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## Places

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*I live in a neighborhood that most people, upon hearing a description of it, would identify as traditional.*

## EVERYDAY URBANISM



East Fairview neighborhood  
Photos: Todd W. Bressi

### MARK L. HINSHAW

My neighborhood has a grid of streets that create rectangular blocks divided by alleys. The streets are narrow; there are sidewalks lined with mature street trees. Parking occupies both sides of most streets, and, given the narrow curb-to-curb width of most of the streets, the uninterrupted, two-way flow of vehicles is difficult. Frequently, one must pull off to the side to await the passage of an oncoming car. This calming of traffic speed allows people to walk across at almost any point without fear of being run over.

Most of the lots and buildings in my neighborhood are relatively small, although there are a number of sizable structures containing apartments and condominiums. On any given block, homes can range from eight decades to eight months old. There are wood-frame houses, stucco and masonry apartments, duplexes, row houses, courtyard houses, tandem houses (one in front, one in back) and diminutive cottages. Some are set close to the street; others are set back. The variety in size, style and cost allows for many different household types, incomes and ways of living.

Within a five-minute walk are several small groceries, a half-dozen restaurants and cafes, a couple of

pubs, the ubiquitous video store and a popular espresso vendor. Because the neighborhood lies next to Lake Union, a string of marine supply and boat repair businesses line one street. You might not be able to purchase a sofa here, but you can buy most of what you need on a day-to-day basis without needing a car to do it. If you commute, buses pass along the main avenue every ten minutes.

All of these characteristics are dear to the hearts of New Urbanist planners and designers. But look more closely at this neighborhood and my street and you will find some significant departures from the dogma that seems to accompany this increasingly popular movement.

There is no elaborate "code" for buildings. Far from it. The range of housing types and designs is far more varied than in many developed New Urbanist communities, even those that are "urban" New Urbanist. The community supports this diverse melange. While a number of basic regulations govern development, variety is valued much more highly than uniformity. Some buildings have porches, others do not. Some have pitched roofs, while others have flat



*This suggests three lessons  
for us New Urbanists:*

*1. Lighten up.*

*2. Be modest.*

*3. Power to the people.*

tops. Some show the hand of good designers; others are entirely unremarkable. A handful of carefully restored Victorian era homes are scattered among more modern structures.

My own street has neither sidewalks nor curbs. It still has parking—parallel, perpendicular and angled, depending on where you are. This random array of parking produces a setting that is well suited to casual strolling: Drivers must watch out for maneuvering cars, joggers and ambling walkers who feel free to use any portion of the street surface. Drivers often creep along, threading between streams of people on foot. Neighborhood cats lie fearlessly in the middle of the street, knowing that they will have plenty of time to get out of the way.

This rich mixture of structured and unstructured physical forms fits our culture—a culture that values individuality as much as community. In fact, my neighborhood is but one of several dozen in Seattle each of which has its own, idiosyncratic character. We seem to share a common value: the ability to shape a small, individualized space within a loose framework that holds it all together.

So, perhaps we need to pare back the rules. Narrow streets with parking, yes. Reverse the standard notion of lot size: no minimum size, but instead have maximum limits to keep the increments of development small. Use floor area ratio (somewhere between 0.5 and 0.75) to prevent bloated buildings. As to land use: allow small businesses at major intersections and certainly home offices. Maybe that's all that is necessary to produce neighborhoods that are lively as well as livable.

This suggests a few lessons for those of us who put ourselves in the New Urbanist camp:

*Lighten up.* Codes don't always need to be complicated. A handful of simple ideas can net a lot of good, and more varied, results.

*Be modest.* Encouraging existing ordinary places to thrive is just as important as building new large-scale projects.

*Power to the people.* Making places that nurture small entrepreneurs, those who do one or two buildings at one time, can be a driving force for change and innovation—rather than top-down planning and capital-intensive approaches.