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Author
Schuster, Mark Davidson

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# Growth and the Loss of Regional Character

In the debate concerning growth and development it is not uncommon to hear the claim that growth will mean the loss of local and regional character. It is easy for an outsider to assume that the "loss of local and regional character" argument is, at best, a rhetorical tool used to forestall change and, at worst, a smokescreen for other, more questionable attitudes toward social exclusion. Yet, many older towns have a rich architectural, environmental and community heritage that is valued not only by those who are fortunate enough already to live there, but also by those who come to the community as visitors, tourists, workers, shoppers and commuters passing through, as well as by those who would like to move there.

Many New England towns have experienced unprecedented growth pressure as a result of changes in the regional economy. The rise of the high-tech sector with its particular emphasis on white-collar employment, aided by the building of Boston's regional belt highways—Route 128 (now Interstate 95) and later Interstate 495—has created a great demand for land for commercial and residential development in previously suburban and rural communities.

But whatever form regional growth takes, these towns have found themselves poorly equipped to manage that growth or to shape its effects. There is very little public-sector infrastructure in place to deal with this kind of pressure: Volunteer town committees are stretched beyond their capacity and expertise, and the public-sector interventions with which these towns are familiar are better suited to a time when the community was much more closely knit and change was measured over decades, if not longer.

The strong images of single-family suburban houses spreading slowly across fields that were formerly farmland, of disintegrating village centers and of increasingly congested secondary roads have become powerful rallying points for citizen concern and debate. In those New England towns where the town meeting is still the primary form of government, multi-unit development proposals more often than not are defeated.

"I like being on top of a hill or near the top of a hill...with distant views of other hills and valleys. And from here to the southeast I can see all the way to Boston, and to the west there are seven layers of blue at a certain time in the afternoon for different distances between here and Mount Wachusett.... And with all that exposure, we're still very private, and so I have a kind of contact with the land that is very special...."—Arthur Blackman, Selectman, long-term resident, Groton, Massachusetts
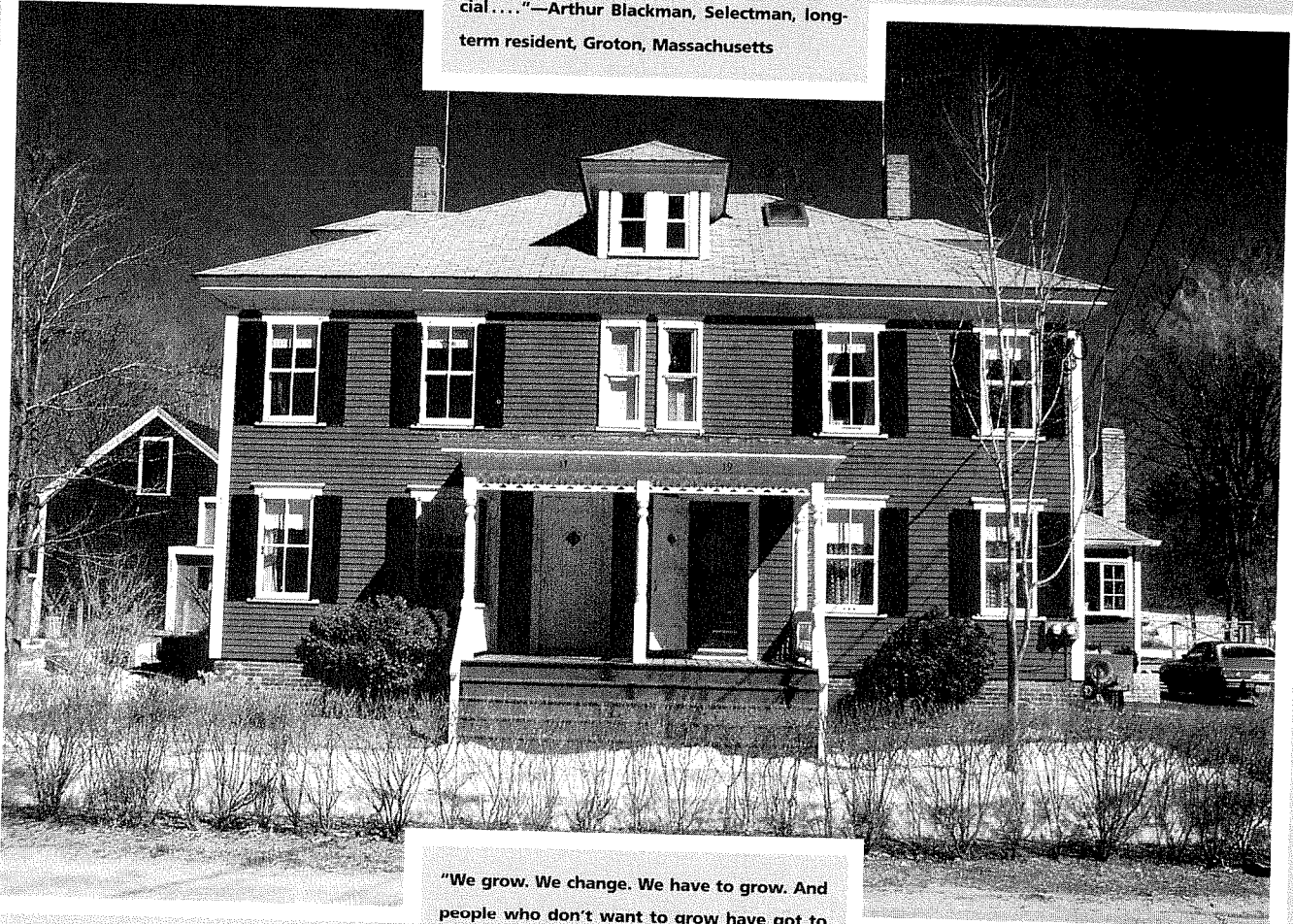
"We grow. We change. We have to grow. And people who don't want to grow have got to keep moving farther back. You see, people come here...because they like 'the country.' And they start immediately, within a year or less, sitting on the boards wanting to do things the way they were done (where they came from), and they get upset and they leave. In the meantime the town has gone the wrong way another three inches, so to speak." —Jack Andrews, retired, long-term resident, Groton, Massachusetts

A typical community building.

A Primer for New England Towns

To what extent, and in what ways, is regional character threatened by growth? Is it possible to have growth without threatening that character?

In the Environmental Design Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology we became intrigued by these questions. If one could identify key elements of local and regional character one might be able to understand better just what was being lost. If this proved possible, then it might also be possible to propose ways in which New England towns could allow (if not welcome) growth while shaping it. With these questions as a point of departure and with support from the Design Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, we developed *Housing and Regional Character: A Primer for New England Towns.*[1]

On its face, the *Primer* is a pattern book in which we identify key elements of local character for a regional grouping of relatively similar towns facing growth pressure and suggest possibilities for development and growth that would be in keeping with, and possibly even re-establish and enhance, local character. Our main emphasis is on housing because that is where growth pressure has been the greatest. In this sense, our approach is a direct descendant of the *Essex Design Guide* in Great Britain.[2]

But less obviously, the *Primer* is a manifestation of an information strategy that can be particularly effective in resolving the perceived conflict between regional growth and the preservation of local and regional character. In particular, it argues that it is far preferable for a community to develop a commonly shared view of its development future and to clearly and widely communicate that view prior to establishing the regulatory policy envelope within which development will take place.

The document is intended to be used as:
- a discussion document around which towns can begin to discuss their vision of what form future development should take;
- a tool to communicate to developers the types of development that the town prefers;
- a negotiation tool that can serve as a touchstone providing images and ideas around which town boards and developers might focus agreements;
- a source of ideas for developers.

This list will undoubtedly appear odd to towns accustomed to using subdivision regulations and zoning as their primary forms of intervention into the realm of environmental design. If the legal clout of zoning has not succeeded in ameliorating the effects of growth, how can a strategy based more on the provision and sharing of information than on the establishment of rules hope to succeed?

But one could argue that zoning is the mechanism towns use because it is the mechanism with which they are most familiar; one changes what one

White picket fences and community mailboxes.

knows how to change. Two-acre (or more) as-of-right zoning is primarily responsible for the single-family housing development that these towns now find so objectionable. With no other articulated models of intervention, these towns fall back on zoning to generate the least worst of the perceived known alternatives. An information strategy offers another path.

Research Approach

The focus of our research was the region to the northwest of Boston surrounding the circumferential highways Interstate 95 (Route 128) and Interstate 495. We chose the towns of Acton and Groton as specific case examples. Acton is closer to Boston and has experienced more development and growth than has Groton, which is still quite rural in character. Acton has a developing commercial strip and has been the site of a number of multifamily housing developments, while Groton awaits these developments with foreboding. The residents of Groton fear that Acton is what they might become in a generation or so. Yet, both contain many wonderful examples of the diverse and surprisingly unfamiliar aspects of local and regional character that contribute to the overall essence of New England.

While the *Primer* draws specific examples from Acton and Groton, as well as from adjoining towns, the lessons are applicable on a regional scale. Neither Acton nor Groton were our "clients." It was our intent to develop a primer that would serve as a generally applicable example; any town developing its own primer would want to highlight other characteristic elements of its town.

The development of the *Primer* included a number of research steps. We began with a detailed historical

analysis of the development of the two towns. Then we undertook a lengthy field analysis including site surveys, mapping, and photography. We completed a detailed analysis of the existing land use policies in each town. This step turned out to be particularly important because a number of the development possibilities that we suggest are simply not possible within the current policy envelope. Put more
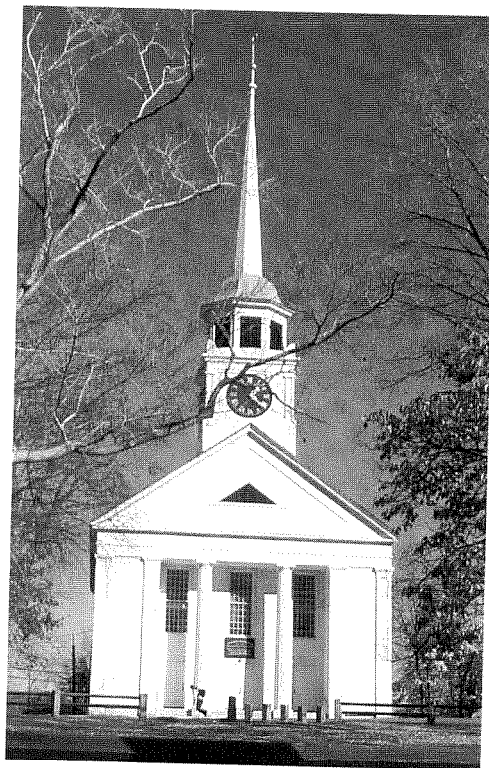
A church in a village center.

strongly, we came to the conclusion that a number of the current policies act perversely to dilute and undermine local and regional character and that others are simply ineffective.

All of these steps were ways of applying our professional knowledge to the problem of identifying local and regional character. But as we proceeded with our research we were continually reminded that our ways of looking at the world were not necessarily the ways that local residents viewed their own towns.

As an integral part of our research we conducted detailed interviews with residents of both towns. We developed an interview protocol that asked residents to talk about what they liked and disliked about their towns and about their hopes and fears for growth and development. Using constrained-choice questions, we asked our interviewees to contrast and compare various types of development and discuss their preferences: "Assuming that single-family housing/multifamily housing/office/retail/open space development will occur, which type would you prefer?" The questions used boards of numbered photographs of each development type in order to focus the discussion of each type.[3]

In each town we interviewed 25 to 30 individuals. No attempt was made to assure that we had a random sample; rather, we used "snowball sampling" in which one contact would recommend several more and so on. We asked to be introduced to individuals who lived in various parts of town, to newcomers and longtime residents, to growth proponents and opponents, to renters and owners, to younger and older people, to developers and town planning officials. We were uniformly greeted with enthusiasm, and we often found ourselves talking longer than the promised hour.

We were moved by the stories we were told of people's relationships to their environment, and we came away with a new appreciation of the complexity and diversity of local knowledge. The views and preferences expressed were by no means monolithic or consistent. Many individuals, for example, are torn by their inability to envision a way to steer between the strongly held view that individual property owners should be allowed to exercise fully their property rights in disposing of and developing their land

and the equally strongly held view that misguided growth and development are gradually eroding their communities. Our thoughts concerning regional character have been profoundly affected by these individuals who opened their homes and their thoughts to us, though it is impossible to trace that effect in any statistical sense.

Regional Typologies

When we synthesized our research information, we discovered that local and regional character could not be summarized in a unitary town-wide milieu. Rather, it was manifested in a series of different settings, each of which is evident in the New England landscape. In the *Primer* we identify five primary settings: the Village Center, the Mill Center, Farm Settlements, Woodlands (originally settled as summer communities around small lakes) and the Commercial Strip. In other New England towns there are undoubtedly other important regional settings such as the Seaport, but the five on which we focus in the *Primer* are pervasive.

The substantive design argument we make in the *Primer* is that wherever a developer proposes to develop in one of these towns, almost without exception it will be in the context of one of these settings, and an understanding of which setting is to be host to the development is the critical first step in preserving and enhancing local and regional character.

In the *Primer* we consider the historic evolution of each of the settings. The Commercial Strip, for example, can be traced back to the eighteenth century, and remnants of each period in its development can still be found along it. We document the views of local residents concerning each setting, including potential development. And

Proposals for Village Centers

New England village centers are the result of a long history of physical, social and economic change. When first settled by Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the village center was sited on the slope or top of a ridge or hill, overlooking a river or wetlands area. Its role as the political and religious center of the town was embodied in the construction of the first meetinghouse. The village center was built around an elongated web pattern of roads, radiating from the center to outlying farms. Although the first town inhabitants lived in the center, by the end of the sixteenth century, outlying farms surrounding thinly populated centers were the norm.

The village center assumed the form one thinks of as "traditional New England" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During this period of growing trade and manufactured goods, the village center became the commercial hub of the surrounding town. The village center became denser as the earlier pattern of buildings was filled in. New roads were added to the web pattern, straight turnpikes were connected to the center and one street became the commercial "main street." Greens, churches, town halls and other symbolic elements of the center were formalized.

The village center today is still built on the web pattern of streets. An open space—commons, green, or square—and monumental buildings, such as churches or town halls, are located at important intersections. Views are "led" by irregular streets and are "layered," with buildings and trees overlapping.

The perceived density of the center is high, with houses close together. Side streets have smaller houses set closer together than the main street. Houses are always oriented to the street and present a "public face."

Traditional large village house.

Although the village center remains the political, religious and symbolic center of town, population dilution and commercial competition have often left it a sleepy backwater. Setback requirements and the introduction of strip-style architecture and siting have helped break the traditional tight building pattern and street enclosure.

Once a destination for foot and horse traffic, the village center is now an obstacle to through automobile traffic. This has affected safety and diminished the enjoyment of the village center by pedestrians. It has necessitated traffic improvements that often damage the traditional village street pattern.

Conservation

Infilling of existing undeveloped or abandoned plots of land could be encouraged. New houses should follow the built form and siting principles of neighbors. Every unbuilt village space or backland should not be infilled, but selective infilling could be instrumental in strengthening the village center and in providing a window for much needed affordable housing.

The "web" pattern of existing streets can be filled in, adding new housing that follows the traditional siting and built form of existing housing. Where a grid pattern exists it can be filled in as well.

Culs-de-sac can be created when through streets are impractical. This will offer the opportunity to open up vacant land in the center of webs and grids. Minimum frontage and setbacks would promote efficient development.

The existing web and grid patterns could be expanded to ensure incremental development is in keeping with the traditional local pattern.
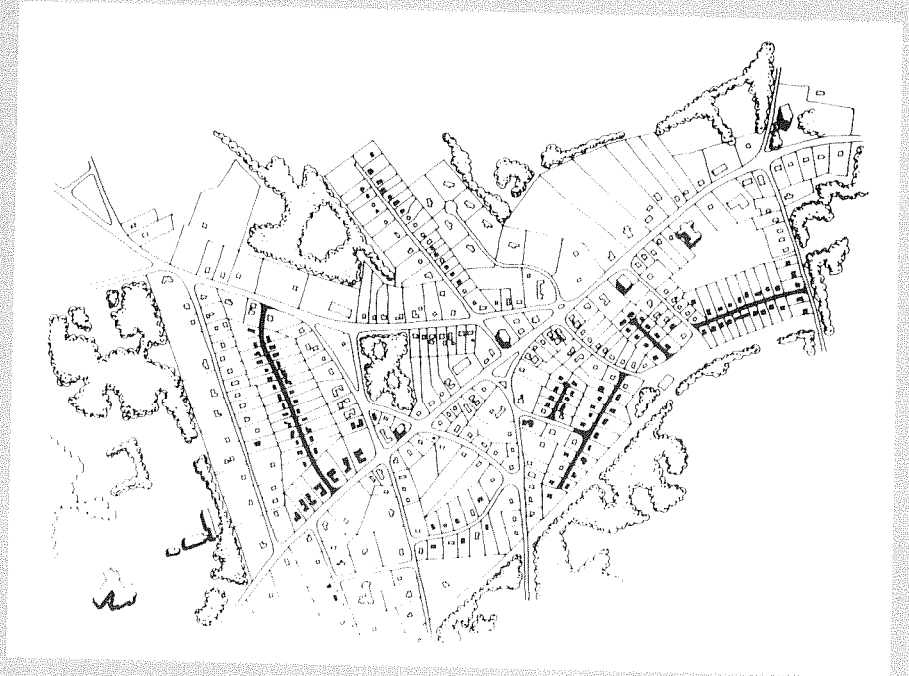
Summary of measures to re-establish village centers.

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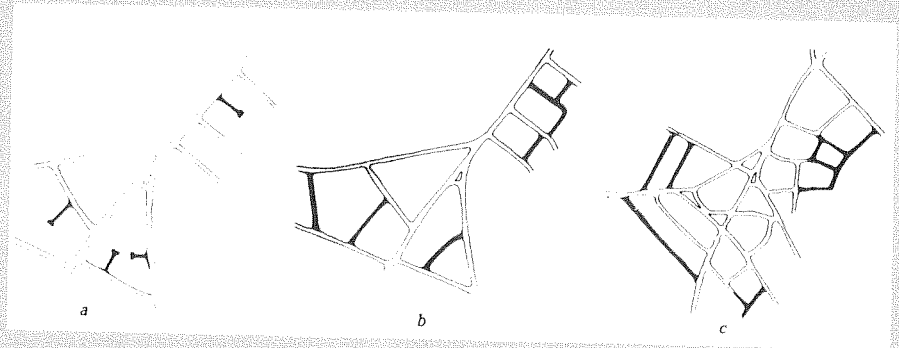
Three strategies for filling in the street pattern.

Text and illustrations excerpted from *Housing Design and Regional Character: A Primer for New England Towns,* by J. Mark Davidson Schuster, Roger Simmonds, Dennis Frenchman, Kathryn Ludwig, William D. Tuttle III and K. C. Ip.

Traditional large village house: model for the design of multifamily housing in the village center.

Successful eighth-acre lot development.
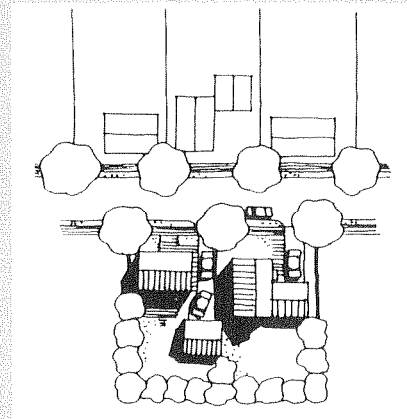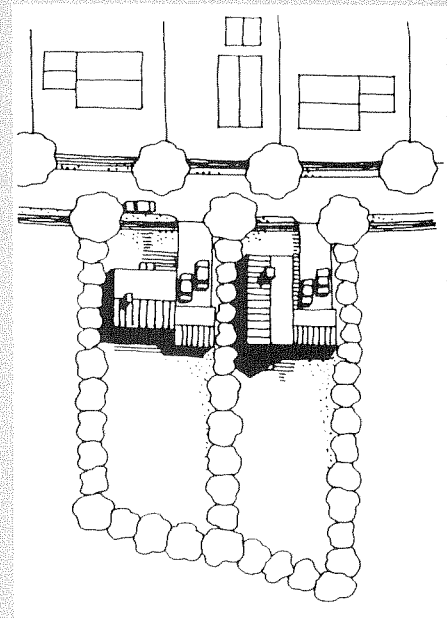

Successful quarter-acre lot development.

Housing

To encourage the development of housing that is in keeping with the local character of traditional village centers, minimum lot sizes should be lowered to lot sizes of one-fourth to one-eighth of an acre, the traditional size of historical house lots. This will encourage sympathetic development, substantially reduce the crippling land costs of larger lots and free up small, derelict, undeveloped lots for development. The danger is that these small plots will be developed with the excessively large subdivision houses that are so much in evidence in today's market. Towns need to control this process, perhaps through tight building-plot ratios.

By making minimum lot sizes smaller, towns can re-create the opportunity for the small traditional single-family house (600 square foot ground floor). These should be located on side streets. Again, it will be necessary to control the size of unit to be built on these plots, so that the buildings will be both appropriate to their context and more affordable.

Multifamily housing could be permitted if it were based on traditional buildings in the village center. The housing might follow existing large single-family house forms, particularly the extended house with coach house or barn to the side or rear. Several such house forms might be combined in one development with perhaps 25 housing units designed around the principle of three large village houses with barns or coach houses to the rear.

Proposed eighth-acre lot development on side streets.

Proposed quarter-acre lot development on main street.
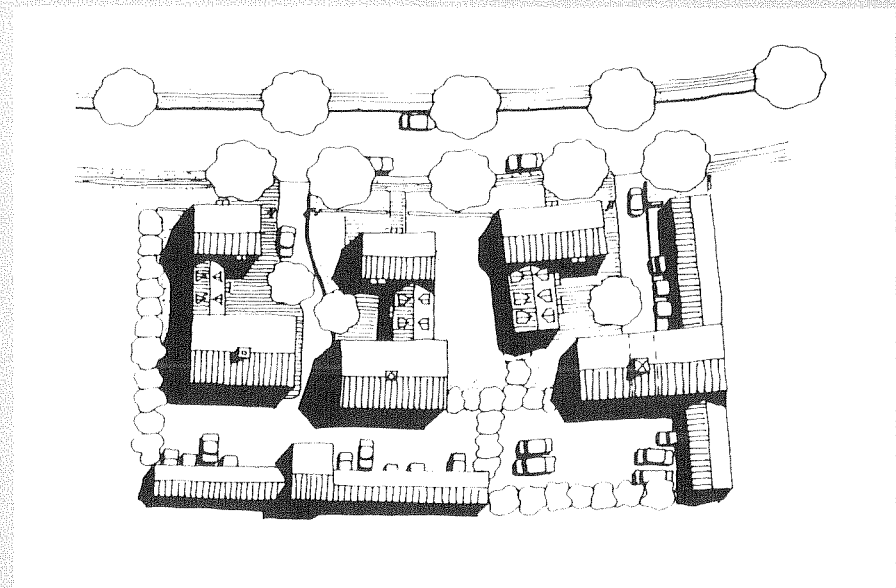
Possible layout for 25 housing units based on the "big house/ little house/coach house or barn" model.

Streeetscape Preservation

Buildings should be set back according to traditional patterns. They should never be set back more than the width of the street pavement and often considerably less. This will maintain the familiar street corridor of the main street and side streets.

Parking should not be provided in front of residential or commercial buildings, and parking on the side of multifamily units or commercial buildings should be screened by planting.

Tree planting is essential on main streets and, where possible, on side streets. New side streets should always have a planting strip between the street and sidewalk.

Traffic Improvements

Traffic speed can be controlled by providing frequent breaks in traffic flow. This would allow pedestrians to cross, obviate the need for street widening, discourage through travelers and create a better retail atmosphere.

A secondary road network could be created in some centers behind Main Street to provide alternatives for local residents and to take traffic pressure off Main Street. These alternative routes should not be straight; rather they should be in the form of a linked network of streets requiring several turns to pass through the network. Such a network would be an integral part of the infill policy discussed above.

we address the problems that are prompted by growth pressure on each setting and analyze the current pattern of the built environment, particularly with respect to housing, in that setting.

Of particular importance is an analysis of the tacit principles involved in suburban housing development. Housing is currently being developed in these towns according to well-established principles about grouping, siting, unit design and exterior design, but principles of which developers, residents and town officials are largely unconscious. Housing development is more habit than considered process, and, like most habits, it is hard for developers and residents to recognize them or to break them.

Consider the single-family subdivision. The implicit rules that embody the paradoxical elements in its design include:

• Housing units in subdivisions must be self-evidently a good investment. The new suburban owner is more likely to be mobile in his or her job and wants to be sure the resale price will be protected. This leads to architectural conservatism. There is pressure on individuals not to "personalize" their houses too much lest they devalue them and those of their neighbors.

• The view of other houses from within each house should be minimized and the view of the landscape maximized. Thus, the front of one house should never face directly toward the face of another. But the homeowner wants to be seen from the street, as do the neighbors across the street, so that landscaping and siting have to be ingeniously managed to satisfy these conflicting demands.

• To give the sense of a rural environment, only cul-de-sacs and loop roads must be used, and they must be curved to ensure that only a few buildings will be seen from the road at one

time, minimizing the sense of density, even though the curves must be sharper than the country lanes that they attempt to evoke because of the limited space available in the subdivision.

Once implicit rules such as these are made explicit, there is a greater possibility that residents and developers will be able to identify key leverage points to change the typical forms of development with which these communities are so displeased and which are destructive of regional character.

Finally, we suggest development principles and design concepts that offer possibilities for enhancing the local and regional character of each setting. These include suggestions for grouping, siting, appropriate plot size, massing and design of housing as well as for the development of road and pedestrian linkages and the identification and preservation of open spaces and vistas. But what is most innovative in our work is the choice to put vision before policy and the suggestion that a new mode of intervention is called for.

Modes of Intervention

Whatever a government does with respect to design can be mapped onto a set of five modes of intervention: standards and regulation, incentives and disincentives, ownership and operation, the establishment, proportionment and enforcement of legal rights, and information. To fully understand government intervention in any field it is critical to understand this menu of five different modes of intervention.

Standards and regulation control the ways in which design decisions will be carried out as well as aspects of the final built form of the design. Through the use of standards and regulation the public sector is saying, "You must do X."

Incentives and disincentives provide rewards or penalties to individuals who take an action the public sector wishes to influence. The essential message communicated by the public sector is, "If you do X, then we will do Y."

When the public sector is not willing to vest the decisionmaking power in individuals, it can choose *ownership and operation* to affect the quality of urban design by designing and building itself. The essential message is, "The public sector will do X."

Perhaps less obviously, a government can also affect the quality of urban design through the creation and *enforcement of legal rights and through the apportionment of those rights* across individuals. "You have the right to do X, and the public sector will enforce that right if you choose to assert it."

And finally, a widely used, though underappreciated, mode of intervention is the use of *information* to affect people's behavior. An information strategy by itself is non-coercive: "You ought to do X."

To be sure, governments often use several of these interventions together in one program to accomplish particular design goals, attempting to offset the disadvantages of one type of intervention with the advantages of another. New and creative public-sector approaches to environmental design have not come from conjuring up new modes of intervention; they have come from innovative recombinations of the existing ones.

These modes of intervention operate along a number of critical dimensions. Two of them are particularly helpful in locating our *Primer* within the universe of possible interventions. The first has to do with the goal of the intervention: Interventions can be used to achieve good design, avoid bad design, or mitigate the effects of bad design. While the ultimate goal of

government is to foster good design, one can argue that most government design programs have been content with avoiding or mitigating bad design because that is easier for a government to accomplish with its awkward regulatory and incentive mechanisms.

The second important dimension has to do with the leverage point at which the intervention is targeted. In a sense, every government intervention with respect to design has as its goal affecting the output of the design process, the natural and built form that we actually experience. But the public sector may also choose to try to accomplish this indirectly by targeting the inputs to, or the process of, design. Building codes that require that certain materials be used, the provision of professional design training in public universities, and regulations that stipulate that only work by certified architects and engineers is acceptable are ways of controlling the quality of inputs to the design process. Design review boards, design competitions, Environmental Impact Statements and public hearing requirements are all intended, in part, to assure that the process of design is an open one incorporating a wide variety of views and approaches with the hope that "better" design will result.

Within this three-dimensional matrix describing ways the public-sector intervenes in design, our *Primer* inhabits cells that are not normally occupied. It is primarily an information strategy, is oriented toward getting good design and accomplishes this by targeting both process and output. The *Primer* is a sourcebook of ideas that can serve as the basis for articulating a local vision of preferred development alternatives. It provides design suggestions and possibilities that can serve as a base of conversation between developers and local communities.

Many of our ideas and suggestions would require changes in the local regulatory envelope in order to make them possible, but we chose not to focus on zoning and other forms of regulation in the first instance because we feel that necessary prior steps are the creation of a local vision of preferred development alternatives and the establishment of a dialogue between communities and the developers wishing to develop there around substantive design issues. A community that rushes into regulation will be ill served if it has not first reflected on its vision of the future.

But we turned to an intervention that relies heavily on information for another, more fundamental reason. An information strategy is particularly suited to balancing the qualities of "coherence" and "complexity" in an environment while recognizing the rights of individuals to develop their property.[4] It points the way to the development of a coordinated and coherent whole, while allowing for the richness that comes from the variety inherent in the multiplicity of individual decisions.

Three Propositions

The success of an information strategy lies in the quality, persuasiveness, timeliness and applicability of the information and in the wide dissemination of that information to those individuals whose decisions are to be informed. Nothing complicates the relationship between developers and communities more than uncertainty. In our experience, developers are more than willing to craft their development proposals to correspond to locally articulated visions if it is demonstrated that proposals of certain types are in fact more acceptable to the communi-

ty, reducing the likelihood of having a proposal held up indefinitely.

We recognize that many communities will not feel comfortable placing their development future entirely in the hands of what might appear to be a loosely guided information process and will attempt to create many of the same results through changes to their zoning or other regulatory mechanisms. But those changes should follow both in time and in spirit the articulation of a development future.

In conclusion, our work suggests three propositions:

PROPOSITION 1: To formulate the problem as growth versus local and regional character is to create a false dilemma. Growth and character, even if they are not completely orthogonal to one another, are two different dimensions that can be used to describe and analyze environments. It is possible to manage and shape growth so that it will reinforce and perhaps even reestablish local character. Indeed, in many New England communities it was tremendous economic growth (as measured on the comparative scale of its own historical era) that created the regional character that today we are working to preserve. Lowell, Massachusetts, is an example.

PROPOSITION 2: Community residents often have an implicit consensus about what would constitute more desirable development and what would constitute less desirable development. They are often not inherently anti-development or anti-growth. The problem is that opportunities for articulating a vision of desirable development are limited, and without that vision any specific development proposal is subjected to a variety of criticisms that together defeats it.

PROPOSITION 3: The key to resolving development disputes lies in the reduction of uncertainty for resi-

dents and developers alike. An information strategy can be an important component in reducing uncertainty because it is through the sharing of information that the hopes and desires of a community can be internalized into the decisionmaking of developers. The certainty of a strict regulatory envelope is not enough to assure that attention will be paid to local and regional character.

Notes

1. Copies of the *Primer* are available for $20 from Environmental Design Group, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 10-485, Cambridge, MA, 02139.

2. Essex County Council, *A Design Guide for Residential Areas* (Great Britain: Essex County Council, 1983). Also known as the *Essex Design Guide*.

3. In designing our survey instrument, we benefitted greatly from the literature on perceived environmental quality indices. See, for example, Terry C. Daniel, "Criteria for Development and Application of Perceived Environmental Quality Indices," in Kenneth H. Craik and Ervin H. Zube (eds.),

Perceiving Environmental Quality (New York: Plenum Press, 1976); and Ervin H. Zube, *Environmental Evaluation: Perception and Public Policy* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1980).

4. Michael O'Hare, "Environmental Management," in Winthrop Knowlton and Richard Zeckhauser (eds.), *American Society: Public and Private Responsibilities* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1986).

5. See, for example, Michael Wheeler, A *Handbook: Building Consensus for Affordable Housing, Working Paper #7* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Center for Real Estate Development, 1987).