Older established neighborhoods throughout America have been sleeping giants that have now awakened. To some it is a nightmare. To others it is an exciting opportunity.

Perhaps as much as a decade ago, residents began to notice that something was happening to the character of those places that they called home. After many years of apparent stability, change was occurring. Original cottages, ranch houses and bungalows were torn down, and were replaced with larger structures that were out of scale.

Alarms went off. At first, neighborhood advocates responded by lobbying for historic district designation. This typically provides a detailed set of design guidelines and a process of review that considers mass and scale as well as architectural character. In some cases, cities also offered an alternative “conservation district,” which focused more on block character and less on preservation of the details of individual buildings.

While these are useful tools, they may not be practical for all situations. These systems require substantial manpower to administer, both in terms of staff and volunteer commissions. In addition, applying the historic district approach may go beyond the neighborhood’s goals. And, even when these systems are in place, there often is a lingering conflict with underlying zoning provisions. For example, while the traditional height of buildings in a neighborhood may be one story and design guidelines call for compatibility with that feature, the base zoning often permits a structure of thirty-five feet, well in excess of a single story. This sets up an expectation that may be contrary to the design guidelines.

Modeling the Buildout Potential with Existing Regulations
A computer model illustrates the maximum potential building volume that can be constructed under existing regulations (the transparent light blue envelope). A typical “recent trends” house is shown in grey. This type of analysis helps inform the discussion about alternatives for addressing neighborhood character. (Terrell Hills, TX)
How did this conflict arise?

Basic dimensional standards affecting building size were set forth in most zoning ordinances, which originally dated from the 1930s and often were revised in the 1950s. In most cases, this limited the size of a building by establishing minimum setbacks from the property lines and an overall maximum height limit. These prescriptive standards were intended to provide adequate separation of buildings for health and safety reasons, but at the same time they established an overall “theoretical building envelope” within which one could develop. For many
people, the size of this envelope went unrecognized.

Early on, residents seldom constructed houses to that maximum potential building envelope. A smaller home was sufficient, either by taste, budget or tradition. Outdoor areas also had functional assignments as well: Space existed for clothes lines, swing sets and vegetable gardens. As a result, residents considered their neighborhoods to be “complete,” with relatively low intensity development. While renovations and small additions might occur in these neighborhoods, the build out area was, by and large, thought to be “finished” in terms of the overall number of buildings that would be in the area and their mass and scale.

Today, many of these older neighborhoods are hot spots of investment, for those existing owners who seek to expand their homes and for developers and new buyers. In some cases, additional pressure comes from zoning that permits higher densities as well. Even though density itself does not necessarily mean that a new building will be larger than those seen traditionally, the two factors (building mass and density of dwelling units) can be linked in a dynamic that results in larger structures.

Figure-Ground Studies Document Existing Development Patterns
GIS maps can be used to study the differences in basic street layouts and lot patterns, as well as the patterns of building coverage of lots and setbacks. During this analysis, a range of “typologies” may emerge. New regulations may address these differences in context. (Denver, CO)
While many people seek to tame this trend, there is another side to the question, even though “neighborhood protection” is a strong motivator. Some planners argue that cities should go through cycles of investment, which keeps them vibrant and healthy. The influx of new owners supports community schools and services, improves property values and can enhance the efficiency of public transit.

One resident described the issue as viewing a new building from the “two sides of a fence” that runs along a shared side property line. If you are the owner of the property under construction, the ability to expand to meet your needs, or to sell and realize a profit, is important. On the other hand, if you are the adjoining neighbor experiencing a massive new building, along with a loss of sun and privacy, your perspective may be quite different. Both viewpoints must be acknowledged if a viable answer is to be found.

What can be done?

These are some steps that communities are taking:

1. Fine-tune the zoning standards.
   A key step is to fine-tune the basic prescriptive standards in the zoning ordinance to be more context-sensitive. Some basic calibrations to consider in zoning are:

1a. Adjust the maximum building height.
   In some cases, reducing the overall height limit may be needed; in other cases, reducing the height along sensitive edges may be more important.

1b. Define different height limits based on the position on a lot.
   Setting a lower wall height limit at the minimum sideyard setback line, for example, can help reduce impacts on neighbors, without necessarily limiting overall building height. Different systems may limit the front wall height, or that along side lot lines. Some address the rear lot.
Different Ways to Describe Building Height

The height of new construction is a key concern in many neighborhoods. Many people believe that traditional building heights should be respected and not overwhelm neighboring structures.

There are three “viewpoints” for height to consider:
• The street view
• Along side property lines
• In the rear yard

While the view from the street is important, a key consideration also can be the impact of building height in the rear and side yards of properties, especially in terms of how height affects the perception of open space that is shared in rear yards.

There also are different aspects of “height,” when evaluating established development patterns and the potential impacts of new construction:
• Absolute height (the maximum height of a building)
• Generally predominant height (of the main building mass)
• Height closest to side yard setbacks (especially wall plate height)
• Height on downhill sides (where tall supporting foundation walls may exist)
• First floor height along the street (often emphasized by porch eaves)
• Front porch height
• Elevation of the building foundation

The interaction of these height variables with the overall building mass is very important, in terms of the perceived scale of a building.

1c. Set a limit on wall length.
For example, establish a maximum front wall plane length that reflects the traditional width of buildings along the street. While the overall width of a new building may be permitted to be greater, the front portion will appear to be in scale with the context.

1d. Establish a floor area ratio.
This relates the maximum building area to the size of the lot, with the idea that these should be in proportion. It is an indirect way of measuring building mass, particularly when floor to floor heights are relatively similar to those seen traditionally in the neighborhood.

1e. Revise building set-back provisions.
In some cases, existing codes may prevent one from constructing a new house in line with neighboring structures, because the current front yard setback minimum is greater than the traditional development pattern. This often is the case when a more sub-urban code has been adopted for an older neighborhood that predates the mid-twentieth century.

2. Describe the existing context in objective terms.
In order to develop standards that are more context-sensitive, the existing character must be documented. This may include descriptions of basic framework features, such as the configuration of blocks, streets and alleys, as well as specific patterns of building arrangement, setbacks, mass and scale. Looking for patterns of consistency is a key part of this analysis, but defining the range of diversity is important as well. This may help to identify the range of “tolerance” that will exist for accommodating change. It is also important to match this analysis of context with other community planning goals related to livability, growth and economic health.

3. Test the potential effects of revised standards.
The numbers placed into a new code can yield unexpected results. The best way to predict the potential outcome and test to see that the changes will yield a compatible solution is to generate three-dimensional representations, or “models,” of alternative standards. This helps the community shape policy in an informed manner. Computer imaging is particularly easy to apply to this task today.

4. Provide options for discretionary review.
Changes to existing zoning standards should address many issues, and keep the system simple to administer, but in some situations a more flexible approach may be needed. When an owner seeks to execute a design that doesn’t quite fit the mold but could still be compatible, they may wish to have an option for using alternative standards, or even enter into a design review process using guidelines. In other cases, the city may wish to modify a regulation to respond to an unusual site condition.

These “alternative compliance” methods can provide flexibility in a system that otherwise is prescriptive. They should be designed, however, to be used only as needed, such that the overall system is effi-
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cient, fair and predictable. This may be built into the basic zoning as an alternative track, or it may be enabled through an overlay, the way historic district designation typically is.

5. Consider other tools to support the new standards.

Once the role of new zoning standards is clearly established, other tools that all address character may still be needed. Some of these are:

- Historic districts
- Conservation districts
- Special design overlays

Ideally, these tools will be reserved for areas that merit a finer-grained consideration of context, because they are more labor-intensive in terms of their administration.

Where is this going?

With current trends, planning tools are becoming more context sensitive, responding to traditional development patterns. At the same time, residents recognize that neighborhoods are not frozen, and that change can be “sculpted” to respect context and even can be beneficial. These refinements come with extensive debate, and it is important to provide a forum for reasoned discussion in which all viewpoints can be heard.

The stakes are high. The character of our neighborhoods and the success of our cities will be greatly influenced by these trends. It is important that we all work to craft creative solutions that will enhance livability in all of its aspects and maintain the character of our neighborhoods that we value.

Wall Plate Height Limits

A sketch to scale illustrates the effects of revised height standards, which limit the height of a building more substantially in the front portion of a lot, to maintain traditional scale as perceived from the street. (Carmel, CA)

Diversity within an FAR system

If the FAR limits the overall mass to a volume that is less than the maximum envelope, then variety in massing can occur. Each of these three examples is at the same FAR, but varied in massing.
Design Guidelines

Design guidelines provide for uniform reviews of proposed work in designated areas, such as design overlays and conservation districts. They are generally performance-oriented, addressing the desired character of development. They are by nature flexible, and as such require interpretation by an administrator or review committee. They can be enforceable, when appropriately linked to a regulatory document.

Design Standards

Design standards are measurable, prescriptive criteria that can be determined at a city permit counter. They most frequently appear in zoning and development codes. This is to be distinguished from “design guidelines,” which typically are more discretionary, and require more discussion to determine the appropriateness of a proposed improvement.

Design standards can be crafted with some flexibility, with the use of “menus” of options for meeting a particular standard.

Transitions

Development along the edge of a lower density residential district is often a consideration. Some design policies encourage lower intensity development that serves as a “transition” from commercial corridors to single family neighborhoods. (Encinitas, CA)
Testing Alternative Standards

Neighborhood representatives may help to determine the “threshold” for compatibility for new zoning standards, balancing mass and scale with design variables that may help new buildings fit into their context. A pictographic survey is one tool to collect this information. (Boulder, CO)