

Compact Housing

Sustaining Communities and the Environment



Compact Housing Models

1. **Compact Single Family Detached**
7 – 21 units per acre
2. **Single Family with Secondary Unit**
17-24 units per acre
3. **Multiple Units, Single Family Appearance**
8-22 units per acre
4. **Rowhouses**
10-40 units per acre
5. **Multifamily Walkup Flats and Apartments**
16-51 units per acre
6. **Multifamily Elevator Apartments**
21-236 units per acre

Compact and Affordable Housing: An American Tradition



Through most of our country's history, there was a wide variety of housing types and prices in most communities, and the tradition of placing homes close together was perceived to provide many positive benefits. While this tradition was interrupted for a period after the second World War, there has been a resurgent interest in the mixed and compact housing patterns of older neighborhoods, to the point that many newer neighborhoods and homes are being built to resemble older ones. What people seem to like about both that old tradition and its new version are that one need not sacrifice a sense of privacy and security, or a loss of incivility, in order to gain the conveniences and public benefits of living in higher density buildings or communities.

A new generation of affordable and market rate developers are using good site planning and building design to turn the act of living close into the art of living well. Looking at the pictures of compact housing here, most audiences find the images attractive. Can you tell which of these examples from an American city is an older development, and which is recent? Which is affordable and which is market rate? The answer- upper left hand image is a recent all affordable low income rental townhouse, the upper right is turn of the century small lot Victorian homes, the lower left is a compact homeownership development with 15% low income buyers, 85% market rate, the bottom right shows a 1920's neighborhood with mixture of single family homes, three unit apartment building, and units over a corner store.

Compact Housing Benefits the Public

- **Compact Development Saves Open Space** – 1.5 million acres of farmland are lost each year for new development while many suitable urban sites are vacant.
- **Compact Development Saves Car Trips** – low density areas require resident to drive 20-40% more per day than compact communities.
- **Compact Development is Healthier** – low density communities have worse air and higher traffic and pedestrian fatalities than compact communities.
- **Compact Development Supports Communities** – local stores and businesses do best when more people live within walking distance or a short drive away.

Compact development provides advantages to the residents and also to the wider community. Consider the list of multiple advantages:

Compact Housing Benefits Residents

- **Greater Housing Choice** - Polls show many households seek more compact homes in neighborhoods close to jobs, shopping, schools, and local parks.
- **Greater Community Stability** – When more people work and live in the same town civic organizations are stronger and residents can participate better.
- **Sound Social and Economic Benefits** – Residents of compact communities spend less on cars and have more time and resources for families and communities

The Opposite of Compact Housing is
Low Density Sprawl...
the real threat to our quality of life

Low density new development is consuming more land to house
fewer people than ever before





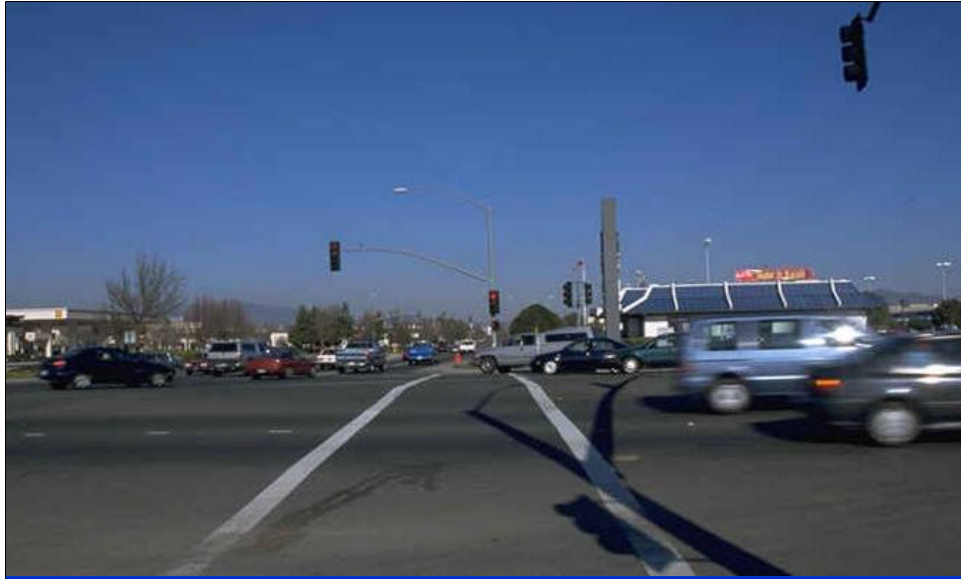
Standard lot sizes and wide street requirements plus poor design lead to land inefficiency and community anonymity like this



While most American metropolitan areas have historically contained a wide range of single family detached areas, the national trend since the 1970's has been for larger homes on larger lots as the predominant new construction type and the biggest user of former farm land and open space. Even in areas with a strong market over the last several decades for higher density apartments and condos, such as Washington, New York, Chicago, the San Francisco Bay Area, and coastal Florida, the average amount of land used for housing is fast outpacing population growth. As lots have increased and housing has spread further from jobs, the rise in vehicle miles traveled per person is also increasing much faster than the population. This new American landscape and its associated home type represents a very narrow spectrum of the single family home.



Commercial strips supplant older town centers and homes, while schools, jobs, and stores are spread further apart



Development and road patterns discourage walking or bicycling . Car use for non-work destinations now accounts for 73% of all trips



Hotels and big box retail generate sales taxes, but they also require a large lower-paid workforce



Many infill lots that could become housing are zoned commercial to attract more sales tax uses



Compact Housing Can Meet Household Needs and Enhance Community Livability With:

- Diversity of Housing Types
- Efficient Land Patterns
- Neighborhood Compatibility
- Services and Programs
- Infrastructure Improvements
- Transit and Walking Choices
- Yes in My Backyard



Compact Housing Strategies

- Single Family Districts
 - ✓ Provide more small lot, secondary unit, duplex, and clustered opportunities
 - ✓ Keep agricultural parcels from becoming residential ranchettes
- Multifamily Districts
 - ✓ Provide broad range of density options
 - ✓ Include some multifamily area in all new larger subdivisions
- Neighborhood Center and Commercial Areas
 - ✓ Allow greater height and density close to shops, jobs, transportation
 - ✓ Provide attractive public realm and access by pedestrians and cyclists
- All Districts
 - ✓ Include a certain number of affordable units in all areas
 - ✓ Emphasize good design and predictable process including minimum densities.

Compact Housing in our Cities and Towns Helps Save the Countryside



- Cities and counties benefit by meeting future growth needs primarily within their existing urban service boundaries
- Jurisdictions and landholders benefit by conserving agriculture and natural landscapes

Compact Housing Helps Build a Better Future



- Compact housing consumes less land, water, and energy resources and maintain good air quality over their full life cycle.



- Compact and affordable housing contribute toward sharing the benefits and responsibilities of growth and conservation more equally within communities and regions.

Compact Housing is Part of our Valued Past



The term “density” has negative associations for many, compounded by the confusion between the statistical measure of density, and the visual perception of density. Density in the form of “historical homes” such as the mix of one and two unit Victorian structures in San Francisco may appear picturesque in someone else’s community. Yet a proposal for a new development of a similar density in one’s own neighborhood, described in the planners lexicon as “a multiple unit multi story development at 14 units per acre” will conjure images of out-of-scale monster structures, hordes of people, and constant streams of cars. This type of response is magnified when the proposed “dense” housing is revealed to be an affordable development whose inhabitants will have different incomes than their neighbors..

This fear is based on some common myths and apprehensions that interact when the terms “affordable housing” or “higher density housing” are used. These include some or all of the following:

1. Limited Personal exposure:

- For the last 45 years, America has primarily been a suburban nation. The majority of adult Americans have been born and raised in suburbs and primarily in single family detached homes.
- For many adults, the first and only experience of living in “higher density housing” may have been college dorms or speculatively developed “collgetown apartments”, lacking in good design qualities
- For adults, the older models of small lot homes, townhouses, and garden apartments found in the pre-1950’s neighborhoods were “run down” or “in the wrong neighborhood” for much of their lives.

Old Neighborhoods and Housing Provide New Models for the Future.



2. Lack of Positive Models

- Most people and many professional planners and public officials are simply unaware of models like these small lot homes, duplexes, and housing over shops that are part of their own community but in neighborhoods outside their places of current residence or work.
- The “rediscovery” of older neighborhoods since the 1980’s and the publications of the new urbanism movement has changed some of these perceptions, but not in all areas.
- Many people find it difficult to tell what the density of a particular development might be, and focus more on the style, visual appearance, and landscaping features that combine to make a structure feel sympathetic to its larger context, or feel out of character.

Living Close is Part of our History



3. Inability of planners to educate the public

The current buyer and renter interest in older American neighborhoods like this small town Victorian era district does reveal a growing trend. A series of California polls commissioned by several major foundations shows that many people who might first choose a single family home on a large lot as their “ideal” home type will then change their preference when given the option of a house on a smaller lot in an older neighborhood, where amenities, conveniences, and either a job or transit is close buy. The perceived “design value” of older neighborhoods which are statistically more dense than newer homogenous suburbs appear to compensate for getting a smaller home on a smaller lot.

However, it is difficult for the public and most elected officials to translate their potential interest in the “good feel” of older, more compact communities into the process of planning for and accepting new developments in their own neighborhoods. The very process and terminology of development tend to polarize participants, and this is where all the “bad feelings” about density come out. When confronted with the the zoning terms and metrics of density, expressed in terms of units per acre or floor area building compared to lot area, parking and open space ratios, the general tendency is to think, the lower the number for buildings, people, and cars the better, the higher the numbers of parking ratios and open space, the better.

Single Family and Multifamily Homes Have Often Been Mixed on the Same Block



4. General fear of change and loss of property values.

Affordable housing sponsors almost universally draw their greatest opposition from homeowners in adjacent single family detached homes. The mere suggestion of bringing in to the community people that could not otherwise afford the single family detached homes already there is the underlying basis of their objections. While the emotional basis of the reaction may have a social component, there is also fear that the physical form of the new development may have a harmful effect on the existing neighborhood. This anxiety has its historical basis. The entire system of American zoning that uses land use controls to segregate single family detached homes from other uses, and sets minimum lot standards up to “protect property values” was sanctioned in the 1920’s by the supreme court.

Prior to the 1920’s, the pattern of lot sizes and housing types was entirely free market driven, but it also provided a great diversity of housing types in close proximity to one another, and neighborhood patterns that have become increasingly attractive to the public when compared to the homogenous subdivisions of more modern times.

Taller Buildings and Housing over Stores Are Found Near Transit and at Active Corners



In actuality, the amount of land taken up by older single family homes varies enormously in most parts of the nation, and the standards for one city or region may be very different than those in another. Many American cities have older neighborhoods laid out in the 19th and early 20th centuries with relatively small lots, shallow front yards, small backyards, and minimal side yards so that single family detached homes are closely spaced, and can achieve densities of 12-16 units per acre or more, excluding streets. These were districts laid out to accommodate a rapidly growing urban workforce while offering a housing type than was intended for the new middle class, as opposed to the tenement and narrow row house models that factory workers still inhabited. One finds entire neighborhoods in cities with a growing mercantile and factory managerial class, like Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, St Louis, Baltimore, Richmond, and Chicago to name a few where the oldest single family detached homes were 18 to 25 foot wide units with identical plans to the attached roughhouses, except they were placed three to six feet apart and set back 5 to 10 feet from the street. The density provided by this pattern happened to also support walkable corner stores and neighborhood commercial districts, and neighborhoods with these homes and characteristics have been rapidly “rediscovered” by several generations of middle class families.

Modern building codes memorialize this first model of “detached” units by allowing lower fire rating standards to be used in single family homes that are at least 3 feet from their side lot line.

Detached Homes Fit on Small Lots



Chicago, closely spaced "bungalows"



Photo courtesy Richard Benjamin

Providence Wide-Shallow "row homes"

Apartments Can Look Like Homes
or Fit with Homes



1930's 4-plex,
Spokane, Washington



Rowhouses and "false mansions"
Boston

Garden Apartment Districts are found Close to Job and Transportation Centers



Multifamily housing models were also adapted to the growing middle class preference for front yards, distance between buildings, and street landscaping. “Garden apartments” were developed in many American cities in the 1910-1940 period. Some were designed to resemble large homes. They differed from the older urban apartment buildings by being freestanding, low rise structures, usually with no elevators, but with parking for each units at the side or rear of the lot. They offered housing type diversity while fitting into the general lower rise, smaller scale, and more landscaped context of the green city ideals promulgated by social and health reformers in the post World War 1 period.

Taller Apartments can be Designed with Visual Interest and Human Scale



Comparing Approaches: Poorly Designed New Market Rate Homes on Small Lots



In many parts of the nation, higher land values are forcing market rate builders to push for smaller lots, but the solutions vary widely in terms of both aesthetic appeal and general contribution to neighborhood livability. .

There are some good lessons we can learn from past housing types in the differ regions of the US.... how to make compact housing more attractive and more livable than the 1950s era motel type buildings that most people associate with “higher density housing.”

Well Designed Affordable Homes on
Small Lots



Self Help Homes, Santa Rosa – Wide/Shallow Lots

Burbank Housing Santa Rosa Compact Lots

Multiple Strategies in One City Can Expand Choice



San Jose, California: Baker Place– 4 low income rental units per “Grand House”

Baker Place



Crescendo Oaks, - 6 first time homebuyer townhouses in one "Mansion"

Crescendo Oaks, estimated 16 units per acre



Almaden Lakes – market rate and first time buyer town homes, low income and market rate apartments, at transit, near park and lake

Compact Housing Builds Neighborhood Character



Parkside Gables, Stamford Connecticut

Compact Housing Provides Good Open Space



Woodlands, Boulder, CO



Randolph Neighborhood, Richmond, VA

Compact Housing Supports Strong Families

