

**Focus on**

**Livable  
Communities**

## **Demystifying Density...**

Moderate densities of 7 to 30 dwelling units per acre can be achieved through small lot single family homes, multiplexes or townhomes. This "compactness" supports neighborhood retail, transit service and active community environments.

## **Learn more...**

For a more detailed discussion of the impact of density on economic development, crime prevention, traffic safety and creating more livable communities, see the companion "Focus on Livable Communities" fact sheets available online at [www.lgc.org/freepub/land\\_use/factsheets](http://www.lgc.org/freepub/land_use/factsheets).



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# **Compact Development for More Livable Communities**

## **"Compact" can be compelling.**

**W**hen people hear the word "density," they often think of barracks-style public housing projects, overcrowding or crime-ridden inner cities. While some of the high-density development of the last 40 years has reinforced these perceptions, well-designed compact development can actually help create more livable communities by:

- ▶ Preserving open space, farm land and agriculture
- ▶ Supporting economic vitality
- ▶ Providing housing choices
- ▶ Supporting better air quality
- ▶ Supporting transit
- ▶ Creating more walkable communities

Research shows that in compact neighborhoods, people are more likely to walk, bicycle and ride transit. According to a study by John Holtzclaw, every time a neighborhood doubles in compactness, the number of vehicle trips residents make is reduced by 20% to 30%.<sup>1</sup> The result is less pollution, less traffic congestion and more transportation options.

Compact neighborhoods contribute to active community environments where people can live, work, shop and play. The images on the following pages illustrate how well-designed compact development can help create more livable communities.



Well-designed compact development contributes to vibrant, active communities – such as these neighborhoods in Brea, CA and Boulder, CO.

# Design Really Does Matter...

Just as the the most critical things in real estate are “location, location, location,” the three most critical issues with compact development are “design, design, design.”

As the following pairs of pictures illustrate, the way we design our buildings and the way they relate to the street are instrumental in creating livable, walkable communities.

Time-proven design elements of traditional neighborhoods – such as narrow streets, front porches, mixed uses and pedestrian orientation – contribute to the quality of our built environment and have a significant impact on the activities that take place within them.

In urbanized areas, compact development and good design are critical components of livable communities.



## Buildings without articulation

Building facades without variation don't create visual interest and give buildings an institutional look.



## Buildings with articulation

A variety of colors, textures, materials and rooflines are more interesting and help identify individual homes.



## Pedestrian-unfriendly design

The location of parking, utilities and garbage receptacles affect the built environment's safety and enjoyment.



## Pedestrian-friendly design

Front porches and attention to how a building relates to the street help create safe, enjoyable spaces for people.



## Single use

While compact development is often built in stand-alone, single-use buildings...



## Mixed use

...Higher densities allow us to also provide space for retailers and small businesses in town center locations.



## Poorly defined open space

Open space that isn't defined as “private” or “semi-private” does not get used and feels unsafe.



## Well-defined open space

Central courtyards, gardens and parks that windows look out on delineate safe, semi-private spaces.



### ▶ Lack of landscaping

Even in well-designed projects, lack of greenery can create monotonous hardscapes.



### ▶ Parking out front

Poorly designed projects often surround buildings with asphalt and parking.



### ▶ Garages in front

Conventional single-family homes typically put blank, unfriendly garage doors facing the street.



### ▶ Peripheral amenities

Amenities that are located on the periphery seem like an afterthought.



### ▶ Landscaping

Plants, trees and shrubs provide shade, beauty, visual interest and even food in urban areas.



### ▶ Parking hidden from street

Compact housing can help hide cars by locating parking mid-block, underground or in structures.



### ▶ Front porches

Compact housing often puts garages in the rear and has front porches that keeps eyes on the street.



### ▶ Central amenities

Well-designed projects make amenities the heart of the community.

# Three Tips for Gaining Acceptance for Good Compact Design

## 1 Inform residents that density does not lower adjacent property values.

Studies have repeatedly shown that well-maintained, well-designed compact housing – whether market rate or affordable – does not lower the value of nearby homes.<sup>2</sup> Use the checklist on the back of this fact sheet to evaluate the design of compact housing projects.

## 2 Engage neighbors in a discussion about compact development.

Exploring neighbors' fears and concerns about compact development can provide meaningful dialogue about how to create communities that people want to live in. Getting input from neighbors early in the development process can help build support for projects and minimize future opposition.

## 3 Consider the fiscal savings.

Low-density development requires greater public subsidies for sprawling infrastructure and services. Compact development helps reduce well-documented social and health costs attributed to sprawl.<sup>3</sup>

# Which projects make the cut?

## AN ELECTED OFFICIAL'S CHECKLIST FOR COMPACT DEVELOPMENT

**To insure that compact housing fits into a community and is well-designed, here are some questions to ask:**

### YES NO

- Is the site within walking distance of shops, services, schools or transit?
- Is the project designed to meet minimum density levels for the site, especially if close to transit and neighborhood retail?
- Do the builder and architect have a track record of building well-designed multifamily housing and/or mixed-use projects? (Ask to see completed examples of the architect's and the builder's work to make sure it is of a quality that you want in your community.)
- Is the plan designed specifically for the site or is it a "stock" plan?
- Is the street lined with living units, retail or office space rather than parking lots or garages? Do windows, entrances and front porches face the street?
- Is parking hidden from the street? (For example, for large projects are there multiple, smaller parking lots located to the side or in back of the buildings? Or is parking provided in a structure that doesn't dominate the site?)
- Are there shared, outdoor spaces designed so that they can be used for barbecues, children's play, community gardens or similar activities?
- Do windows overlook shared outdoor spaces?
- Does each unit have some private, usable outdoor space such as a patio, balcony or small yard?
- Does the landscaping complement the buildings? (Encourage the use of drought tolerant species.)

**A more complete list of design considerations and design guidelines are available on the Local Government Commission's website at [www.lgc.org/freepub/land\\_use/guidelines](http://www.lgc.org/freepub/land_use/guidelines).**

## Compact Development

### Resources

#### Compact Development CD (CD<sup>2</sup>) Toolkit

*This easy-to-use toolkit helps local government officials, community leaders, planners, developers and smart growth advocates address concerns about compact development. Available at [www.lgc.org/bookstore](http://www.lgc.org/bookstore) or call (916) 448-1198 x307.*

#### Affordable Housing Design Advisor

*This comprehensive web site addresses good design, why it is important and how to achieve it. The site includes an online database of compact housing developments. [www.designadvisor.org](http://www.designadvisor.org)*

### Notes

1. Holtzclaw, John, Ph.D., Sierra Club, [www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/articles/modal.asp](http://www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/articles/modal.asp)
2. Studies by U.S. General Accounting Office, UC Berkeley's Institute for Urban and Regional Development, California's Department of Housing and Community Development, and Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.
3. Funders Network for Smart Growth, Health and Smart Growth, [www.fundersnetwork.org](http://www.fundersnetwork.org)

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