

Nashville and Its Neighborhoods: Fanning the Flames of Place

Christine Kreyling

“A place that ever was lived in is like a fire that never goes out. It flares up, it smolders for a time, it is fanned or smothered by circumstance, but its being is intact, forever fluttering within it, the result of some original ignition.”

Eudora Welty, *Notes on River Country* (2003)

It is at the level of the neighborhood that a child first becomes conscious of the building blocks of place. Colin Powell--the U.S. general-turned-Secretary of State--describes this dawning consciousness in *My American Journey*[ital.], when he writes about growing up in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx.

When I stepped out the door onto Kelly Street, I saw my whole world. You went left three blocks to my grade school, one more block to my junior high school; between the two was a sliver of land where stood St. Margaret's Episcopal Church, our church. A few blocks in the opposite direction was the high school I would later attend. Across the street from us, at number 957, lived my Aunt Gytha and Uncle Alfred Coote. On my way to school, I passed 935 Kelly, where Aunt Laurice and Uncle Vic and their children lived. Farther down, at 932, my godmother, Mabel Evadne Brash, called Aunt Vads, and her family lived. And at 867 were Amy and Norman Brash, friends so close they were considered relatives. . .

The block of Kelly next to ours was slightly curved, and the neighborhood had for years been known as “Banana Kelly.” . . . Outsiders often have a sense of New York as big,

overwhelming, impersonal, anonymous. Actually, even now it's a collection of neighborhoods where everybody knows everybody's business, the same as in a small town. Banana Kelly was like that.

There was a repeating pattern to the avenues that connected our streets. On almost every block you would find a candy store . . . selling the *Daily News* and the *Post* and the *Mirror*. No one in my neighborhood read the *New York Times*. These little stores also carried school supplies, penny candy, ice cream and soft drinks. . . Every few blocks you found a Jewish bakery and a Puerto Rican grocery store. Italians ran the shoe repair shops. Every ten blocks were big chain stores, clothing and appliance merchants, and movie houses. . . The south Bronx was an exciting place when I was growing up, and I have never longed for elms and picket fences.”¹

Powell's recollection is telling for our purposes here because it touches precisely on the basic elements of neighborhood: housing, shops, communal institutions, the streets that bind the



Above: Row houses on Fifth Avenue in the Germantown neighborhood define a consistent, human-scaled wall for the street. (photograph, 2005: Vanderbilt University, Neil Brake)

¹ Colin Powell with Joseph E. Perisco, *My American Journey*. (New York: Random House, 1995; reprint, New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 10-11.

other elements together--and, of course, neighbors. The details of his description--Jewish bakery, Puerto Rican grocery, no elms or picket fences--also suggest that the specific attributes of these basic elements determine the neighborhood's physical character and social identity. A neighborhood's age, types of housing, kinds and quality of goods and services, the nature of its institutions, the architectural style and materials of its buildings, the design and functionality of streets and sidewalks and other transportation infrastructure, amount and types of landscaping, number and nature of parks, as well as the demographics and ethnicities of its residents, all work together to create a distinctive sense of place--and shape the self that grows up in it.

The Ideal Neighborhood



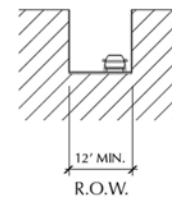
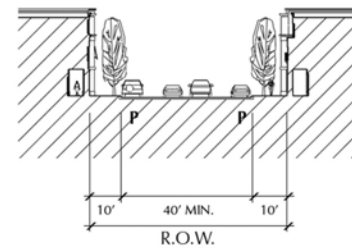
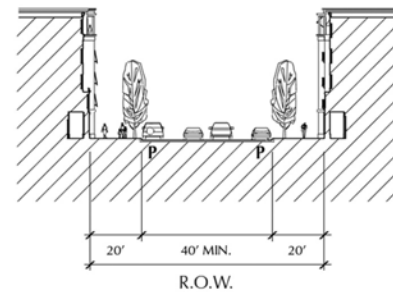
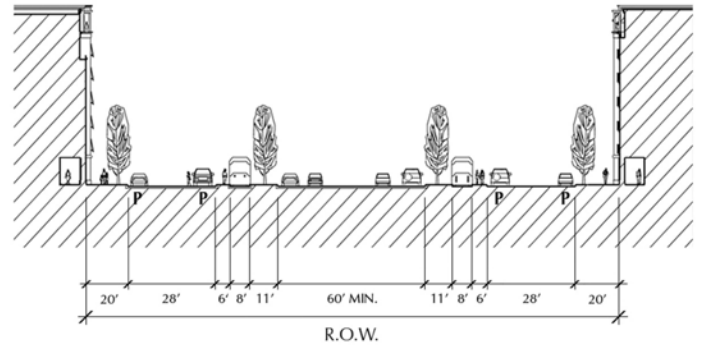
Aerial view of Edgefield, showing East Park with its Beaux Arts bandstand, and Warner School and Tulip Street Methodist Church to the right. (Photograph, 1920s: Nashville Room)

“A neighborhood is where, when you go out of it, you get beat up.”

Murray Kempton, quoting Puerto Rican office worker, “Group Dynamics,” *America Comes of Middle Age* (1963).

Underlying a neighborhood's distinctive attributes, like the skeleton beneath the skin, are organizational patterns that vary little from place to place. These patterns repeat the logic of the city in miniature.

Each neighborhood has a center and edges.² The center--which does not necessarily lie at the geographical middle but is the physical and social focal point--may be marked by a square or green or an important intersection. At or near the center are typically clustered the civic buildings. The focal point for the Edgefield neighborhood, for example, is East Park and Warner School.



Above: Sample sections that illustrate the street hierarchy. From top to bottom: Boulevard / pike; Connector / principal street; local street; alley. (Drawings, 2004: ESA, Corey Little after Graphic Standards)

² The composition of the ideal neighborhood is from the Charter of the New Urbanism, ed. Michael Leccese and Kathleen McCormick (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 79-86

The edges are the neighborhood's limits, which are important in establishing the social sense of belonging to a somewhere. In *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford writes of the psychological importance of the wall--the epitome of the edge--to the medieval town in creating "a feeling of unity as well as security."³

Among the residents of a neighborhood, those who have the most unerring sense of its boundaries are the children. That's because children define the limits of place by walking--to school, to a friend's house, to the Sno-Cone stand. And, according to the *Charter of the New Urbanism*, walking is the instrument of measurement for the ideal neighborhood: a ten-minute walk (approximately a half-mile) from edge to edge. A bus stop located within this walking distance increases the probability that residents will use mass transit.

A neighborhood's children also function like the canary in the mineshaft, because they are the most vulnerable to adverse conditions. If a child cannot easily and safely navigate through the neighborhood, then that neighborhood does not perform well and lacks a sense of security.

Commerce is often associated with the neighborhood center. But in urban areas, in which the aggregation of neighborhoods form towns and cities, commercial buildings often lie at the edges, along high streets or main streets that serve as the "zipper" between neighborhoods. The Hillsboro Village area along 21st Avenue South is a good example of this phenomenon in Nashville, pulling together the Belmont-Hillsboro and Hillsboro-West End neighborhoods.

"Streetscape is not just some abstract notion of quaintness. It is the self-reinforcing quality of liveliness that causes people to want to walk."

Justin Davidson, *Newsday* (August 5, 2004)

The neighborhood street system is a network of connectivity organized into a clear hierarchy. The hierarchy includes alleys, local streets primarily designed for use by residents of the neighborhood, and connector streets--principal streets and avenues--that serve adjoining neighborhoods. Boulevards and pikes accommodate many neighborhoods, are used for longer distance travel--such as the commute from home to downtown--and connect entire communities.

A fine grain of blocks--a block of approximately 240 feet by 450 feet is optimal--enables more direct travel between home and daily destinations for pedestrians as well as vehicles. This network also provides a variety of routes, thus dispersing traf-



Aerial of Bellevue, exemplifying post WWII suburban development patterns. (Photograph, 2002: Metro Planning Department)

fic and keeping local traffic off the boulevards. While the local street system within the neighborhood is used primarily by insiders who already know their way, the pattern of organization has enough predictability for outsiders to navigate without major confusion. Each street within this system is designed to balance the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers--sidewalks, on-street parking and rights-of way narrow enough to calm traffic--enabling the casual encounters among neighbors that help form the social bonds of the community. Land uses in the neighborhood reflect a balanced mixture in close proximity: office and retail, schooling and recreation, and a variety of housing--rental and owner-occupied, single and multifamily--for a range of ages and incomes. Development opportunities in small increments, rather than the assemblage of parcels for big box retail and large housing tracts, reflect the traditional pattern of neighborhood building and contribute to the organic, fine-grained character.

Like the city as a whole, the neighborhood's architectural fabric is composed primarily of background buildings--solid citizens that establish a basic character but don't call attention to themselves. These buildings are placed on the blocks to define the street walls--either built to the sidewalk, which is standard for commercial and mixed-use structures, or with the consistent setbacks more typical of residential areas. At selected places in this fabric--a central location or the terminus to a sightline--stand the architectural special events, such as a school, library or church. These are the community's monuments. Such buildings add ceremony and dignity to the streetscape, and give the neighborhood a collective sense of pride, whether individual residents actually use them or not.

The Not-So-Ideal Neighborhood

The insistence of the Plan of Nashville on the form of the traditional neighborhood as the ideal building block of the city

³ Mumford, *The City in History*, 304.

may be more fully understood by considering its less than ideal opposite: post-World War II suburbia. Crucial distinctions are found in street and land use patterns.

According to traffic engineer Walter Kulash, planning regulations established during the post-war suburban building boom “called for street systems deliberately designed to keep through traffic off residential streets, and they specified the antithesis of connected streets: isolated pods of development connected only to a sparse system of arterial highways. Street layouts were no longer networks, but instead became ‘dendritic’ in nature, with all streets branching from a single connection to the regional arterial road system. The conventional suburban hierarchy was designed to consist of local streets ending in cul-de-sacs and collector streets”⁴ that feed vehicles into major arterials.

Kulash points out that this suburban logic compels all drivers onto the arterial, producing intersection congestion even in low-density developments. “Attempting to accommodate short, local, daily trips is an abuse of the intended function of arterial streets and fuels much of the demand for more and wider highways.” In addition to producing needless congestion, Kulash says, the suburban street layout “is the worst possible environment for pedestrian travel. Access between people’s homes and their destinations is seldom direct and usually requires travel through hostile environments such as major arterial streets and parking lots.” Few trips are within walking distance. “And walking or biking is often dangerous and unpleasant because there are no sidewalks, or they may exist only on the multi-lane arterial road where traffic is heavier and faster, with much greater noise and fumes.”

Isolated pods of a single land use--such as are found at Cool Springs, Nashville’s so-called “edge city,” where residential, office, retail and entertainment are segregated--require people to drive to each destination and attempt to park there, increasing the number of vehicles on the road and the amount of asphalt on the ground. And the typical subdivision contains a solitary

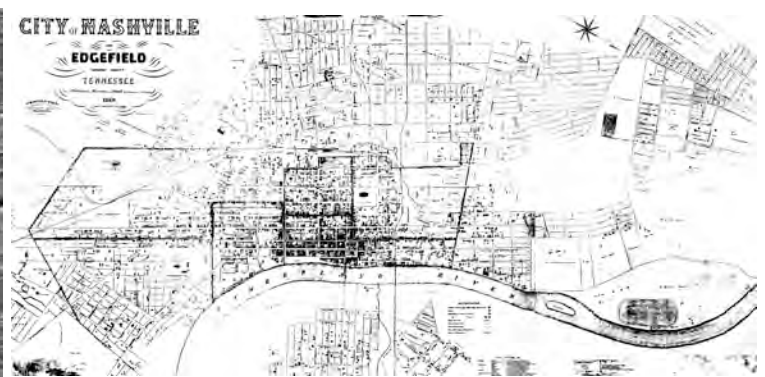
housing type--single or multi-family, rental or owner-occupied--with same-size units on same-size lots, thus enforcing segregation by economic class and often by age. This is the recipe for an assortment of monocultures, not a city.

The City of Neighborhoods

If neighborhoods are to mass together to form a city they must be closely linked, without losing individual identity. Methods of linkage include streets and sidewalks, bike paths, mass transit, and even linear parks or greenways. A good example of the phenomenon of a city of neighborhoods is New Orleans, a place that, in the words of Peirce F. Lewis, “occupies a special niche in America’s small chamber of urban delights.”⁵

The neighborhoods of New Orleans built prior to 1940 exhibit the characteristics delineated in the section above. Each is of walkable size, with a center, clearly defined edges and a tight network of streets laid out in a grid plan skewed in response to the broad bends of the Mississippi River. These neighborhoods are linked by a system of avenues and boulevards that either parallel the path of the river or lie perpendicular to the waterfront. Because of the minimal intrusion of the interstate--protests blocked a riverfront expressway in the 1960s--the historic neighborhoods fanning back from the river still exhibit classic neighborhood form.

Most of the characteristics of the ideal neighborhood were once present in Nashville’s first ring neighborhoods. These earliest of Nashville’s suburbs--enabled by the advent of the streetcar--originally had natural edges, such as the Cumberland River and its flood plains, the Gulch and other topographic features. The bridges across these natural barriers are woven into the city’s history. While these neighborhoods exhibit less density of building fabric than downtown proper, they are nevertheless urban in character due to their network of streets, the preponderance of buildings oriented to the public right-of-way, and residential population densities of six to ten units to the acre.



Left: Aerial view. Note the fracturing of the traditional neighborhood form by the interstates, and the gaps caused by surface parking. (Photograph, 2003: Metro Planning Department) Right: Historic neighborhoods of Nashville. (Map, 1860, Tennessee State Library and Archives)

⁴ Kulash citations from Leccese and McCormick, Charter, 83-86.

⁵ Peirce F. Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*, 2nd ed. (Santa Fe, N.Mex., and Harrisonburg, Va.: Center for America Places in association with the University of Virginia Press, 2003), 4.

