The front facade of the house and the front yard are the most lavishly designed and decorated parts of the house. They represent a "gift to the street" from each individual. Historians of African American culture argue that the porch's origin is in sharecropper cottages and it represents as significant a contribution to American culture as Jazz.

The essence of the street is a social relationship between individuals and society.

Houses Create Neighborhoods

The basic relationships described in these cross sections can be found in an almost infinite number of variations and permutations, often with porches, sometimes without. In some cases, open, airy street spaces are defined by large houses on heavily landscaped lots; in others, tiny row houses squeeze together and are set back only a few inches from the property line. At higher densities with apartment buildings, even high-rises, the front facades have large open windows, porches, and front lawns to contribute to the quality and character of the street. Shopping streets are most successful when there are residential uses over the shops, adding to the sense of security and stability in the neighborhood.

In all cases, the essence of the street is a social relationship between individuals and society—a space for interaction among all who pass through the public space of the street. It is this social function of the street that contributes to the stability of the neighborhood. Therefore, the design of new buildings inserted into such neighborhoods must maintain this relationship rather than disrupt it.

Traditional neighborhood cross section: single-family houses

Traditional neighborhood cross section: multi-family buildings

Deteriorated neighborhood – existing conditions

## Transforming Deteriorated Neighborhoods

In troubled neighborhoods, those which have suffered deterioration and high crime rates, abandoned houses and vacant properties disrupt the continuity of street character and cross section. By filling in the empty spaces with new buildings that continue the traditional pattern, it is possible to provide natural security and new life for the neighborhood.

View of the proposed revitalized neighborhood with new buildings in the traditional pattern

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Understanding Neighborhood Patterns

The Traditional American Neighborhood

Neighborhoods provide a wide variety of architectural styles, house types, and sizes. Yet despite the differences, these neighborhoods share a fundamental physical structure.
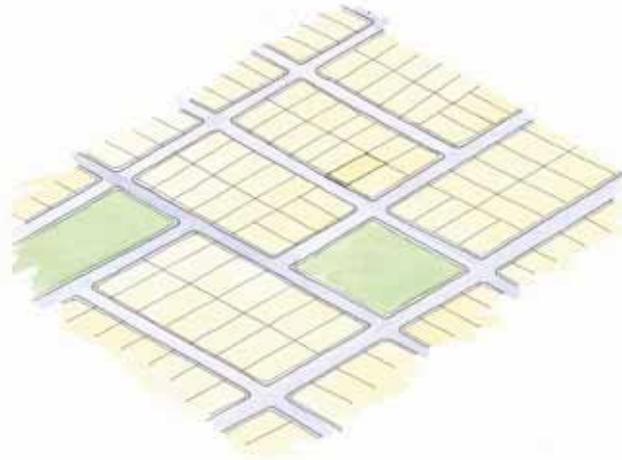
Streets and Blocks

The physical structure of a neighborhood is defined by its network of public streets, (occasionally with alleys), residential development blocks, and parking spaces. The street pattern can vary from a small-scale grid of streets focused on a park green, to curving streets or to a series of cul-de-sacs, depending on the neighborhood's era of development.
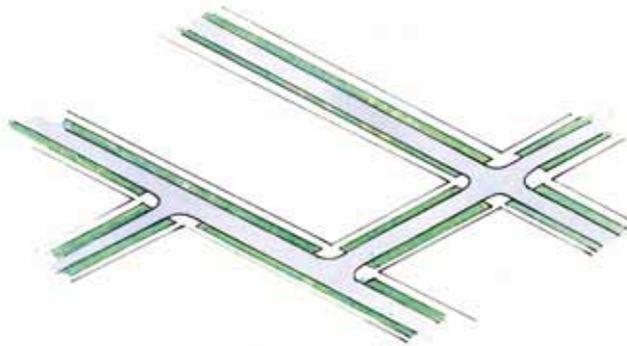
Building Setbacks

Each residential *Development Block* is lotted into individual house lots with a typical *Front Yard Zone* which is the "public face" of the house. These lots can vary in size and can accommodate single or multi-family lots. The "building setback" is the distance from the front property line to the face of the house. Neighborhoods usually have a common setback for the houses that varies depending on the era of the neighborhood.

Development Block

Front Yard Zone

Houses on Lots

Houses are built along a relatively consistent front yard setback line. Setbacks vary slightly to provide visual relief and to allow for porches, existing trees, and other landscape elements to remain. First floors and porches tend to sit two to three feet above finished grade. Ancillary structures, such as garages and sheds, are attached to the house or are located at the rear of the lot.
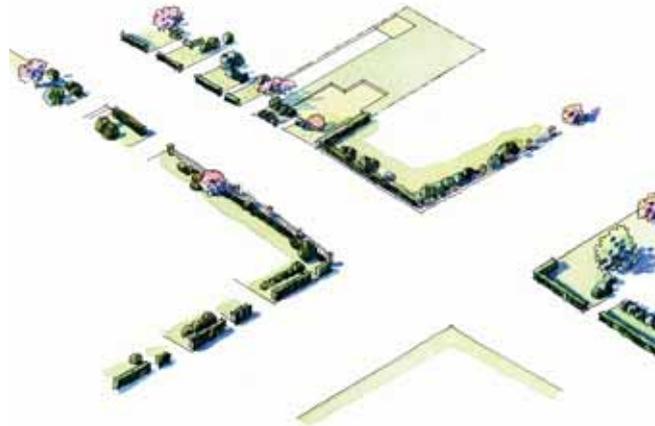
Public Street Landscape

Public street landscape, such as grass verges (lawn between sidewalk and street) and street trees, provide both a visual edge as well as a buffer between the street and the front lawn. In older neighborhoods, the trees have grown quite large and beautiful creating a canopy of green as one walks down the street.

Site Grading and Landscape

The individual personality of the homeowner is displayed through the varying treatments that front and back yards receive. Landscaping patterns can range from the formal to the informal, from brick edging, brick walks, and well-trimmed hedges to naturalistic gardens of low groundcover, medium height shrubs, and indigenous ornamental trees.


Neighborhood Character

Each neighborhood derives its unique character from the composition and juxtaposition of these individual elements—streets, blocks, houses, parks, and public and private landscape elements—which together form the residential fabric.


The Individual House

The last component of a neighborhood is the individual house. The house provides the greatest opportunity for variety through the use of architectural styles, massing forms, color palette, and the varied possibilities of landscaping selections.
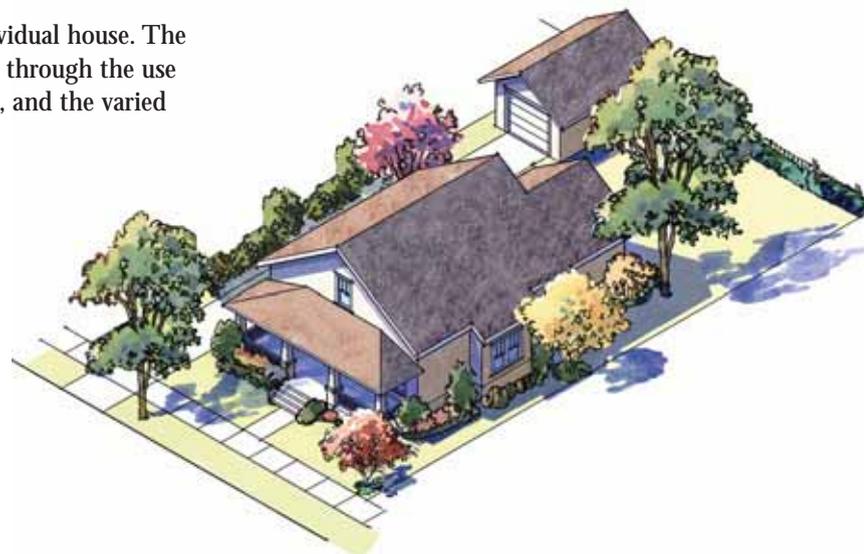
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Placing Houses in Neighborhood Patterns

The placement of houses and buildings on their individual lots should be based on the patterns of adjacent properties. In traditional neighborhoods, this is best done by measuring the setbacks of the buildings on both sides of the street of the block in which the house is to be located. In many cases, the current zoning ordinances do not reflect these traditional patterns and it is necessary to apply for a waiver in order to correctly place the house.
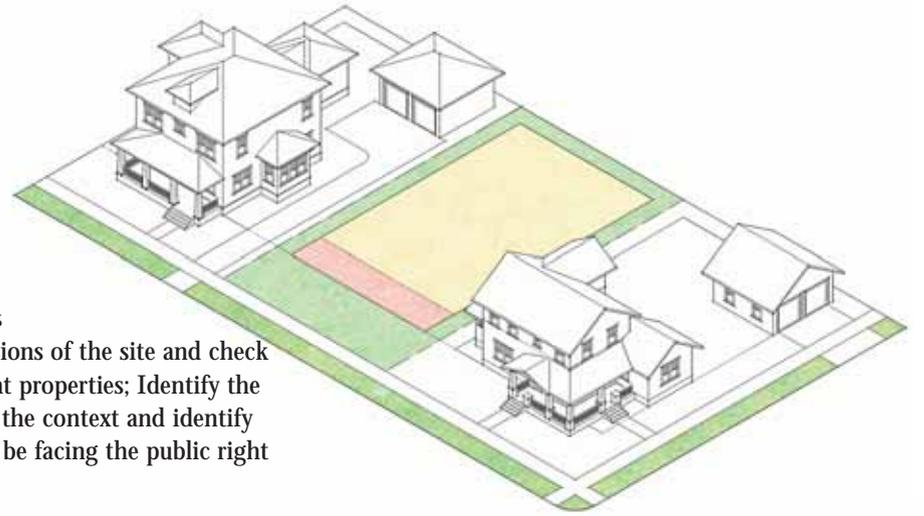
Step 1:
Identify Setbacks
Determine the dimensions of the site and check the setbacks of adjacent properties; Identify the setback lines based on the context and identify those facades that will be facing the public right of way.
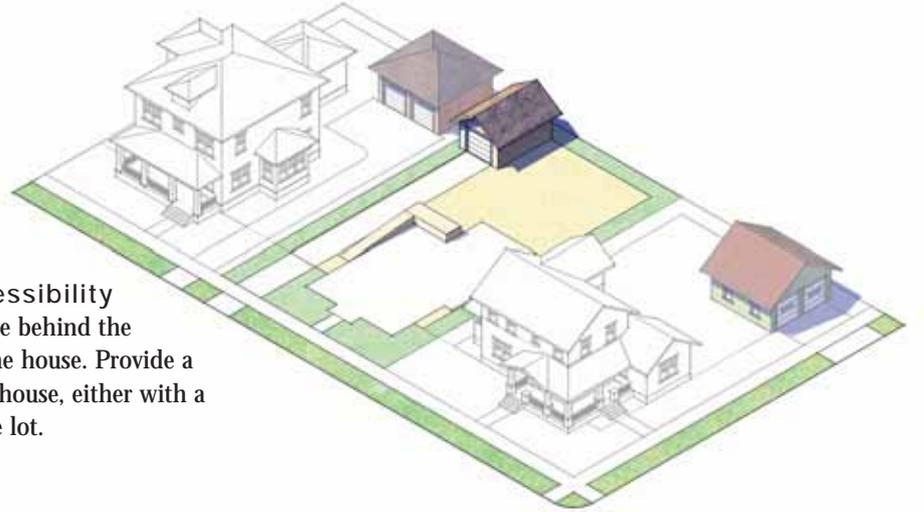
Step 2:
Parking and Accessibility
Provide a parking space behind the front facade zone of the house. Provide a zero-step entry to the house, either with a ramp or grading of the lot.

Step 3:
House and Porch Placement
Place the house with the front facade on the setback line and the porch or stoop within the setback area.

Step 4:
Front and Side Yard Landscaping
Develop the front walk and front yard landscape.

Completed Neighborhood
Houses that adhere to the traditional neighborhood patterns add to the quality of the public realm and encourage the safety and vitality of a neighborhood.

# Placing Multi-family Buildings in Neighborhood Patterns

Apartment buildings provide affordable living space by using standard unit types and shared infrastructure. Both the scale of the buildings and the economy of construction are desirable when building in neighborhoods with large houses or mixed-use buildings. Style, massing, and landscaping will vary widely from one region to the next. It is important therefore to observe and document regional historic precedents.
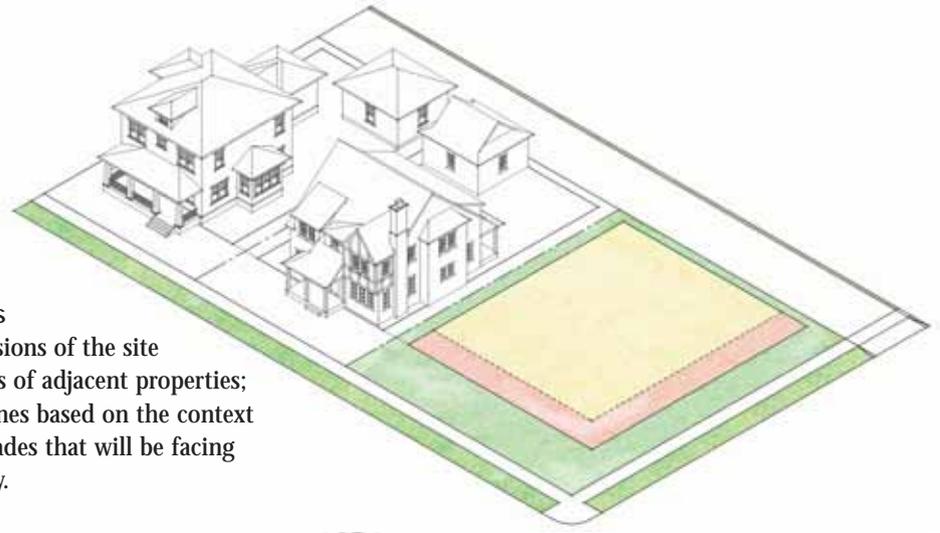

Step 1:
Identify Setbacks
Determine the dimensions of the site and check the setbacks of adjacent properties; Identify the setback lines based on the context and identify those facades that will be facing the public right of way.
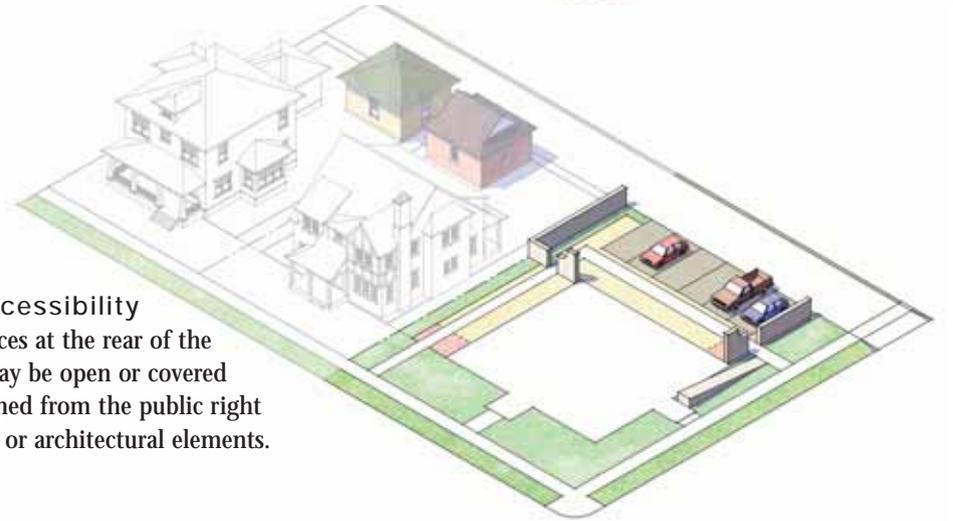
Step 2:
Parking and Accessibility
Provide parking spaces at the rear of the building. Parking may be open or covered and should be screened from the public right of way by landscape or architectural elements.
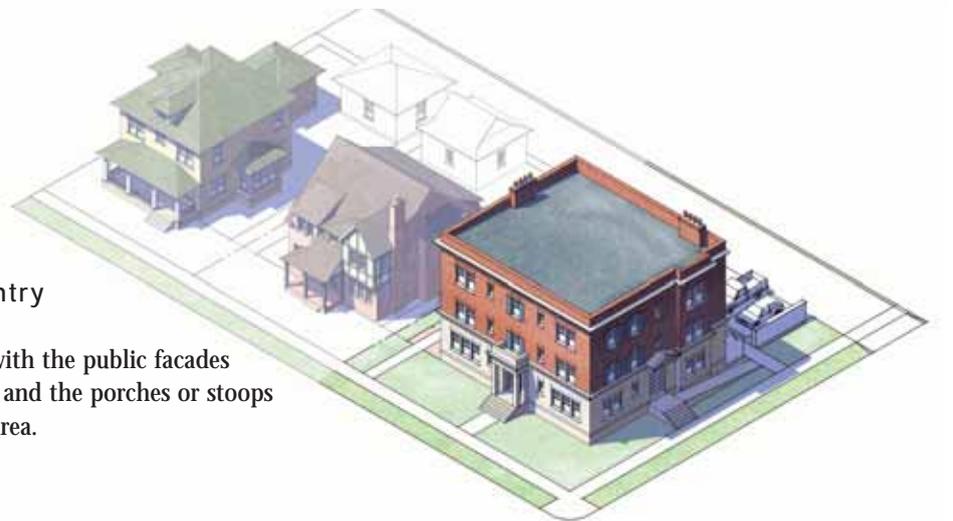
Step 3:
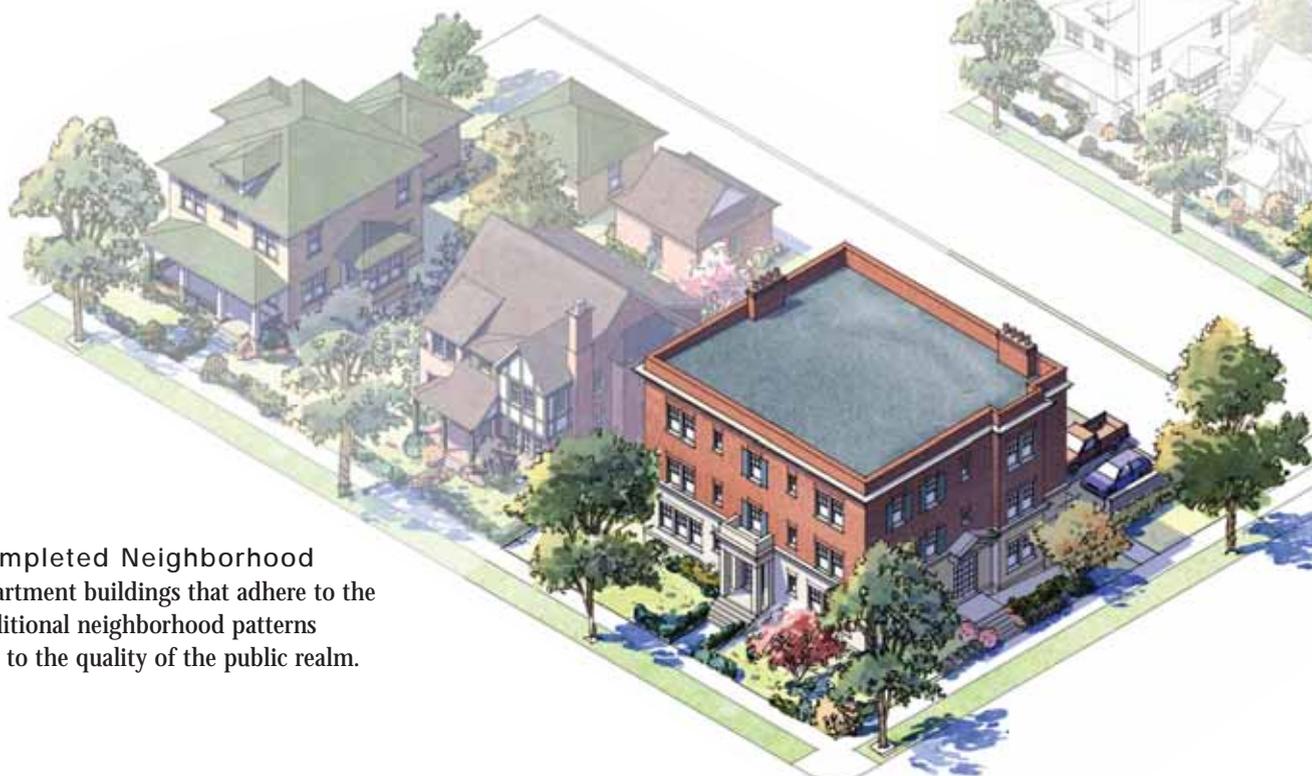### Building and Entry Placement
Place the building with the public facades on the setback lines and the porches or stoops within the setback area.

Completed Neighborhood
Apartment buildings that adhere to the traditional neighborhood patterns add to the quality of the public realm.

Step 4:
Front and Side Yard Landscaping
Develop the walkways and the front and side yard landscape.