

Neighborhoods reborn

After a half-century hiatus, environmental and traffic concerns are bringing back old-style neighborhoods.

The millions of Americans who buy homes each year base their decision on a familiar list of choices—the commute to work, the number of bedrooms and baths, the quality of the schools. But they have surprisingly little choice in one important factor: the physical layout of the neighborhood.

Many people dream of buying a home on an old-fashioned tree-lined street with a few shops on the corner—a place where buying a quart of milk, picking up the kids, or eating out doesn't require a stressful drive down the local six-

lane arterial. But it's hard to find places like that these days. For a half-century, developers have maintained that tract houses with big front lawns in auto-oriented subdivisions are what Americans want. Moreover, local officials have often made it illegal to build new neighborhoods in the old style—even "tree-lined" may violate the code.

As a result, in many cities 1920s-style homes—in traditional neighborhoods—have become highly desirable, despite their

small closets and baths. "Ask yourself what neighborhood in your hometown people are willing to pay a premium to live in," says D.R. Bryan, a North Carolina builder. "It's probably a neighborhood built between 1890 and 1920."

Over the past decade, the persistent appeal of old neighborhoods has persuaded a small but influential group of designers and developers to advocate building old-style communities for a new era. These "neotraditional" places would look and work like the back streets of a comfortable pre-World War II city, with a rich mix of housing types, cultural centers, and shopping districts within walking distance, and a vibrant public personality. Such neighborhoods are being built in places as different in scale and location as downtown San Diego and rural North Carolina.

We visited several of these neotraditional developments and talked with leading proponents of the approach, as well as with developers, town planners, and residents. We also looked at the traditional neighborhoods that serve as the models. There aren't enough completed examples to tell whether these will be honest copies of old-style, mixed-income communities or just pricey boutique villages for the well-to-do. But we think this style of neighborhood is a choice that buyers ought to have.

We also learned that the forces discouraging such innovation remain embedded in the legal and financial apparatus that controls land development: thousands of local zoning codes, road standards, the requirements of national

retail chains, and the financial structure of the real-estate development industry. Change, if it does come, will depend largely on decisions that need to be made locally.

"We've been building great houses but lousy communities," says Peter Katz, director of the Congress for the New Urbanism, a national organization of neotraditional designers and developers. "I've never met anyone who has hated the idea" of neotraditionalism. "The only questions have had to do with implementing it."

To build better towns

The critics of suburban sprawl decry land-use designs that tear communities into far-flung fragments and make residents use a car to get anywhere. Instead, they offer this alternative vision:

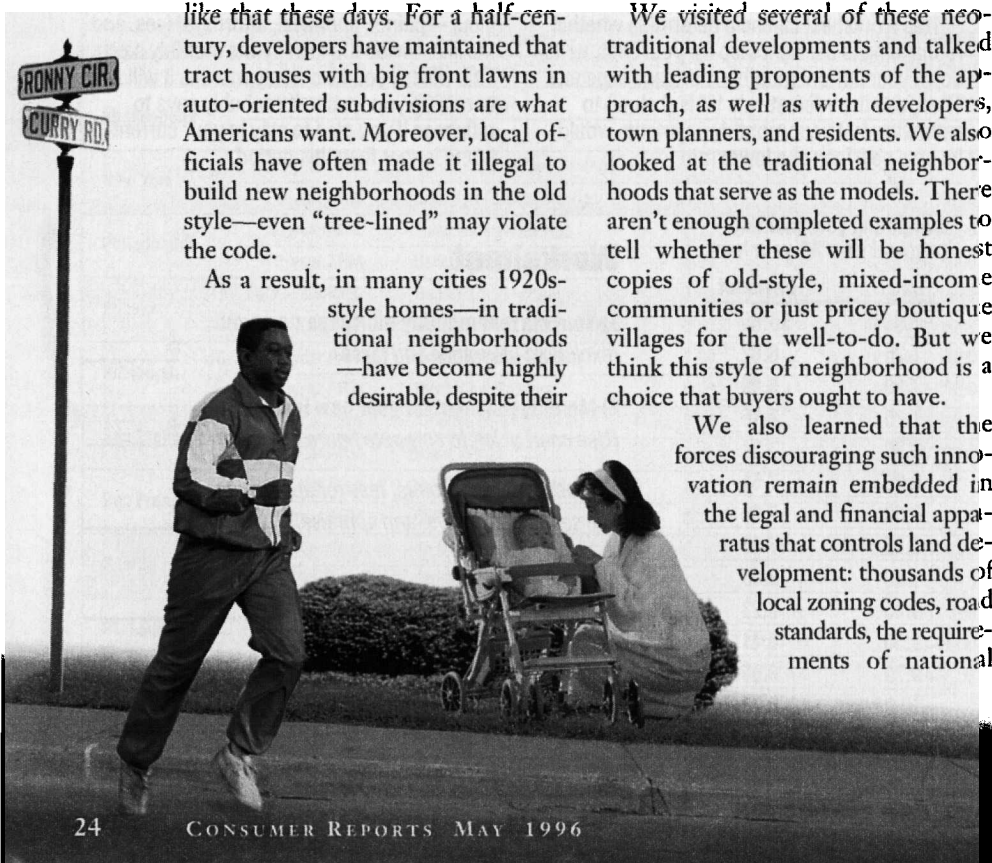
- **Houses** occupy small lots clustered around pretty public spaces, such as parks or playgrounds.
- **Garages** retreat to the rear of the lot or an alley.
- **Street grids** replace isolated cul-de-sacs and the broader roads that connect them.
- **Shopping** takes place on intimate Main Streets, with stores lined up along the sidewalk and parking to the rear.
- **Walking** is encouraged by sidewalks, street trees, front porches, narrow roads that slow down cars, and—most important—commercial and recreational areas located a short walk from most houses.
- **Public transportation** is made possible by clustering neighborhoods and offices along lines that can readily be served by buses, trolleys, or light-rail lines.
- **Housing types** are varied in size and price, to facilitate the kind of mix of people found in a city. The mix also means that grown children won't have to move so far away to start a home,

IN SHORT

Neighborhoods with an old-style look and layout are being built once more.

Street grids, sidewalks, and hidden parking lots downplay cars and encourage walking.

Still unclear: Will new neighborhoods be affordable for all or a pricey "niche" option?



and older people won't have to leave the neighborhood when they retire to a smaller home.

Miami architects Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, pioneers of neotraditionalism and its most prominent advocates, believe this vision offers not only a livable alternative to regular suburbia, but also a path away from our environmentally and financially costly dependence on the private auto.

"Americans need to be reacquainted with their small-town heritage," they have said. "[They] have to insist that the happiness of people finally takes precedence over the happiness of cars."

Where do the cars go?

As Duany and Plater-Zyberk point out, it is the handling of cars—not the addition of picket fences or front porches—that really distinguishes neotraditionalism from standard suburban design.

The movement's most radical proposal is to abandon the now-standard street hierarchy that dominates suburbia: Isolated residential loops or cul-de-sacs, which feed broad connector streets, which, in turn, feed busy multilane arterials. Instead, homes would line a grid of neighborhood streets. (See "Getting there," page 27.)

"What we have done with traffic . . . turns out to have been the worst possible thing," says Walter Kulash, an Orlando, Fla., traffic planner and convert to neotraditionalism. "By concentrating traffic on a few arterial streets and prohibiting it from other streets, we've made people hostage to ugly congestion for the six to nine trips the average household makes in a day. It affects the quality of life of everybody who has to do that kind of traveling."

Neotraditionalists also would repeal the long-standing suburban rule that every commercial building must come with on-site parking in the front yard. Instead, they would park cars on the street (to slow passing traffic and serve as a physical and psychological barrier between road and pedestrians); behind the stores (to eliminate the unsightly "strip" store developments laced through many towns, and to encourage people to walk from store to store); and in shared lots (where spaces could be used, say, by bank customers by day and restaurant patrons by night). One architect has

demonstrated that Main Streets served by shared parking garages require fewer than half as many parking spaces as the same stores in strip shopping malls.

All this sounds great to many city and county governments, which are desperately seeking ways to get out from under the financial burden of servicing sprawling suburbs with wide roads, big parking lots, and expensive police and fire protection. City planners also believe neotraditional design

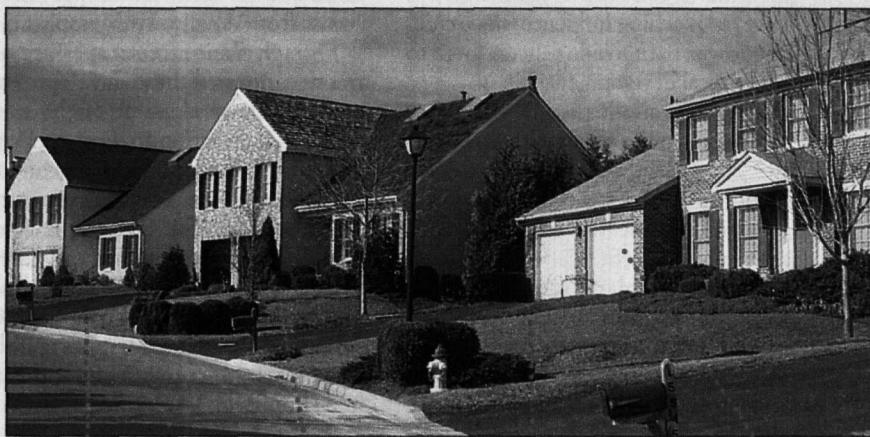
offers a new way of halting or reversing decline in the inner city and in older suburbs. In some cities, they've rewritten their building codes to encourage neotraditional design instead of outlawing it.

The neotraditionalist argument is gaining ground among traffic planners as well. The Institute of Transportation Engineers is in the process of creating street standards for neotraditional communities. These guidelines will endorse a connected road network, allow streets

Designs that differ *Suburban vs. neotraditional*

One goal of neotraditional developers is to create suburban subdivisions that feel more like complete communities and look more like old-fashioned towns. Their methods include laying out grid-like street patterns, building various housing types, and incorporating central shopping areas.

They also design their streets to be public "rooms" that encourage walking and socializing. Some of the deliberate design differences can be seen if you compare the neotraditional development of Kentlands (bottom), in Gaithersburg, Md., with a conventional suburb less than a mile away.



No sidewalks
Sidewalks

Trees in yards
Trees along street

Deep front yards
Shallow yards, porches

Garages forward
Garages on alleys



A success story

Reapplying the old rules to old streets

Mountain View, in California's crowded Silicon Valley, revived a moribund downtown (left) by widening sidewalks to accommodate pedestrians and getting rid of on-site parking requirements for stores and restaurants on the main shopping

street. A short walk away, a neotraditional housing development (right) built onto the existing neighborhood street grid fits right in with much older adjoining blocks. It sold out before construction even began.



much narrower than the current suburban norm, and tip the balance away from cars and toward pedestrians. This addition to the existing standards will have far-reaching influence, since cities and towns nationwide rely on them to guide local development.

But what about people who want to live on a quiet street with little traffic? Neotraditionalists say you don't need cul-de-sacs to keep traffic down. In a well-connected grid of streets, they note, traffic distributes itself evenly and thinly as motorists given a choice of routes automatically select the least congested one. What's more, narrow streets, sharp corners, and stop signs force cars to move slowly, which in turn greatly reduces the noise and commotion they generate.

Indeed, in the traditional neighborhoods we visited—both the originals and their modern imitators—we saw no more traffic than in conventional suburbs. And we found driving on their slow-moving, two-lane commercial streets a lot more pleasant than racing down a six-lane arterial, searching for a place to make a U-turn to get to the strip mall we passed a mile back.

The first communities

Big neotraditionalist developments that have gotten the lion's share of attention include: Duany and Plater-Zyberk's Seaside, a resort town on the Florida panhandle; their other

major project, Kentlands, outside Washington, D.C.; Laguna West, south of Sacramento; and Harbor Town, on an island in the Mississippi River across from downtown Memphis.

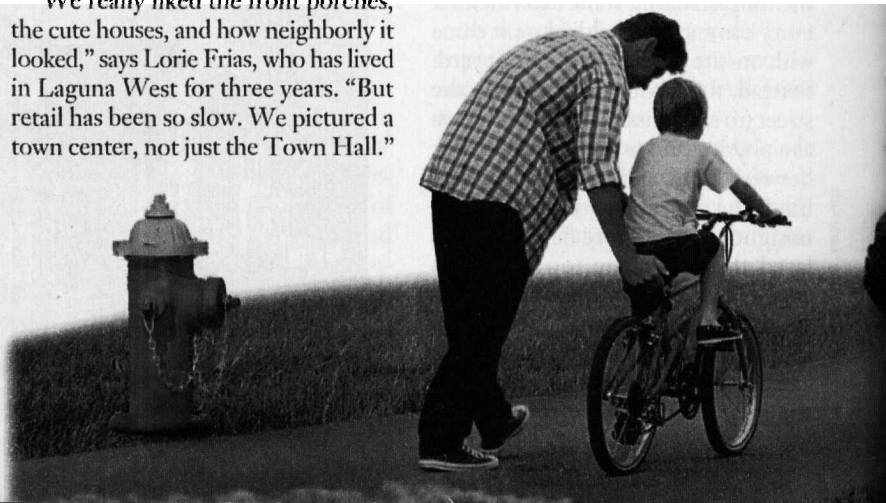
Though their streetscapes are attractive, none of these developments contains every element of the neotraditional prescription. Laguna West doesn't yet have a single apartment. Only Seaside has a central shopping street. Except for Seaside, a free-standing beach community, all these neighborhoods remain isolated within a surrounding matrix of conventional suburban sprawl, with poor public transportation connections and limited shopping. The center of activity in Laguna West, for instance, is a stylish new community building that bustles day and night with art and exercise classes. But the only nearby businesses are a Jiffy Lube and a gas station.

"We really liked the front porches, the cute houses, and how neighborly it looked," says Lorie Frias, who has lived in Laguna West for three years. "But retail has been so slow. We pictured a town center, not just the Town Hall."

But even as the big neotraditionalist projects have struggled toward completion, smaller-scale developments have quietly been succeeding in many places. Among the ones we found: Ferrington, near Chapel Hill, N.C., which is built alongside an existing cluster of specialty shops and restaurants; and Fairview Village, near Portland, Ore., which will bring a new Main Street-style downtown to a suburban area that never had one. In Mashpee, Mass., and Boca Raton, Fla., neotraditionalist designers built successful downtowns literally on top of the vast parking lots of failed strip malls.

What may be the most complete realization of neotraditional principles is being assembled now on orchard land outside Orlando. The Disney Co. is building an instant small town, called Celebration (see "Now showing," page 28), which from the begin-

Photos at top by Eugene Louie



ning will include shops, offices, and large apartment blocks as well as single-family homes. The first residents are to move in this summer.

Finally, neotraditionalism is prompting some *real* traditional towns to come full circle. For decades, many tried to re-make themselves as suburbs, by replacing downtowns with enclosed malls and forcing new housing, even in old neighborhoods, to obey zoning and building rules that encourage sprawl. Now, the towns are using neotraditional principles to restore and revitalize those shopping areas and neighborhoods.

Neotraditionalists are applying their ideas to big cities as well, by treating them as a collection of small, pedestrian-scale neighborhoods. In San Diego, for instance, an empty urban-renewal site now boasts a profitable supermarket (with underground parking) linked to streets densely lined with townhouses. Neotraditionalists have also designed plans for, among other places, downtown Providence and Los Angeles. So far, however, the great majority of neotraditional projects, both urban and suburban, have been for middle- and upper-income residents.

So what's stopping it?

In spite of growing support from city planners, neotraditionalism has a long way to go before it becomes a standard community design. Some reasons:

- Local fire departments worry that the streets will be too narrow for their trucks (a test in Laguna West proved they were wrong).
- Builders are afraid the houses won't sell as well as standard suburban models. "The development industry is full of legends about people who tried something different and went broke," says Steve Tracy, a Sacramento County planner who is trying to encourage neotraditional construction.

- Neotraditionalism doesn't fit standard patterns of financing developments. A major stumbling block is that developers, as well as the banks and insurance companies that lend them money, tend to specialize in one kind of project—retail, office, or residential. "Right now, we're in heavy conversation with three different banks, who specialize in three different categories," says Richard Holt, developer of Oregon's Fairview Village project.

- Without a big front parking lot, many retailers won't locate in neotraditional downtowns—and might not be able to get a bank loan even if they were willing to come.

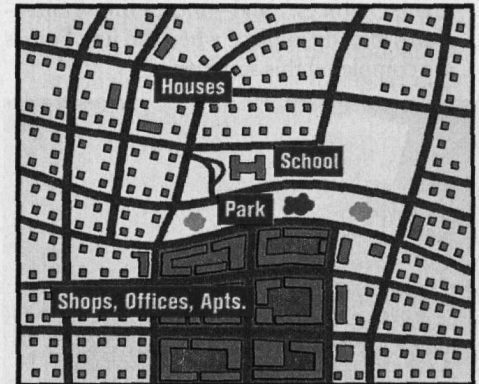
But some retailers are coming around to neotraditionalism. Robert Gibbs, a Michigan-based retail consultant, says that such mall powerhouses as The Gap and Victoria's Secret are seeking out prosperous Main Street locations.

Some neotraditionalists liken the situation to that faced by the automobile industry in the 1970s. "Detroit had this very monolithic version of what car buyers wanted," observes John Massengale, a neotraditionalist planner from Bedford, N.Y. "Then Honda and BMW came in and showed that General Motors may have been right about three-fourths of the market, but nobody was building for the other one-fourth. Developers ignore this. They just look at what's being built today, but they ignore the fact that two miles

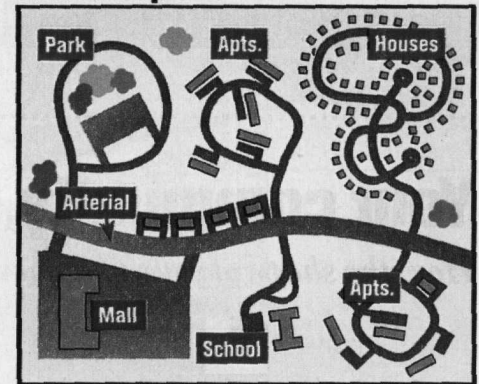
Getting there

In the standard suburban design (bottom), to get to school, office, shopping, or recreation, residents have no choice but to drive on the arterial—which usually ends up congested as a consequence. In traditional neighborhoods, the street grid gives drivers a choice of routes from place to place, and also distributes cars more evenly, thus avoiding congestion.

Traditional



Suburban sprawl



New neighborhoods and the environment

Promoters of neotraditional neighborhoods say their plans would reduce car use and promote public transit. That would be an environmental boon; personal transportation accounts for a big chunk of the emissions causing global warming.

We calculated the carbon dioxide—a key contributor to global warming—generated per commuter in several major cities. It turns out that commute distance and the extent of public transit make a big difference: For average commuters traveling to the central city, the amount of carbon dioxide they generated each day was at least 50 percent greater in San Francisco and Los Angeles than in New York City, Washington D.C., or Philadelphia, where a much higher percentage of commuters use subways, trains, and buses instead of cars.

But will building neotraditional neighborhoods

get people out of cars? The evidence is shaky. Numerous transportation studies have shown that, unless a place is much more densely settled than most new neotraditional projects, people prefer to drive. And studies of actual traditional neighborhoods show that residents drive about as much as people living in conventional suburbs.

To make a real dent in emissions of global-warming gases, governments will have to display a more serious commitment to public transportation in cities as well as towns—and to land-use patterns that bring people closer to jobs. Neotraditional planning alone won't make that happen. But unlike conventional suburban sprawl, neotraditionalism—with its mixed-use commercial centers within walking distance of houses and apartments—is fully compatible with these more far-reaching changes.

Now showing *Main Street U.S.A.*

The new town of Celebration, Fla., now being built by the Disney Co. outside Orlando, is one of the most extensive demonstrations to date of neotraditional principles. Unlike several recent old-style subdivisions, which don't have all the amenities of complete communities, this one will have apartments, offices, and—most important—stores already in place when the first homes are completed this summer.



away, an old house with substandard plumbing and wiring is going for twice the price."

Looking ahead

How many places will eventually embrace neotraditionalism is still unclear. Overcoming the resistance of the retail and real-estate finance industries may require inventing entirely new ways of building and financing shopping districts.

Then there's the question of what home buyers want: Neotraditionalism may not be for everyone, any more than a Toyota will satisfy the needs of every car buyer. The market for suburban cul-de-sac neighborhoods remains strong. But researchers have found that many consumers do like traditional neighborhoods—or would, if offered the choice.

Anton Nelessen, a New Jersey planner, conducts innovative "visual preference surveys" in which he shows, side-by-side, slides of traditional and conventional city and suburban streets,

homes, apartments, and commercial districts. Audiences of ordinary citizens of all ages and walks of life overwhelmingly prefer the look of traditional communities.

And studies by real-estate economists of Baltimore, Dallas, and Oakland, Calif., show that when you strip away all the other factors known to influence home prices, buyers are willing to pay a steep premium for a home in a well-preserved traditional neighborhood.

That, in fact, is our biggest worry: that neotraditionalism will become an expensive "niche" product for upper-income homebuyers, maintaining the very socioeconomic uniformity that the movement's advocates are trying to undo. We think neotraditionalism is worth encouraging, even if all it ever does is put a prettier face on the suburbs. But in the long run we hope that these neighborhoods—and the lifestyle they make possible—once more are so common and affordable that they're ordinary. CR

Your community, your life

How the shape of your neighborhood may shape you.

Looking at a house? Before you commit yourself, take a minute to step back from it and consider its surroundings. The lay of the land is likely to have a significant effect on *your life: how much time you spend at stoplights, where you shop, and even your sense of community.*

The difference is most noticeable when you compare

life at opposite ends of the scale—in neighborhoods built at opposite ends of the century. Though neotraditional design is cropping up in some new neighborhoods, the overwhelming majority of homebuyers still have to make a basic choice between an old house in a pre-World War II neighborhood or a newer house in a post-war-style one.

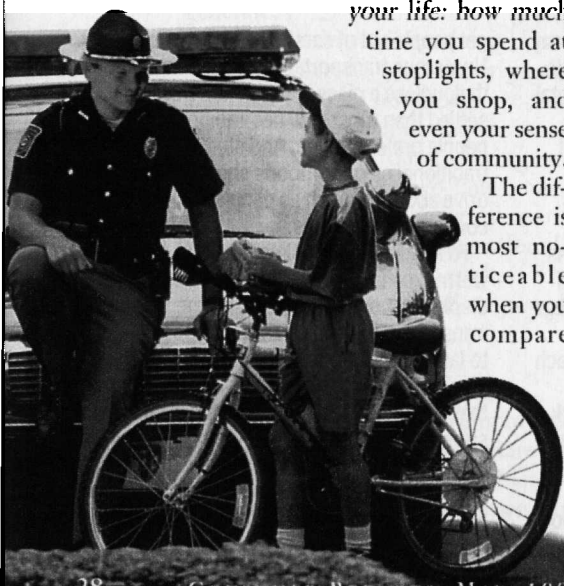
What are the consequences of choosing one over the other? To find out, we visited people living in both kinds of neighborhood in two fast-growing Sunbelt cities—Sacramento, Calif., and Orlando, Fla.—and asked them how they felt about their neighborhood and how they handled the daily routines of their lives. We also consulted the academic and professional literature on the relationship between urban form and travel patterns. What we learned can be summarized as several questions worth

considering no matter where you're planning to buy a house.

What's the traffic?

The standard street pattern in post-war suburbs assures that every single car has no choice but to get on the main drag—the arterial—at some point, for a trip of any length (see "Getting there," page 27). And as new malls, subdivisions, and offices sprout along arterials, traffic inevitably builds from year to year. We didn't find any residents who actually admitted to liking strip-mall development, but many were willing to tolerate it in exchange for a newer house. Also, many appreciated the flip side of heavy arterial traffic: almost no traffic on neighborhood streets, where, as one suburban father told us, "there are more kids' vehicles than cars."

By contrast, people who live in an older neighborhood with a connected grid of streets get a steadier but relatively light flow of traffic past their homes. Meanwhile, these communities' "main" commercial streets never acquire the intense congestion of arterials—something inhabitants of old-



fashioned neighborhoods especially prize. "I really like going downtown, because you can take the back roads instead of those big, congested roads," says James Glazebrook, who lives in Winter Park, a traditional community just north of Orlando.

Homebuyer's tip: Before signing that sales contract, drive or walk to the nearest grocery store, drugstore, and dry cleaner and see how you like the trip because you'll be making it regularly for years to come.

What is my neighborhood?

We found a subtle difference in people's "mental map" of their neighborhoods, depending on what kind they lived in.

In modern subdivisions, where land uses are deliberately kept well separated, people think of their neighborhood as, basically, the streets within the subdivision walls. There, they form strong social bonds with neighbors. In one Orlando subdivision that we visited—a single looped street—mothers who first met each other while out pushing strollers still get together years later for regular potlucks and card games.

But to describe the world outside the development walls, subdivision-dwellers tend to use purely utilitarian terms, not sentimental ones. Asked where they shop for groceries or prescriptions, they answer with a description of how many minutes or miles it takes to get to the nearest neighborhood strip mall.

In contrast, people who have chosen a traditional neighborhood consider the entire neighborhood—not just their block—as a distinctive, cohesive community.

"A wonderful grocery store, the best bakery in town, and an old-fashioned ice cream shop are maybe three blocks from my house," says Ellen Robinson-Haynes, who lives in the traditional Land Park neighborhood in Sacramento. "It's a great neighborhood to walk in. In the spring, summer, and fall the streets are completely overgrown with trees."

Homebuyer's tip: Think hard about your expectations for your neighborhood. If you are community-minded, you might have trouble making all the connections you want in a subdivision on the outskirts of town. If you want lots of privacy,

Worlds apart

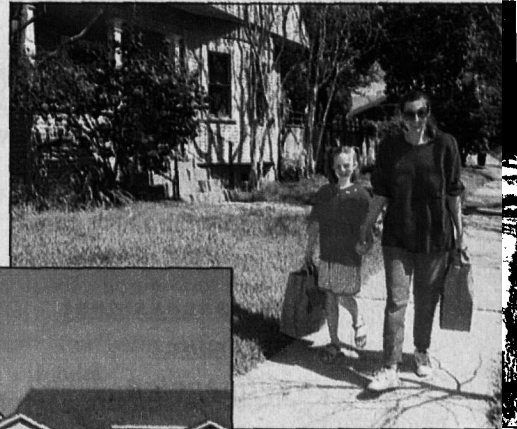
What a difference the roads make

Kathy Les and Betsy Keithcart both live in roomy, well-kept houses in Sacramento, Calif. Each is married, and each has one school-aged daughter. They live less than 10 miles apart. Yet they step out their front doors each day into vastly different environments.

Les (below right) lives in a turn-of-the-century neighborhood a few minutes from downtown Sacramento. She can walk to a small grocery store, a bakery, a coffeehouse, a community center. When she drives, she navigates a grid of narrow, tree-shaded streets. Her neighborhood green space is a rectangular city park bordered on all sides by streets and houses.

Keithcart considered locating in Les's part of town, but found she couldn't afford the repairs and renovations an older house would require. Instead, she picked a house in an unincorporated area south

of the city (below left), a neighborhood, so new it doesn't even appear on area maps. When she leaves her pristine, quiet, walled-in development via its curving interior street, it's usually by car. The nearest store: two miles away. To get there she turns onto a four-lane collector road, which in turn leads to an eight-lane arterial where cars race from stoplight to stoplight. What walking Keithcart does is strictly for pleasure, on trails bordering a nature preserve near her home.

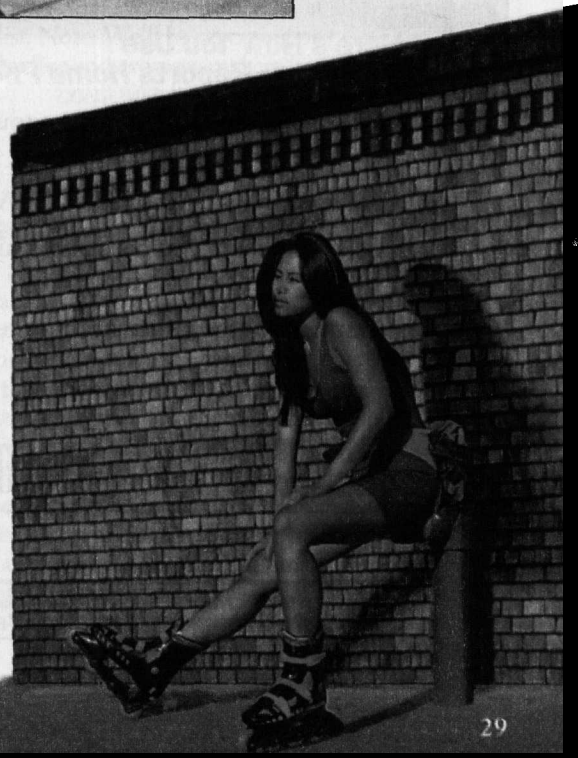


though, a traditional neighborhood might feel too "public."

Who needs to walk, and why?

Whether the neighborhood you choose is conducive to travel on foot depends somewhat on whether you want to walk, or you need to walk. People stroll for pleasure and exercise no matter what kind of neighborhood they live in, according to surveys done in California and Texas by Susan Handy, a planning expert at the University of Texas. When we asked residents in Orlando and Sacramento to keep a brief log of car and walking trips, we found exactly the same thing.

A neighborhood where your walk takes you to an actual destination is harder to find. First, it must have schools, stores, and parks



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within a quarter-mile or less. But that's not all: To entice people out of their cars, the walk itself should be along narrow streets that have slow-moving, light-to-moderate traffic, and a variety of appealing things to look at, preferably all shaded by mature trees. It also helps if there's a sidewalk. These elements can be found more readily in traditional neighborhoods than in modern suburban ones.

Walkability is most important for people who don't have the option of driving—older children and some senior citizens. In upscale Winter Park, retirees living in expensive apartments flock to nearby downtown shops and restaurants. And Margaret Sanders, a mother of four, says the family chose the community having previously lived in a spread-out suburb near Milwaukee. "Here the kids can ride their bikes to the library or to get an ice-cream cone downtown."

Homebuyer's tip: If you like or need to walk, get out of the car and take a stroll around the neighborhoods you're considering. You can't assess walkability through the windshield of a moving car.

Will things stay the same here?

When Meg and Jay Clark moved into their new suburban Orlando ranch house in 1984, "we liked it because it was rural," Meg recalls. Just beyond the back yard was a quiet orange grove; the street outside the subdivision walls was a sleepy two-lane road.

Today, a forest of houses has replaced the orange grove, and that quiet country road has become an ever-busier six-lane arterial. Development has brought some advantages—a larger selection of stores nearby—but no one would mistake the Clarks' neighborhood for "rural" any more.

In contrast, traditional neighborhoods, having long since been fully "built out," usually don't offer scenic rural vistas. On the other hand, the best ones do have strategically placed parks. In any case, what you see is likely to be what you'll get for years to come.

Homebuyer's tip: If you're looking at a house at the edge of town, check with the local planning department to see what developments might be permitted there in the future. Don't expect the developer to volunteer this information.