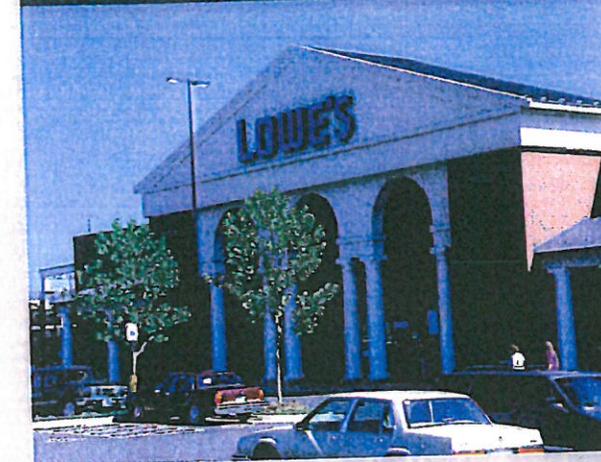
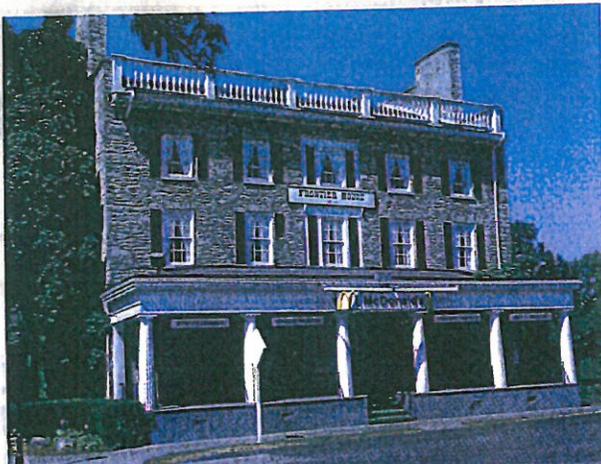


BETTER MODELS FOR COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT



*Ideas for
Improving the
Design and Siting
of Chain Stores
and Franchises*

by Edward T. McMahon

THE CONSERVATION FUND
in partnership with
Planning Commissioners Journal and
Smart Growth Network



About The Conservation Fund

The Conservation Fund is a national, nonprofit land conservation organization with offices throughout the United States. Since 1985, The Conservation Fund has acquired and protected more than 3.5 million acres of open space, wildlife habitat and historic sites throughout the nation. The Fund also assists partners in business, government and the nonprofit sector with projects that integrate economic development with environmental protection. For additional information about The Conservation Fund, contact: The Conservation Fund, 1800 N. Kent Street, Suite 1120, Arlington, VA 22209-2156; (703) 525-6300; www.conservationfund.org.

About the Smart Growth Network

The Smart Growth Network (SGN) works to encourage development that serves the economy, community, and the environment. The Network provides a forum for:

- Raising public awareness of smart growth and the implications of development decisions for the economy, community, and the environment;
- Promoting smart growth best practices through educational publications and other venues;
- Developing and sharing information, innovative policies, tools, and ideas;
- Fostering collaboration among Network partners and members, who represent various interests, to apply smart growth approaches to resolve problems of the built environment; and,
- Cultivating strategies to address barriers to, and to advance opportunities for, smart growth.

For additional information about the Smart Growth Network, contact: Smart Growth Network, c/o ICMA, 777 North Capitol St., N.E., Suite 500, Washington, DC 20002-4201; (202) 962-3623; smartgrowth@icma.org; www.smartgrowth.org

About the *Planning Commissioners Journal*

Now in its 12th year, the *Planning Commissioners Journal* is the principal national publication for citizens interested in land use planning and related subjects. Each quarterly issue of the *PCJ* contains 20 pages packed with useful information on a wide range of planning issues—many focusing on how citizen planners can work more effectively. This *Better Models* publication is being distributed to all *PCJ* subscribers. For additional information about the *Planning Commissioners Journal*, contact: *Planning Commissioners Journal*, P.O. Box 4295, Burlington, VT 05406; (802) 864-9083; info@plannersweb.com; www.plannersweb.com.

Contents

Introduction	1	Control Signs	9
Ask Franchises and Chain Stores to Fit In	2	Better Models for Chain Drug Stores	10
Better Models for Fast Food Restaurants	4	Better Models for Big Box Retailers	12
Better Models for Gas Stations and Convenience Stores	6	Commercial Development, Arizona Style	14
Eight Steps to Reshaping the Strip	8	Lessons Learned	15

Introduction

Clean air, clean water and healthy natural systems are all important to the health and well being of American communities, but as Mark Twain once said, "We take stock of a city like we take stock of a man. The clothes or appearance are the externals by which we judge." In other words, community appearance is also important. Unfortunately, many American communities have gotten used to ugliness, accepting it as inevitable to progress. Just look around: billboards, cluttered commercial strips and look-alike fast food restaurants are all too common across America.

There is an immense but too often ignored relationship between a community's character and its economic well being. Attractive, well-planned communities always attract more visitors and high quality investment than ugly ones. Unfortunately current zoning standards and environmental regulations do little to address visual quality, community character, or urban design. As a result, many communities are slowly losing their unique sense of place.

Placelessness

No two towns are exactly alike. Each has a particular street layout and arrangement of buildings, shaped over time in a particular geography, by a particular population. The dynamic forces of place, time and culture work to create endless variations on the theme of city, town, village or rural area.

At least they used to. In another era local culture and geography played a larger role in the shaping of towns: Buildings were constructed of local materials, regional architectural styles predominated, businesses were locally owned, and building technology was limited. Roads curved and dipped, buildings were added onto, signs

were designed one at a time. St. Michael's, Maryland, looked somewhat similar to nearby Oxford, but not quite like Chestertown and a whole lot different from Taos, New Mexico, or Beaufort, South Carolina. Regional style predominated, and local variation provided uniqueness.

Today, however the subtle differences between places are fading and the bigger regional distinctions hardly exist.



Commercial strips and cookie-cutter corporate designs can homogenize the visual character of a community by imposing a uniform look.

Now if you were dropped along a road outside of almost any American city you wouldn't have the slightest idea where you were because it all looks exactly the same. Is it Albany or Allentown, Providence or Pittsburgh, Baltimore or Birmingham, who can tell?

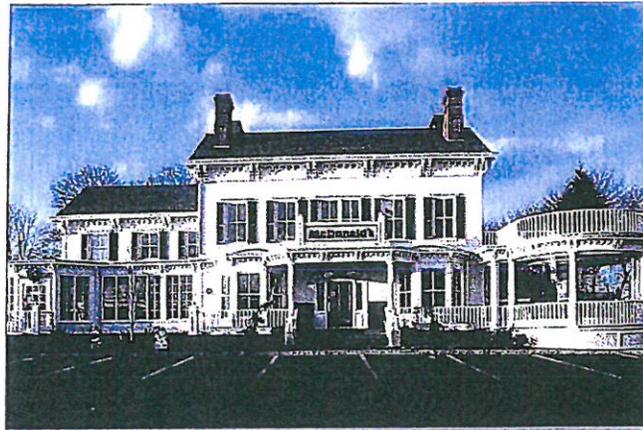
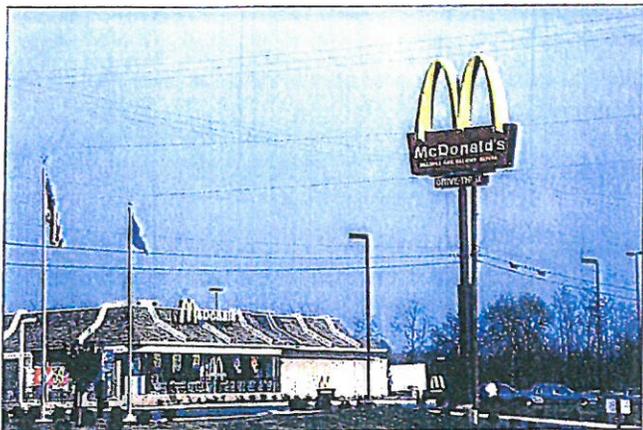
Today, building materials can be imported from anywhere. Hills can be flattened and streams relocated. We can

transform the landscape with great speed and build anything that meets our budget or strikes our fancy. Technological innovation and the global economy all make it easy for building plans drawn up at a corporate headquarters in New Jersey to be applied over and over again in Illinois, California or Maryland. Over the last 40 years, America's commercial landscape has progressed from the unique to the uniform, from the stylized to the standardized. A big reason for this is the proliferation of chain stores, franchises and big box retailers.

About This Booklet

This booklet is designed to show how new commercial development can be made more attractive, more efficient, more profitable and more compatible with local community identity. This booklet focuses on ways to improve the appearance, design and siting of chain stores, franchises, and big box retailers.

Ask Franchises and Chain Stores to Fit In



Which of these fast food franchises made an attempt to fit in with the local community?

DO FRANCHISES AND CHAIN STORES in your hometown have to be in the same style building as those in New York, North Carolina, or Nevada? The answer is a resounding “no, of course not.”

National franchises and chain stores can and do change their standard building design to “fit in” with the local character of the surrounding community. But they only do this in communities savvy enough to insist on something better than “off-the-shelf,” cookie-cutter architecture.

Experience shows that if you accept standard look-alike corporate design, this is what you’ll get. On the other hand, if your community insists on a customized, site-specific design, that is what you will get. To understand how, see the tips and suggestions that follow.

The bottom line for most chain stores and franchises is securing access to profitable trade areas. They evaluate locations based on their economic potential. If they are asked to address local historic preservation, site planning, or architectural concerns, they will usually do so.

Fast-food restaurants, gas stations, convenience stores, and chain drug stores are some of the most prominent

buildings in our auto-oriented society, and their look-alike architecture contributes to the homogenization of American communities. Chain drugstores, for example, are proliferating across the country. Hundreds of large, single-story featureless buildings are being constructed on downtown corners—often after historic buildings have been razed. Likewise, massive “big box” retailers have overwhelmed many smaller communities, physically as well as economically. But as more communities have recognized the economic value of preserving their sense of place, there increasingly are examples of where these huge companies have adapted their designs or even their locations to meet local standards.

Today, communities all across America are working successfully with franchises, chain stores, and big box retailers to get buildings that fit in. See the examples that follow.

*“We shape our buildings
and afterwards, our
buildings shape us.”*

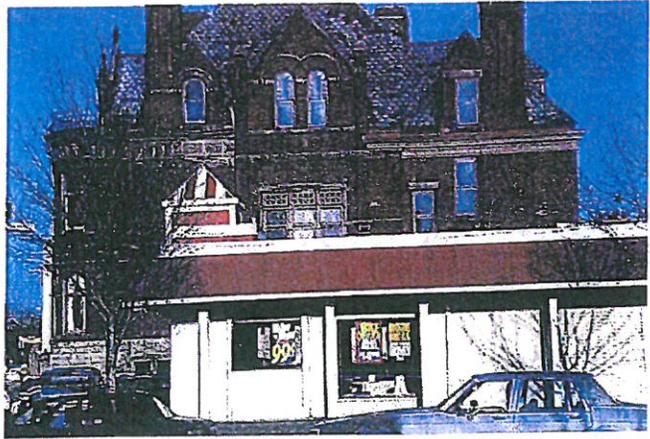
Winston Churchill

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW:

- Design review is one means of ensuring the compatibility of franchise design with local community character.
- More than 3,000 cities, towns, and counties nationwide exercise some type of design review over new commercial construction. Many others have voluntary

design guidelines or use other techniques to get buildings to respect local community identity.

- Chesterfield County, Virginia, Santa Barbara, California, and Sedona, Arizona, have done a particularly good job developing design standards that require franchises and chain stores to fit in with the character of the community.
- Even without a formal design review ordinance, a community can develop voluntary design guidelines. These can help to foster new buildings in harmony with their surroundings, especially if combined with public education and incentives.
- Chain stores and franchises that respect community character can be found in every region of the country.
- Many communities, including Rockville and Chestertown, Maryland, have placed limits on the size of commercial buildings to ensure that national retailers are an appropriate scale.
- Other communities limit the amount of land covered by the building, in effect allowing more square footage in additional stories. Gaithersburg, Maryland, for example, limits commercial buildings to 80,000 square feet per floor, thus encouraging multi-story buildings. Target, Kohl's, Toys-R-U's, and other big-box retailers have constructed attractive two-story buildings in Gaithersburg.
- "Big boxes" can also locate in downtowns or in existing buildings. Both Wal-Mart and Target have developed two-story buildings in several communities. For example, Wal-Mart recently opened a store in a mixed-use urban location in Long Beach, California, without the usual sea of parking in front. Instead the parking is in two nearby garages. Toys-R-U's has two-story downtown buildings in many communities.
- A national survey found that a majority of consumers would prefer to shop in a town center with a mix of stores and civic buildings rather than in a strip shopping center.



Chain stores and franchises should be good neighbors, but often they are not.

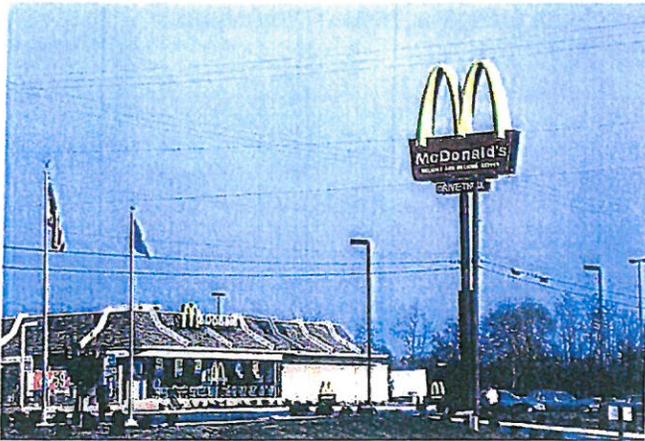


The bigger the store, the bigger the parking lot and the wider the roads that lead to it.



In Gaithersburg, Maryland, the Target is in a two-story building which means it uses less land, fits better with the community, and is accessible on foot.

BETTER MODELS FOR FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS



Typical McDonald's



McDonald's, Annapolis, Maryland. It is in an older building on a busy city street.

More Good Examples



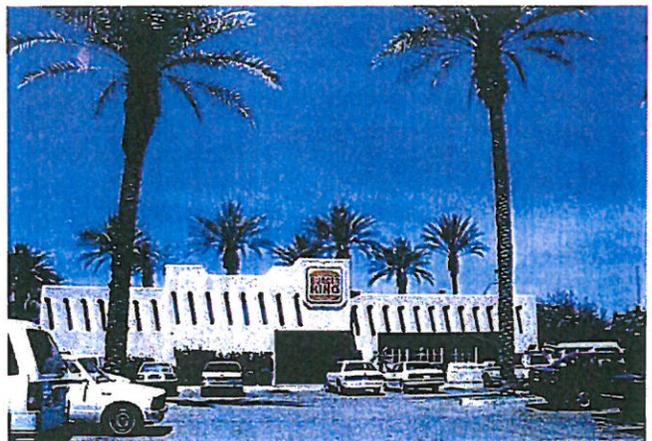
McDonald's, Freeport, Maine. The company originally proposed demolishing this house. The town said no.



McDonald's, Lake Forest, Illinois. This profitable restaurant resembles a Dutch colonial house.



McDonald's, Stowe, Vermont, reflects its New England setting.



Burger King, Cathedral City, California, reflects its desert setting.



Typical Pizza Hut

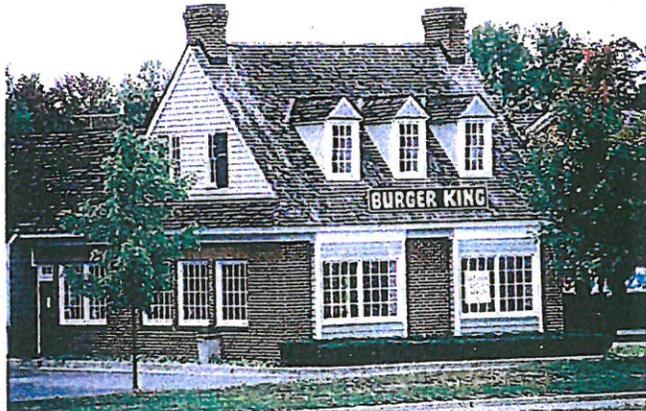


Pizza Hut, Worchester County, Maryland, shows how landscaping and good design can pay off.

More Good Examples



Burger King, Key West, Florida, illustrates context-sensitive design.



Burger King, Chesterfield, Virginia. The county has a design standards manual.

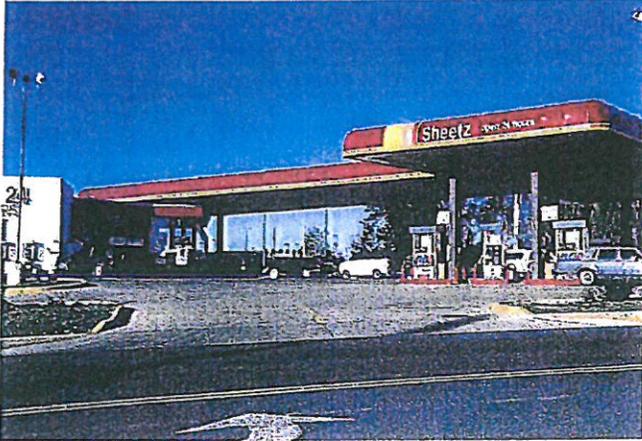


Taco Bell in Fort Collins, Colorado, is in a restored Spanish colonial revival house.



Taco Bell, Freeport, Maine. Most of the town's chain stores and franchises are in existing historic buildings.

BETTER MODELS FOR GAS STATIONS AND CONVENIENCE STORES



Typical new service station

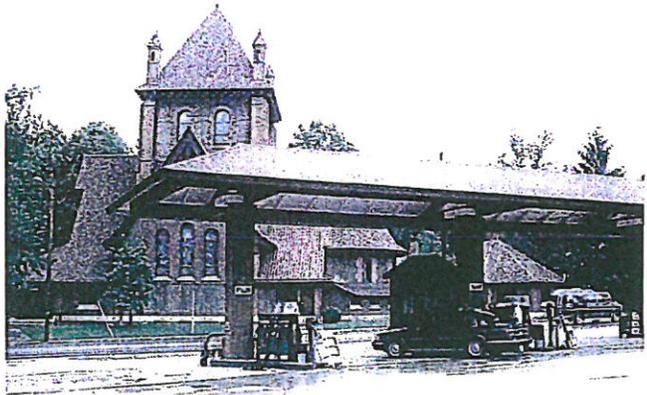


New service station, Albemarle County, Virginia, has a standing seam metal roof like other nearby buildings.

More Good Examples



Chevron station in Waitsfield, Vermont, looks like a country store because it's in the country.



BP Station in Asheville, North Carolina, shows that gas station canopies can come in all sizes and shapes.



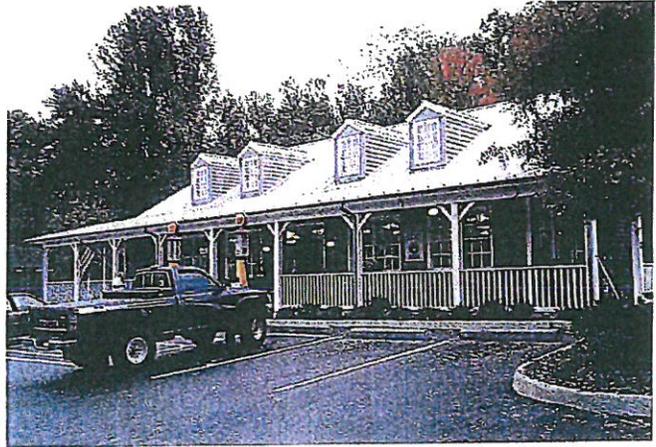
Texaco in Charleston, South Carolina, hides the pumps on the interior of the block.



Texaco, Hanover County, Virginia, reflects its rural setting.



Typical convenience store



New convenience store in Charlottesville, Virginia, went through Albermarle County's design review process.



Typical 7-11

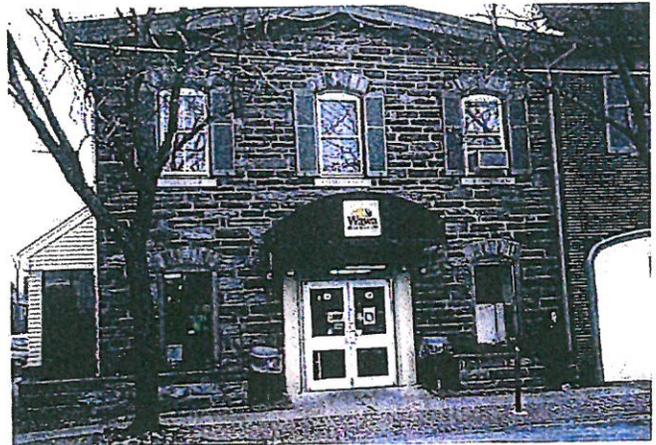


7-11 in Washington, D.C. is in a new mixed use building.

More Good Examples

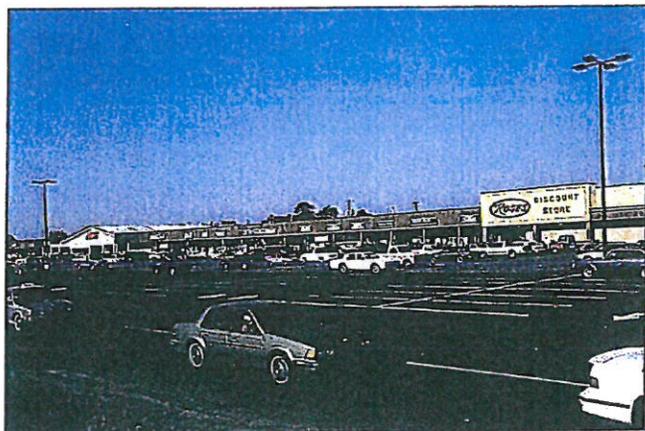


New convenience store, Richmond, Virginia, is in a two-story building.



Wawa, Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, shows how a convenience store can be a "good neighbor."

Eight Steps to Reshaping the Strip.



Commercial strips are often ugly and congested.

PEOPLE LIKE THE CONVENIENCE and low prices of discount stores, supermarkets and chain restaurants, but the same people often complain about the ugliness and traffic congestion associated with commercial strip development. Progress does not require turning every major road corridor into an endless parade of parking lots, pole signs, and bland strip shopping centers. Commercial strips can be redesigned to make them more attractive, less congested, and more convenient for shoppers and pedestrians.

Communities can begin the process of reclaiming existing commercial strips by agreeing to a long-term design program that gradually transforms strips into mixed-use town centers. These steps can help:

- 1. Put a firm limit on the length of any commercial district;** instead of a longer strip, allow commercial expansion in greater depth. This concentrates commercial uses and encourages shared parking and walking between stores.
- 2. Limit curb cuts and consolidate entrances** along the road to a few main driveways with internal service streets based on a block system to connect businesses. This relieves traffic back-ups, accidents, and the need for expensive road widening.
- 3. Help unify the streetscape with continuous street trees,** high-quality parking-lot landscaping and, where



Town centers are more attractive and less congested.

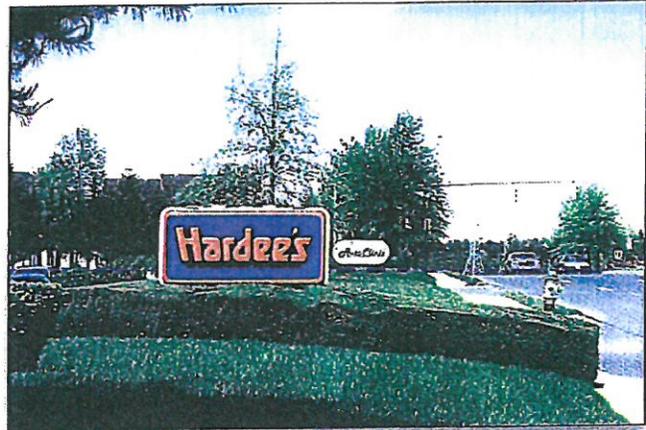
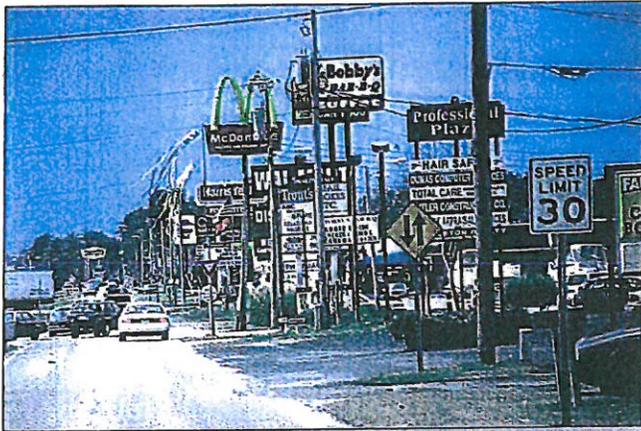
possible, planted medians in the main roadways to prevent unlimited left-hand turns.

- 4. Build sidewalks and crosswalks** throughout the area to encourage shared parking, public transportation, and walking between stores and to nearby homes and offices.
- 5. Build a street frontage** by filling in the front of large parking lots with small, closely spaced store fronts with parking behind or on the side.
- 6. Provide incentives** for the use of attractive, place-responsive architecture, smaller signs, and multi-story buildings.
- 7. Encourage a mix of other uses,** including nearby housing to begin to build a walkable neighborhood rather than a driving-only strip district.
- 8. Eradicate the ugliness** by controlling signs, undergrounding utility wires, planting street trees and improving the design of new buildings.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Ten Principles for Reinventing America's Suburban Strips, Urban Land Institute, 2001, Washington D.C., 202-624-7000.

Control Signs



Which street is more attractive? On which street are the signs easier to read?
Which street would you prefer to see in your community?

SIGN CONTROL is one of the most important and powerful actions a community can take to make an immediate visible improvement in its physical environment. This is because almost nothing will destroy the distinctive character of a community or region faster than uncontrolled signs and billboards. This doesn't mean we don't need signs. We do. Signs provide us with direction and needed information. As a planned, architectural feature a business sign can be colorful, decorative, even distinguished.

So why do American communities need to control signs? The answer is obvious: too often signs are oversized, poorly planned, badly located, and altogether too numerous. What's more, sign clutter is ugly, costly, and ineffective. And it degrades one of the country's greatest economic assets—its scenic landscape.

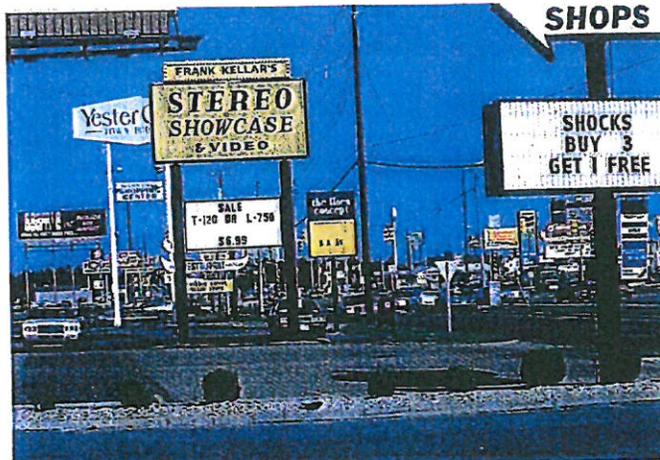
Driving down a street cluttered with signs is often an

unpleasant experience, not just because it is ugly but because it is fatiguing. Sign clutter overloads drivers with more information than is possible to manage. It requires great effort by the driver either to read it all or to block it all out, while attempting to drive safely.

Willy nilly clutter and placement of signs can cause information overload and confusion.

Daniel Mandelker,
Street Graphics & The Law

A good sign code is pro-business, since an attractive business district will attract more customers than an ugly one. Moreover, when signs are controlled, businesses will do a better job of selling at less cost because when clutter is reduced, consumers actually have an easier time finding what they are looking for.



Sign clutter is ugly, ineffective, and expensive.

A community should consider guidelines for both public and private signs. The careful design and placement of traffic signs and other public signs can improve community appearance and aid drivers. A profusion of signs is as confusing as a lack of them.

Better Models for Chain Drug Stores

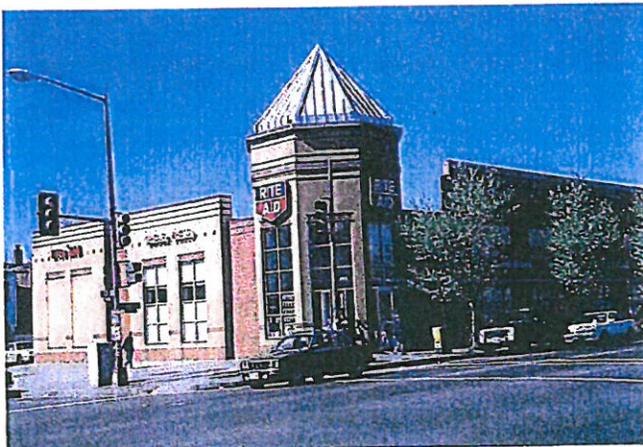


Typical chain drug store

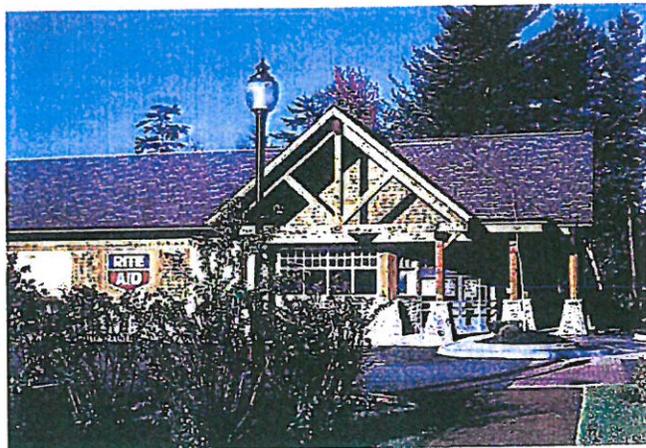


Rite Aid in Camden, Maine, is in a new building that complements its surroundings.

More Good Examples



Rite Aid in Washington, D.C., hides the parking in the rear.



Rite Aid in Lake Placid, New York, was patterned after other Adirondack-style buildings.



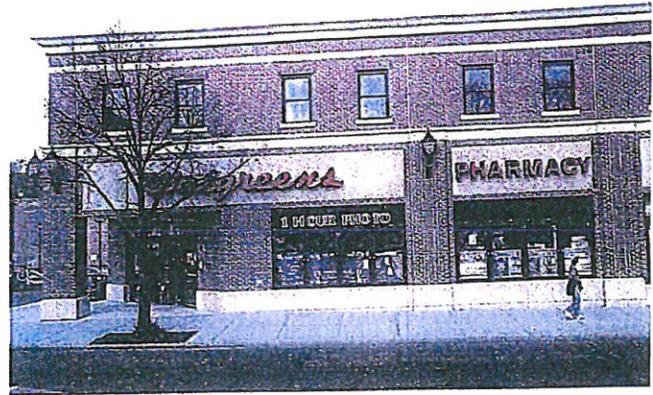
Rite Aid, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, fits in with the neighborhood where it is located.



Rite Aid in Tacoma, Washington, meets the sidewalk and hides the parking.



Typical chain drug store

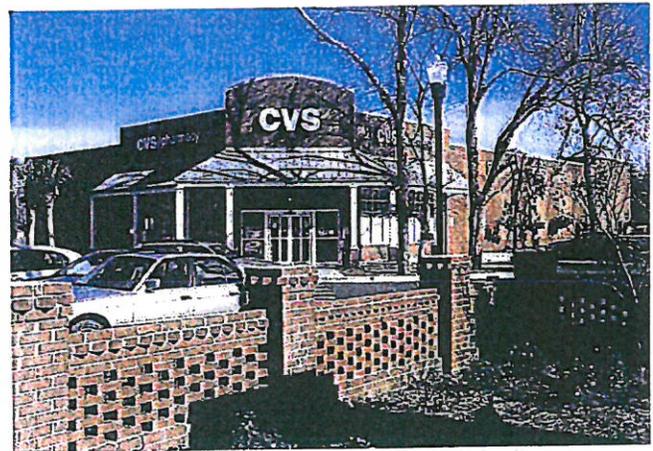


Walgreens, Brookline, Massachusetts, blends with the New England town's existing streetscape.

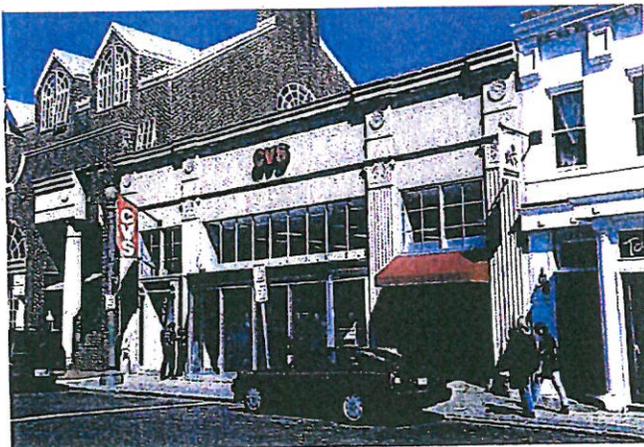
More Good Examples



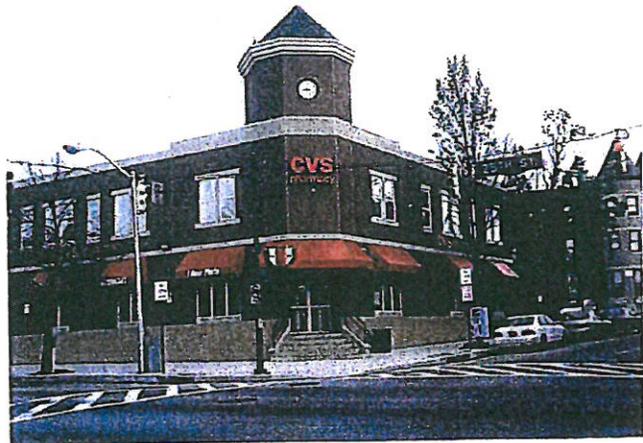
CVS, Alexandria, Virginia, uses materials and detailing that are compatible with nearby buildings.



CVS, Hanover, Virginia, is well landscaped and screens the parking lot.



CVS in Washington, D.C., is one of several in restored historic buildings.

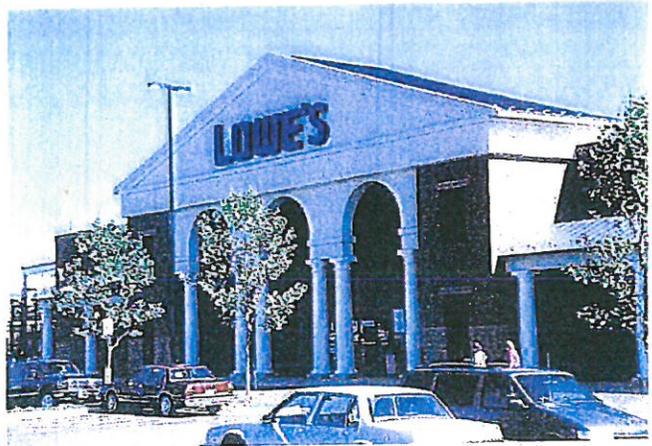


Another CVS in Baltimore, Maryland, is in a new building in a neighborhood commercial area.

Better Models for Big Box Retailers



Typical big box retailer



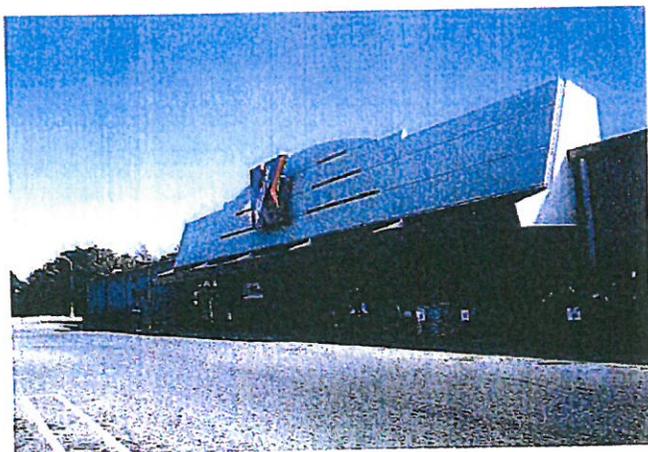
Lowe's in Gaithersburg, Maryland, shows how the design of big box retailers can be greatly improved.



Typical chain bookstore



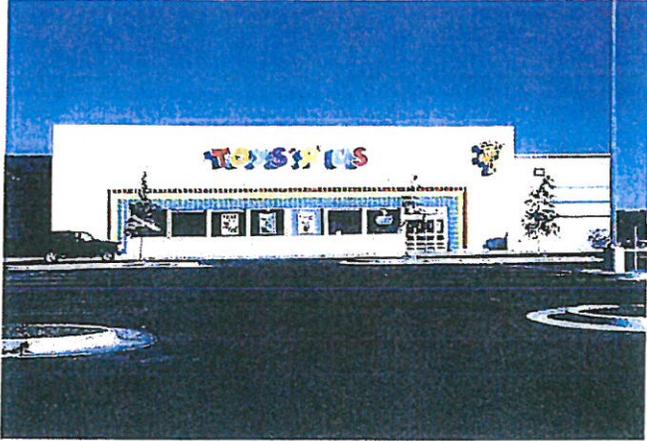
Barnes & Noble, Bethesda, Maryland, is in a multi-story building in a walkable neighborhood.



Typical big box retailer



K-Mart, Jackson, Wyoming, has an articulated facade that breaks up the box.



Typical Toys-R-Us



Toys-R-Us in Charlottesville, Virginia, went through a design review process.



Typical Wal-Mart



Wal-Mart in Evergreen, Colorado, reflects its mountain setting.

More Good Examples



Grocery store in an historic warehouse building, Baltimore, Maryland.



Big box retailers in Gaithersburg, Maryland, hide the parking and many are in two-story buildings.

COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT, ARIZONA STYLE

THERE ARE NO GOLDEN ARCHES in Sedona, Arizona. Instead, they are turquoise and beige to complement the high desert setting of this Southwestern community. Set amid the beauty of northern Arizona's red rock country, Sedona is one of the Southwest's most popular and attractive destinations. This is not an accident.

Since 1993, Sedona has used comprehensive design review standards to "preserve and enhance Sedona's unique sense of place, one project at a time." To ensure that new development respects and enhances Sedona's cultural and environmental uniqueness, the city's design review manual espouses the following imperatives for new development:

- Architectural transplants from other locales are neither appropriate nor desirable.
- The natural environment deserves authenticity and integrity in the built environment.
- Commercial, public facilities, and multi-family residential development can be designed with architectural character that accommodates the structures in harmony with their natural surroundings.
- Franchise/monoculture (corporate signature) buildings and shallow or artificial imitations of "western" architectural styles are not desirable.
- Natural structural rhythms, proportions, and color schemes can enhance environmental surroundings.



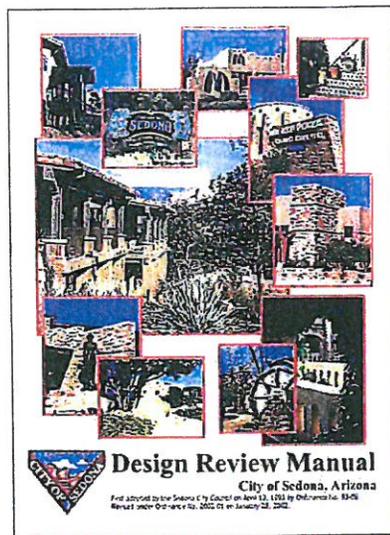
McDonald's, Sedona, Arizona

- Careful site planning is the essential basis for designing and building structures on sensitive, often difficult terrain.

The design guidelines were created to provide good design that is responsive to its contextual setting. As a result of the guidelines, the national chains that have located in Sedona have departed from their "off the shelf" designs to construct buildings compatible with Sedona's unique character.

Sedona's planning director notes that the city's business community supports the design review process, "because it realizes that Sedona's continued desirability as a tourist destination is dependent on preserving its unique sense of place."

For additional information about Sedona's design review process, contact the Department of Community Development, 102 Roadrunner Drive, Sedona, AZ 86336, (928) 204-7118, www.sedona.az.us.



Lessons Learned

ASK, AND YOU MAY RECEIVE. Experience shows that if you accept the standard “cookie-cutter” design, that’s what you’ll get. On the other hand, if your community insists on a customized, place-responsive building, then that is what you’ll get. The bottom line for most chain stores is securing access to good trade areas. They evaluate locations based on their economic potential. If they are required to address local site planning or architectural concerns, they will usually do so. Hundreds of local communities have successfully worked with national chains and franchises to get buildings that respect local community identity. Your community can, too.

A design review process is always desirable, but even without a formal design review process, local governments can establish a process of “mandatory review and voluntary compliance.” The mere act of talking about the design of a building will almost always improve it. When coupled with design guidelines and public education, requiring developers to discuss design issues as part of the site plan review process can go a long way toward producing “corporate good neighbor” buildings.

Use incentives and public opinion, too. In cases where chain stores and franchises insist on placing corporate interest over community interest, local government can use a variety of regulations and incentives to foster compatibility between franchises and communities. These include incentives, such as relaxed parking standards, density bonuses, and tax credits, as well as regulatory techniques such as limits on store size or footprint, historic districts, design guidelines and review, conditional use permits, site plan review, corridor overlay zones, sign controls, and landscape ordinances. However, with or without legal tools, no community should forget the power of public opinion. Many of the successes featured here grew out of public calls for a site-specific design or for saving a cherished building.

Control the signs. Garish, oversized signs are one of the more objectionable aspects of franchises and chains. Left unchecked, the “copy-cat” logic of corporate competition

often results in an unsightly clutter of portable signs, pole signs, plastic pennants, flapping flags, and twirling streamers all shouting for attention. Experience shows that sign clutter is ugly, costly, and ineffective. Experience also shows that when signs are controlled, franchises do a better job of selling at less cost, because shoppers can now find what they are looking for. When it comes to signage, businesses want a level playing field. They can compete for attention with 100-foot-tall signs or 10-foot-tall signs. Either way, the burgers taste the same.

The keys to success. National corporations and their local franchises are more likely to agree to design modifications when:

- Design objectives are clearly stated. The developer and architects should know in advance what criteria will be applied to the proposed project.
- The local government offers pre-application meetings. Misunderstandings can be avoided if the national company is given a chance to meet informally with staff and commission members prior to submitting a formal application.
- Visual design guidelines are available. Many communities no longer rely solely on written design standards. They have adopted visual design guides that graphically depict what constitutes a compatible design.
- Local government understands that it has leverage whenever a building applicant requests a variance, a rezoning, or other consideration from the city or county.
- Local groups know when to compromise. Fast food companies care a lot more about some things than others. For example, they are much more adamant about having a drive-thru than they are about architectural styles or sign heights.
- There is organized community support for historic preservation or urban design standards.

For Additional Information

Better Models for Chain Drugstores, by Anne Stillman, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1999; 202-588-6000, www.nthp.org.

Better Models for Superstores: Alternatives to Big-Box Sprawl, by Constance E. Beaumont, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1997; 202-588-6000, www.nthp.org.

Design & Aesthetics: Taking a Closer Look, 14-article set from the *Planning Commissioners Journal*; 802-864-9083, www.plannersweb.com.

"Dollars and Sense of Preserving Community Character" (video), The Conservation Fund; 703-525-6300, www.conservationfund.org.

The Home Town Advantage: How to Defend Your Main Street Against Chain Stores and Why it Matters, by Stacy Mitchell, Institute for Local Self Reliance, Minneapolis, MN 55414; 612-379-3815, www.ilsr.org.

Placemaking: Developing Town Centers, Main Streets, and Urban Villages, Charles C. Bohl, Urban Land Institute, 2002; 202-624-7000, www.uli.org.

Saving Face: How Corporate Franchise Design Can Respect Community Identity, PAS Report 452, by Ronald Lee Fleming, American Planning Association; 312-786-6344, www.planning.org.

Transforming Suburban Business Districts, Geoffrey Booth, Urban Land Institute, 2001; 202-624-7000, www.uli.org.

Corporate Good Neighbor Initiative

The Corporate Good Neighbor Initiative, led by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in partnership with The Conservation Fund, Scenic America and the Townscape Institute, works proactively with chains, franchises and big-box stores to protect historic places and advance preservation-based community revitalization.

The Good Neighbor Initiative builds on the success of the National Trust's Chain Drugstore Initiative, through which

the Trust and local partners have helped save 44 historic buildings in 23 communities. In addition, it obtained written commitments from the "Big Four" drugstore chains (Eckerd, CVS, Rite-Aid and Walgreens) not to demolish properties individually listed on the National Register and established with them a pro-active early-warning system. For additional information about the initiative, call (202) 588-6283 or email the Program Coordinator at ferrall_dietrich@nthp.org.



Do you want the heart and soul of your community to be a downtown or a shopping mall?

Credits and Acknowledgements

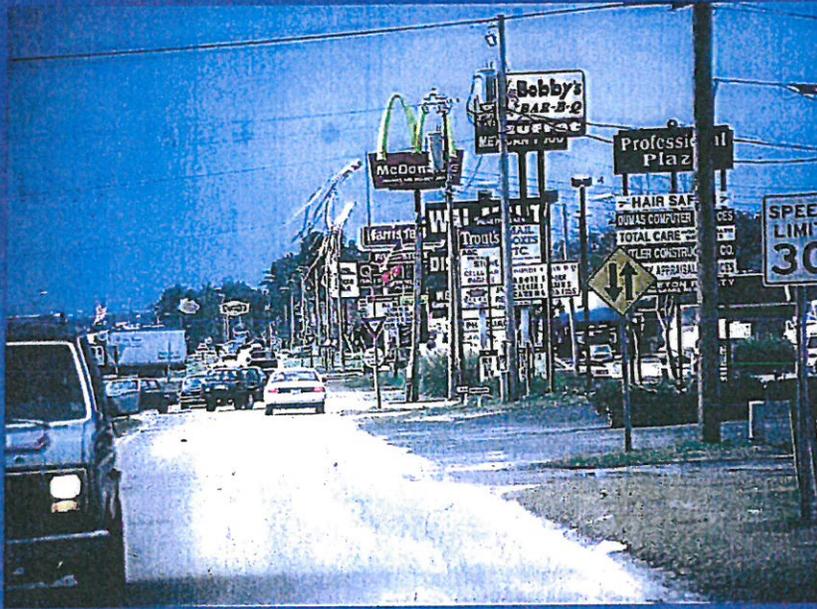
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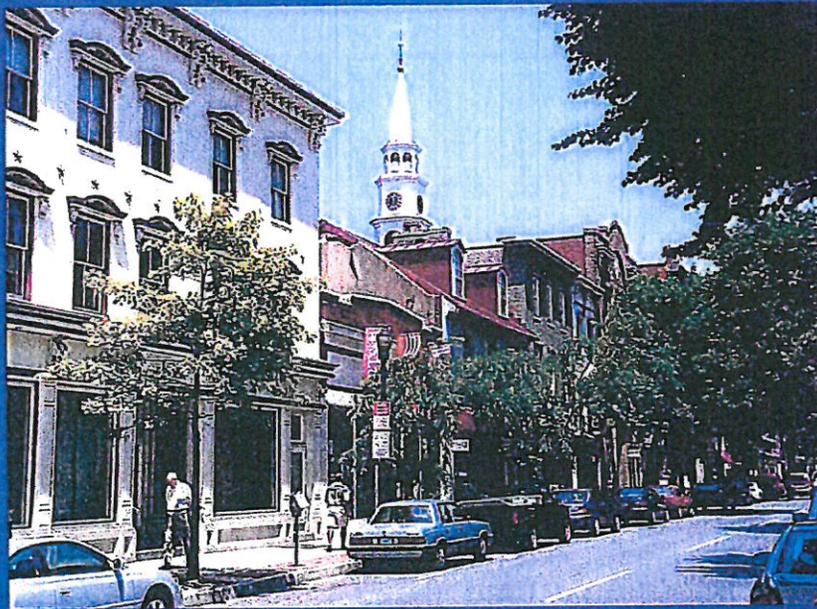
About the Author

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The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations in this brochure are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders, The Conservation Fund, the Smart Growth Network or the *Planning Commissioners Journal*.



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