Selecting a Livable Neighborhood

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A NEIGHBORHOOD IS A GROUP OF FAMILIES
bound together by similar interests and activities. Schools, employment, churches and neighborhood centers usually determine its location and extent. Other factors will make it an enjoyable place in which to live. Following are some of the things to look for in selecting a livable neighborhood.

CHARACTER...

In choosing a neighborhood environment, look for a high percentage of owner-occupied houses. Pride of ownership, resulting in greater care for buildings and grounds, is a safeguard against depreciated property values. However, small areas of rented homes may not detract from a community if they are well-maintained. Houses should be well planned and constructed if the neighborhood is to retain a good character. They should be located so as not to detract from each other.

Since the character of a neighborhood is determined by the people who live in it, a community consisting of low-cost homes can be just as livable as one which is limited to higher priced properties. In choosing a neighborhood you should consider the people who are living there, to determine whether or not you have interests in common. This can be done by visiting neighborhood schools, churches, and community centers.

LOCATION...

In looking at a neighborhood you should consider both the natural and the man-made features which exist in the vicinity. Bodies of water, such as rivers or lakes, may be desirable; but you should avoid swamp-like land which might flood or rivers which might overflow. You should also avoid the use of rocky or rubbish-filled land which is likely to add to the cost of building and may make it difficult to grow a lawn or garden.

Nearby heavy industry to windward will be an objectionable source of noise, smoke, dirt, and odors—both from the factories themselves and from the railroads serving them. Light industry, on the other hand, may be an asset to the community, providing work close to home in pleasant surroundings. This will be especially true if the small factories are operated by electricity.

Transportation must be kept in mind when choosing a neighborhood. Facilities should be modern and convenient, with frequent service. It will be better still if shops, schools, churches, libraries, and parks, as well as work, are within walking distance of the home.

STREETS...

Layout: In a properly designed neighborhood, the streets should be safe, convenient, and well-surfaced. They should be free from through traffic, but accessible to main arteries. The street layout should be attractively landscaped and should take advantage of all natural features such as hills and valleys, wooded areas, and waterways. Streets fitted to an irregular terrain can provide easier grades, thereby saving on construction costs. Curves and grades must be designed so as to offer desirable lot sizes and shapes.

Court Streets: In order to control traffic or to help subdivide properties where all streets do not go through to intersections, court or "dead-end" streets are sometimes used. Such streets should provide room for firetrucks or moving-vans to turn around at the closed ends.

Easements: Back alleys for utilities should be avoided, except in apartment or business areas. To make room for these services on privately owned land, an easement is usually provided for in the deed. This gives permission for pipes and wires to cross your property within the easement.

Traffic: Traffic flow may be controlled in large measure by the design of the streets. Main traffic routes should be wide and direct. In residential areas narrower streets with gradual curves will discourage through or speeding traffic and will add interest to the usual street scene. These streets should cross at right angles, however, for better vision and fewer accidents.
Blocks: Blocks in a livable neighborhood should be planned carefully for size and shape. Long blocks (up to 1200 feet) result in fewer intersections and reduce the accident hazard. They also lessen paving, sidewalk, and utility costs by eliminating many cross streets. Large blocks make it possible to place houses near the edges, leaving broad inside spaces to be devoted to play and recreation.

Building Sites: A building site should be large enough for the house and garage. It should also accommodate gardening and clothes-drying facilities. Sites should furnish privacy, a pleasant view and space for recreation. They should be wide enough to allow sunlight and air between the houses. (See Small Homes Council Circular B2.1, "Selecting the Homesite").

Buildings . . .

The houses in a livable neighborhood should be similar in general size and character, but should vary in exterior appearance. A simple, appropriate, and "honest" design is necessary to all sound architecture. Houses should be gauged by people's habits of living and fitted to the topography or ground on which they are constructed. They should be adapted to the regional climate. A "Spanish" type stucco house might be all right for a mild climate, in a setting of palm trees, but it would be very much out of place in the snow drifts of the northern part of the United States.

In some areas, stone, brick, and wood are all readily available. These are excellent exterior wall materials, and make possible a variety of treatments. However, too many different materials should not be used in one small home without good reason; that is, to reduce apparent height or to add interest.

In choosing a permanent neighborhood, you should look for houses which are similar in general size and cost, substantially constructed with materials which assure long life and low maintenance.

Trees and Screen Planting . . .

A great arch of trees over the street is a familiar scene in many older communities. Too frequently in new developments an attempt is made to imitate this by planting quick-growing, but short-lived trees. Planned planting should be of more permanent species.

Screens of planting can be used to increase privacy, to block out undesirable views and to reduce the transmission of noise from main highways or railroads.
PROTECTING ORDINANCES AND DEEDS

Local zoning ordinances are designed to regulate the use of all lands within a community for the protection of the home owner. If properly written and carefully enforced, they limit the uses to which buildings can be put, keeping commercial or non-residential elements out of the home neighborhood. By limiting building heights and land coverage, they can insure open space between the houses, thus allowing for ample light and air.

Similar and added protection often is provided by local deed restrictions, building codes, and health and sanitary ordinances and laws.

UTILITIES

Unless a neighborhood has an adequate and approved water supply, there will have to be individual wells and pumping systems for each home. If sanitary sewer lines are not provided, private septic tanks or individual sewage disposal arrangements will be needed. For lots of average size, this would be unthinkable because of high cost and poor sanitation. There should be a system for collecting and discharging surface drainage. Look also for street lights and accessible fire hydrants. Telephone and electric service should be readily available in the neighborhood which you select.

NEIGHBORHOOD FACILITIES

Good neighborhoods include schools, churches, parks, and other recreation areas. A neighborhood center and a shopping center should be near by. All of these facilities should be within walking distance of your home.

A grade school is the natural center of a neighborhood. It should be well designed and modern, with adequate space for play. The school should provide facilities for adult education and neighborhood activities, as well as for the child’s curriculum.

Landscaped park areas should offer what individual homes lack in space for games and recreation. Some of these areas, at least, should be associated with the school.

The neighborhood center may be established in a separate building, or it may be connected with the church or school. In any event it should include a library, a nursery school and a meeting place for teen-age groups. The nursery school will permit youngsters to learn how to play together. The teen-age meeting place provides an opportunity for games and parties and the development of leadership responsibilities.

The shopping center should be located between two corners rather than at a street intersection. This will confine it and keep it from spreading and destroying neighborhood property values. The general character of this center should be such as to safeguard these values. It should be housed in buildings especially designed to fit the surroundings, with adequate parking space off the street.

An active public health service and near-by hospital facilities are important factors to consider in selecting a neighborhood. You should also make sure of adequate fire and police protection.

CONCLUSION

Do not be surprised if you fail to find all of the qualities mentioned here in one neighborhood. New subdivisions should have many of these features, which are recognized as being essential. Neighborhood planning is basic to good housing.