

QUICKNOTES

Measuring Community Character

Community character refers to the distinct identity of a place. It is the collective impression a neighborhood or town makes on residents and visitors.

People often choose the places they live and spend their leisure time based—in part—on their perceptions of community character. Nevertheless, many people find it difficult to explain which characteristics are essential to their sense of place. Identifying the key measurable qualities that contribute to community character can provide planners, local officials, and community members with a common language to understand the physical and social characteristics they value and most closely associate with their neighborhood or town.

BACKGROUND

When urban design experts explain the concept of community character, they typically stress the importance of the physical characteristics of a neighborhood or town, such as the pattern and style of buildings, streets, or open spaces. In contrast, landscape architects emphasize the role of natural features, and sociologists highlight interpersonal and institutional relationships. But the average citizen understands community character on an intuitive level. That is, she knows it when she sees it.

The danger of relying solely on intuition is that this can lead residents and business owners to oppose almost any proposed change to their community out of fear that it will negatively affect community character. Communities can approach change (which is inevitable) in a more constructive manner by working to identify the objective characteristics of the physical and social environment that are closely tied to perceptions of community character. This can refocus conversations on concrete measurable characteristics of the community, rather than emotional pleas based on intuition.

Generally, you can group objective characteristics that contribute to perceptions of community character into three broad categories: urban form, natural features, and demographics.

MEASURING URBAN FORM

Urban form refers to the relationships among streets, blocks, lots, buildings, and other man-made features. These relationships tell us, intuitively, whether we are in a place designed for many residents, workers, or visitors or just a few. They also send us signals about whether it would be more comfortable and convenient to walk or drive to get from one destination to another, and whether there are enough public spaces for people to gather on a nice day.

While there are many potential ways to measure the urban form of a neighborhood or town, a small number of these measurements seem to have a disproportionate effect on how people perceive community character. These key measures are the heights and widths of buildings, the distances between the fronts of buildings and the edges of streets, the distances between buildings on the same side of the street, the distances between facing buildings, the distances between parallel and intersecting streets, and the variation in those heights, widths, and distances across the community (or a defined subarea of the community).

MEASURING NATURAL FEATURES

In this context, *natural features* refer to terrain, vegetation, wildlife, and water bodies—including those altered by humans. The relationships between natural and man-made features tell us, intuitively, whether we are in a place designed primarily for people to live, work, or play. They also send us

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This view of a retail corridor in downtown Traverse City, Michigan, shows several urban form characteristics that contribute to perceptions of community character, including relatively uniform and modest building heights, uniformly small distances between facing buildings, and a lack of separation between buildings along the same side of the street.



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signals about how much time we'd like to spend outside versus inside on a nice day. The impressions triggered by these relationships can either complement or conflict with those triggered by urban form alone.

As with measuring urban form, there are many potential ways to quantify the relationships between natural and man-made features, but a small number of measurements seem to have a disproportionate effect on how people perceive community character. These key measures are the slopes and heights of hills, the heights and widths of trees, the distances between trees, the percentage of land covered by vegetation or water, and the variation in those slopes, heights, distances, and percentages across the community (or a defined subarea of the community).

SELECTING DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographics are measurable characteristics of human populations, such as age, sex, household size, marital status, race, religion, and education level. While there are numerous sources that collect and share demographics for different geographical areas, most people have an intuitive sense of some demographics of their community. This sense may be rooted in information learned through public observation or social interaction, or from media depictions.

Demographic intuitions often affect our perceptions of community character. Perhaps most importantly, they tell us whether we are in a place inhabited by, or welcoming to, people "like us." The risk of relying solely on intuition is that our observations, interactions, and media consumption can create highly distorted impressions of the community as a whole.

While there is no limit on the number of potential measurable characteristics of human populations, planners and local officials typically select a small number of demographic statistics as important indicators of community makeup and health. These include the sizes of daytime and nighttime populations; population distribution by age, sex, race, and ethnicity; average household size; median household income; and rates of adult educational attainment, employment, and home ownership.

When selecting demographics to characterize a community, it is important to consider whether a statistic is likely to make members of the community feel stigmatized. In cases where key statistics do carry negative associations, it is important to keep discussions focused on facts and not feelings. The purpose of looking at demographics is to foster a more complete understanding of the community and not to legitimize discrimination based on national origin, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sex, or familial status.

CONCLUSIONS

Certain measures of urban form and natural features, as well as select demographic statistics, exert a disproportionate influence over people's perceptions of community character. However, the concept of *community character* is not neatly limited to these factors. Personal experiences, along with community history and culture, can either amplify or attenuate impressions rooted in objective characteristics of the physical or social environment.

Community change is inevitable. Powerful external forces often drive physical and social changes in neighborhoods or towns. Identifying the most important contributing factors to perceptions of community character reframes conversations about potential changes around objective measures rather than vague notions that may result in blanket resistance to change. This can help planners, local officials, and community members establish goals and priorities for community growth and change without resorting to indefinite appeals to protect the established character.

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FURTHER READING

1. Published by the American Planning Association

Keast, Bret C. 2010. "Defining and Measuring Community Character." *Zoning Practice*, December. Available at planning.org/media/document/9006933.

Wright, Norman. 2012. "Beyond the Density Standard." *Zoning Practice*, November. Available at planning.org/media/document/9006909.

2. Other Resources

Kendig, Lane, and Bret Keast. 2010. *Community Character: Principles for Design and Planning*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press. Available at islandpress.org/book/community-character.

Pivo, Gary. 1992. "How Do You Define Community Character?" *Small Town*, November-December. Available at u.arizona.edu/~gpivo/Character.pdf.