

DEFINING DISTRICT CHARACTER

The design guidelines should be based on the character of the historic district if they are to be effective. To a great extent, the physical context is the summation of the visual characteristics that give a distinct identity to the district.

Many people may consider the present condition of the historic district to be its context, and while this is very important in design review considerations, it does not tell all of the story.

Design policies are often founded upon one's image of the district in earlier times, a context that some may wish to recreate. At the same time, the guidelines are also colored by anticipated changes that may occur. In fact, many guidelines are written in reaction to changes that may be anticipated.

It is extremely important that the relationship of the current context to the district's historic and future conditions be clearly defined, as a basis for establishing design goals for the district. As a result, three "tenses" in the history of the district should be used to describe the character of the historic district, and its neighborhoods, within different periods of development--the present condition, the historic character, and potential future development.

In order to define the character of the district, conduct a simple, objective documentation of the existing character of the district. Then, develop an understanding of the historic character of the district. Compare this with the existing character and define the degree of integrity that the district holds.

Finally, forecast potential development scenarios under current regulations and market trends to produce a vision of what the district may become without the anticipated guidelines. This exercise will then help generate a list of topics that will be design issues that the guidelines should address. A simple description of these steps follows:

Step 1 Adopt a common vocabulary to describe design issues

First, establish a vocabulary you will use in describing the character of the district. Select simple terms that will be easy to communicate. Keeping the terms simple will help broaden the base of support of those who may use the guidelines by making the process one that citizens can understand as well as design professionals and historians.

Select terms that will describe the character of individual building types and others that can be used to define the relationships among buildings and site features. For example, many features on commercial building appear to align on the street, such as cornices, window sills and moldings, because structures were erected with similar components of similar scale. Alignment of architectural features, both in elevation and plan may therefore be a term to use in describing the relationships of structures on the street.

It is assumed that the district is characterized by similarities among structures that contribute to a sense of visual continuity and therefore the survey tools focus on identifying

For More Information:

Winter & Company
1265 Yellow Pine Avenue
Boulder, CO 80304
303.440.8445
www.winterandcompany.net

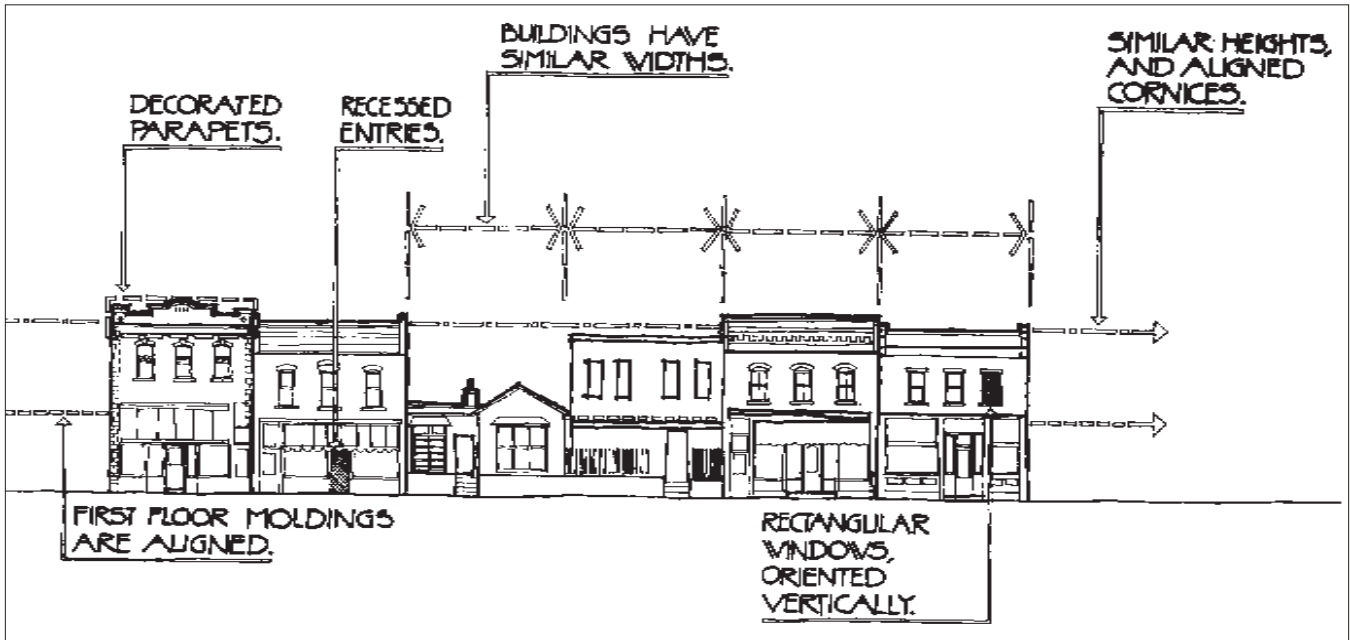
common elements. Some districts are characterized by the variety of building types and site relationships that they feature. These same survey tools can be adapted to such conditions, by changing the questions to focus on differences found in the district.

Step 2 Define the present-day character

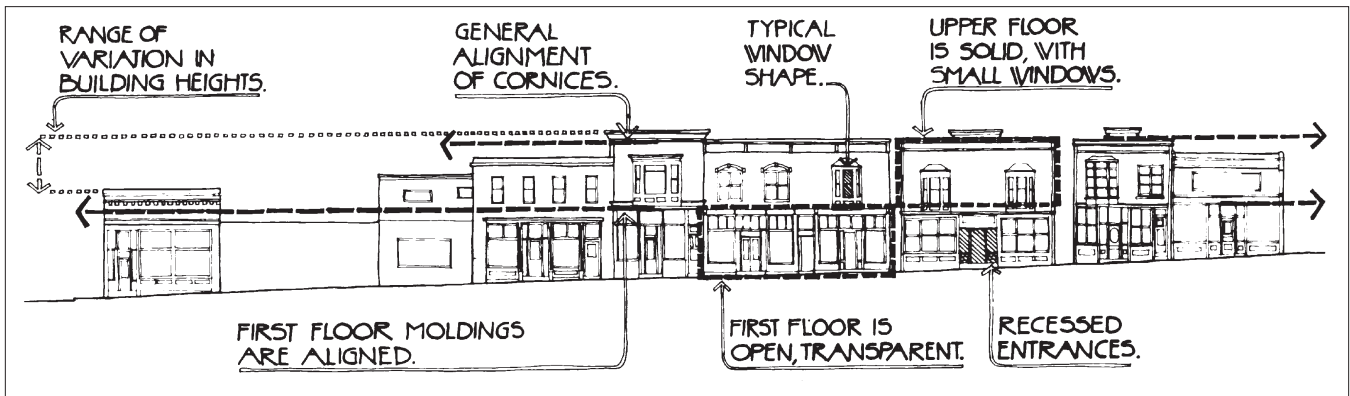
The current character of the district may be defined in a series of “neighborhoods,” each with distinct characteristics. In general, these differing sub-areas are distinguished by land use and building type. For example, the central blocks in the core of town may be composed of traditional commercial storefront buildings, whereas residential areas will be characterized by single family dwellings.

Draw upon architectural surveys to develop descriptions of individual building styles and components and then conduct field surveys to define overall district character and relationships among historic resources.

Document your survey of the existing character of a historic district with a combination of text, photographs and drawings that describe the features that should be respected. Incorporate these descriptions in the guidelines such that everyone can understand the context to be protected.



The spacing pattern of upper-story windows is one of the strongest characteristics of this typical Main Street.



This drawing of buildings on the main street of Telluride, Colorado, illustrates characteristics of visual continuity. Notice in particular the alignment of horizontal elements.

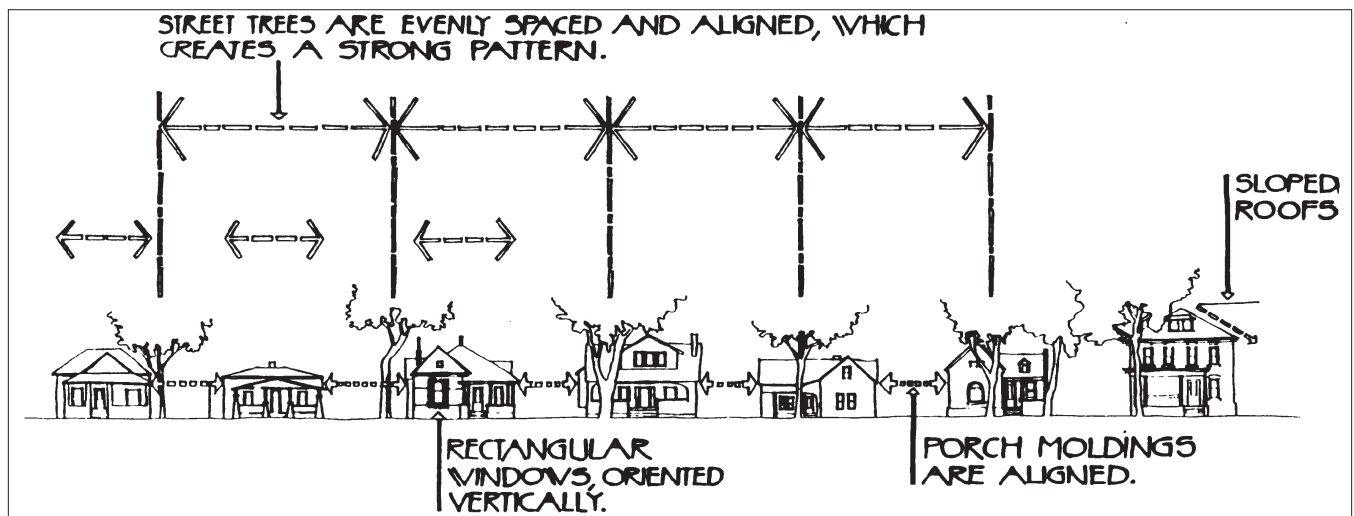
Using your survey information, answer these questions:

- Which features are most distinctive in contributing to the character of the district?
- Which historic building styles are represented in the district today?
- What are the typical building components seen today?
- How are materials finished?
- How are buildings sited?
- How is the landscape treated?
- What is the degree of visual

- continuity found in the district?
- What is the degree of diversity found in the district?
- To what degree do newer structures complement the historic context?

- The district at large
- A neighborhood within the district
- An individual block within the neighborhood
- Individual building types in the district

Organize the characteristics of the district in categories that will facilitate development of the design guidelines, usually starting with general, district-wide features and proceeding down to building details. For example, you might describe features in these categories:

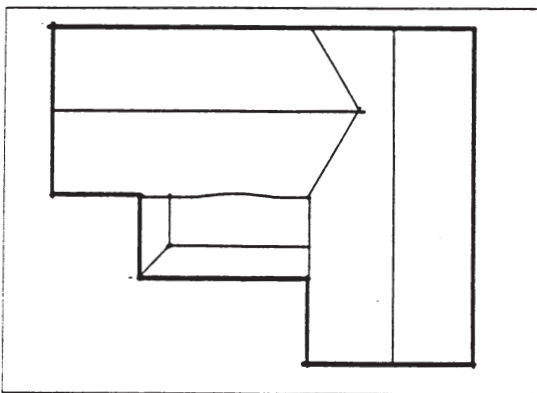


Spacing between buildings is one of the most important characteristics of this residential block.

BUILDING TYPES

L-plan houses

This was Texas' most common house plan type in the late nineteenth century. It was seen as an elaboration of the center-passage house resulting from a desire for more irregular forms. These homes came in one-, one-and-a-half-, and two-story forms. They usually had cross-gable or intersecting roofs with an off-center gabled wing extending toward the front and rear. Wood frame was prevalent with weatherboard siding. L-plan houses in the Queen Anne style often have elaborate detailed ornamentation, especially on porches and gable ends. Porches typically appear to be attached elements, but some are integral to the main roof form. Porch supports range from simple wood posts to decorative columns.

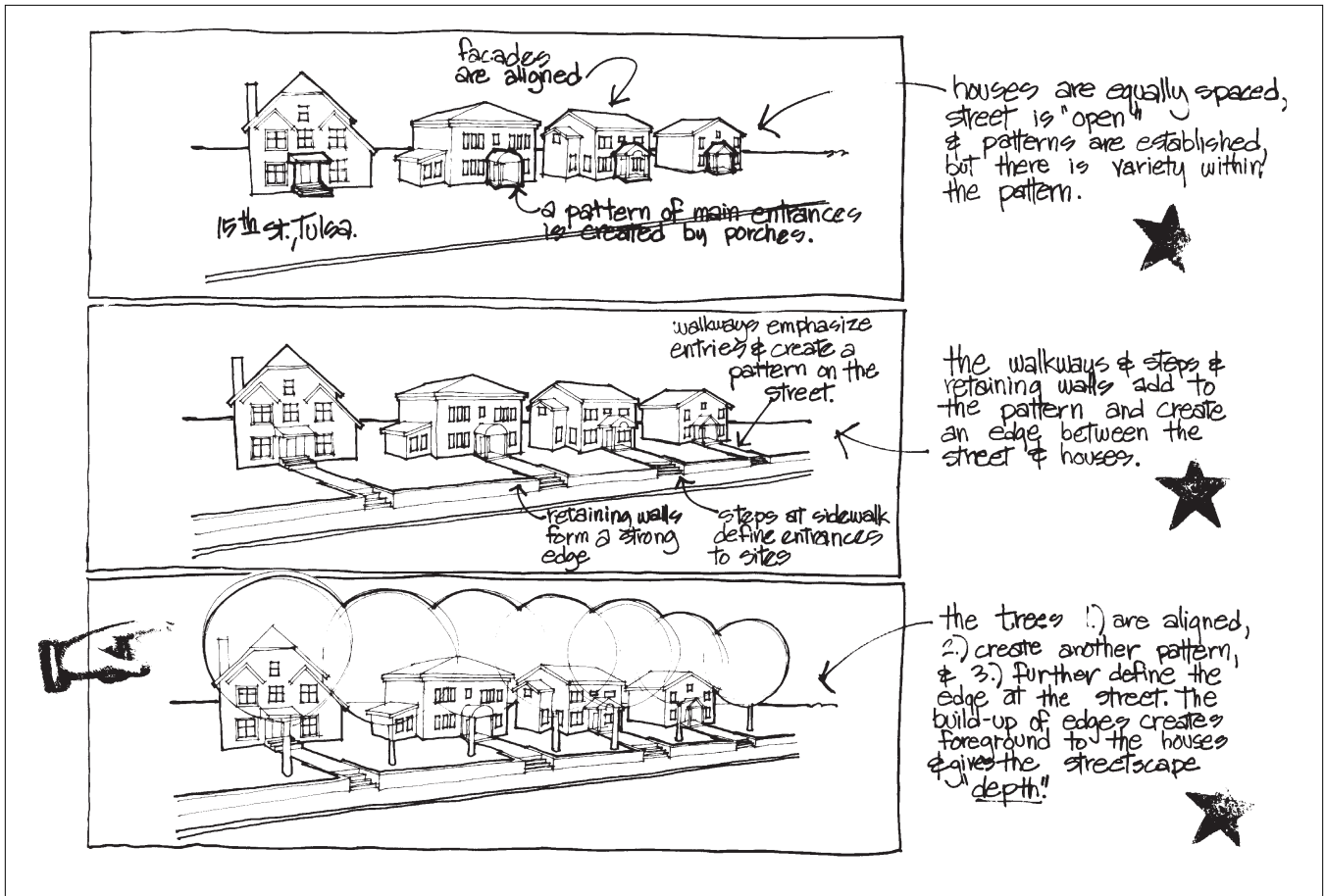


The L-plan house type is often identified by intersecting gable roofs.



This house exhibits the offset porch that often accompanies an L-Plan house. The horizontal lap siding is also a typical feature.

The design guidelines for Nacogdoches, Texas, include a sketch of each building type, a representative photograph, and a roof plan.



These sketches define the present-day character of a residential district in Tulsa, Oklahoma. A rhythm of porches is highlighted by walkways that define each building entry. A row of street trees align at the sidewalk edge to create a foreground for the row of houses.

Step 3 Define historic character

Defining the historic character helps develop an understanding of the early components of the built environment that establish the foundation for the historic district. A significant percentage of these historic features should be found today, and by comparing their current condition with their historic condition, we can determine the degree of integrity that the district retains.

Using the historic documentation, answer these questions:

- Which building styles were represented in the district historically?
- What were the typical building components seen historically?
- How were materials finished?
- How were buildings sited?
- What was the character of the historic landscapes?
- What was the degree of visual continuity found in the district?
- What was the degree of diversity found in the district?

By describing the historic character, you also may define the building and site development components that

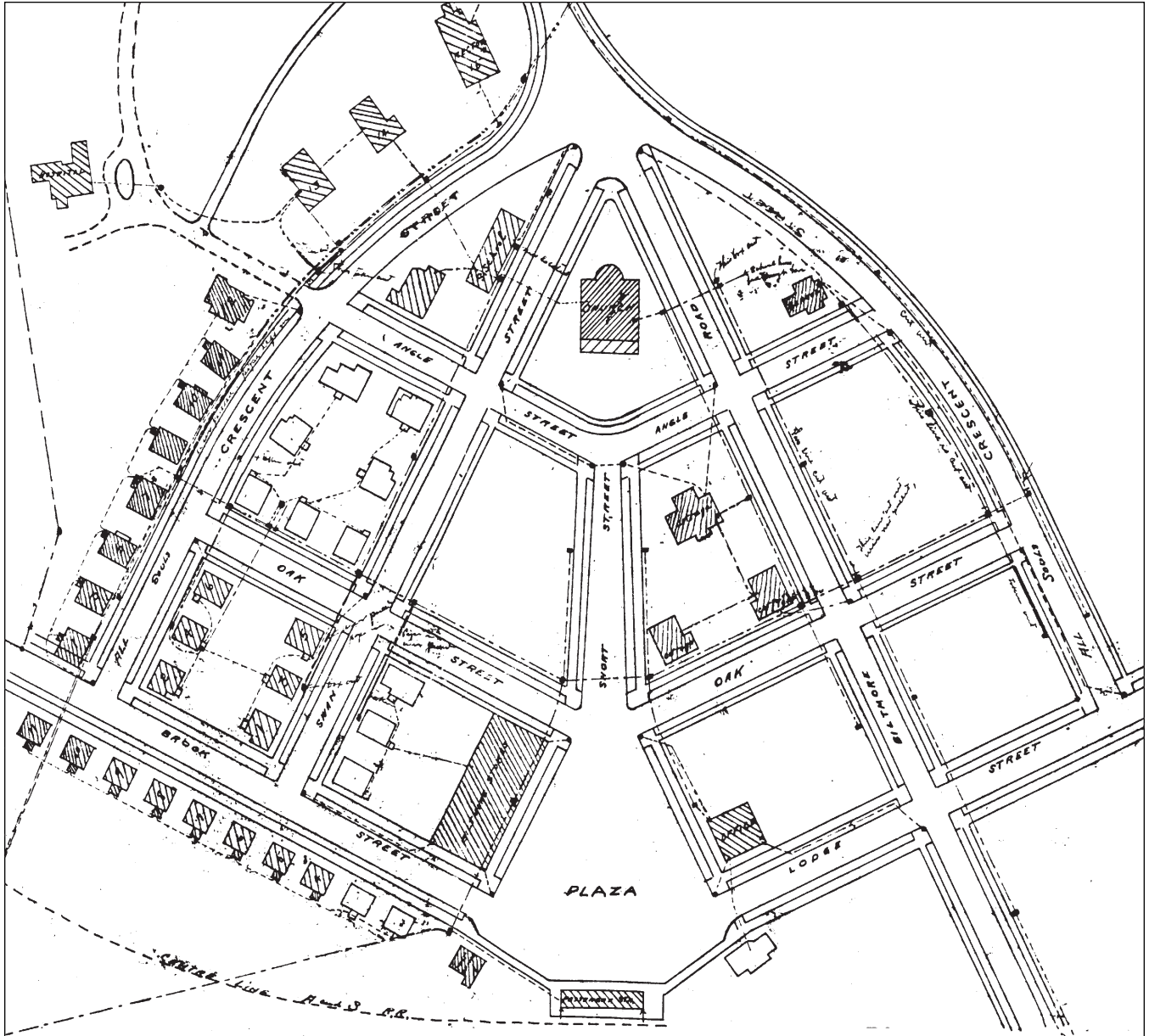
helped to define the historic character. This exercise also helps to identify neighborhood characteristics that may have since been lost. These may help surveyors better understand some of the features that do survive. For example, secondary structures may have been demolished, leaving rear yards that are in fact perceived as being larger, and more open, than they were historically. This may suggest that policies accommodating the construction of new secondary structures would be in keeping with the historic precedent.

The historic scale of a building and its density also may be considered when establishing policies for the future character of this area. For example, a district may now contain fewer structures than it did historically. Archival research would indicate that in such a case, increased building density would be in keeping with the historic character.

Define historic character from early photographs, insurance maps and written descriptions. Collect historic photos and descriptions of the district to define the original character of the area.



Historic photos and original drawings also help one understand the earlier character of a district. (Biltmore Village, NC)



This historic map of Biltmore Village, North Carolina, helped planners understand the earlier character of the district. The map, dated 1901, shows the "first stage" of build-out of the Village. (Map courtesy of the Biltmore Estate, Biltmore Village, NC)

Step 4 Compare present and historic characteristics

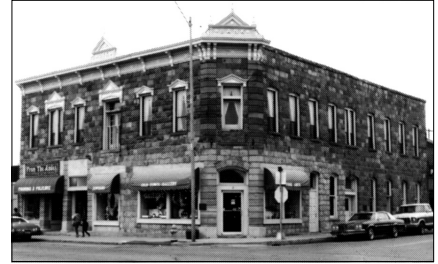
By comparing historic and present-day contexts, at this stage, you can begin to develop some broader preservation goals for the district and identify important characteristics that should be respected.

Comparing the degree of change between the historic character and the present-day character, will enable you to define the degree of “integrity” of the district. This may also influence policies for future development. For example, in an area where the neighborhood is virtually intact with respect to its historic character, policies may be quite strict about the character of new construction, stipulating that they very closely match the context. In other areas where greater change has occurred, more flexibility in design may be allowed.

Following this logic, compare the historic and present-day characteristics of the district and determine which areas remain virtually intact. Perhaps guidelines for new construction should emphasize the sensitivity of this setting, and guidelines for rehabilitation should focus on principles for maintaining historic structures as they exist.

Also identify those areas where change has been more substantial. Perhaps greater flexibility in new construction is appropriate in this area and guidelines for rehabilitation should focus on removing obtrusive alterations and restoring damaged features.

By and large, the greatest departure from the historic character in some neighborhoods may be the loss of buildings, with the result that tracts of undeveloped land are now seen that once were built up. The casual observer may not realize that these blank areas were once inhabited. In this sense, the present-day context only tells a portion of the history.



Compare historic photographs with scenes of the same setting today. This photograph of the Arizona Central Bank building in Flagstaff retains much of its historic character, but a tall window on the second floor is a curiosity, and the stone on the lower level is paler than that above. The historic photograph below provides the answers.



In this earlier scene of the building shown above, a balcony runs across the front of the building. The taller window was in fact a door. The balcony protected the stone below, and therefore it has not weathered as much as the stones on the second level.

Step 5 Forecast future character

Finally, projections into the future character of the district should be developed in order to predict development trends for the district. These forecasts should then be compared with the present and historic characteristic of the district, as a means of determining issues for the design guidelines.

These projections should include forecasts of what may happen under current trends and regulations as well as what may occur if policies are modified. By testing these scenarios against the goals produced earlier, new policies for development can then be crafted.

Current regulations and market conditions are used to illustrate the potential changes that may occur in the district under existing policies. For example, current market conditions and zoning regulations may encourage construction of new buildings that would be significantly larger than those seen historically. One may respond to this potential development by modifying the zoning regulation or by drafting guidelines that encourage buildings that are appropriately scaled.

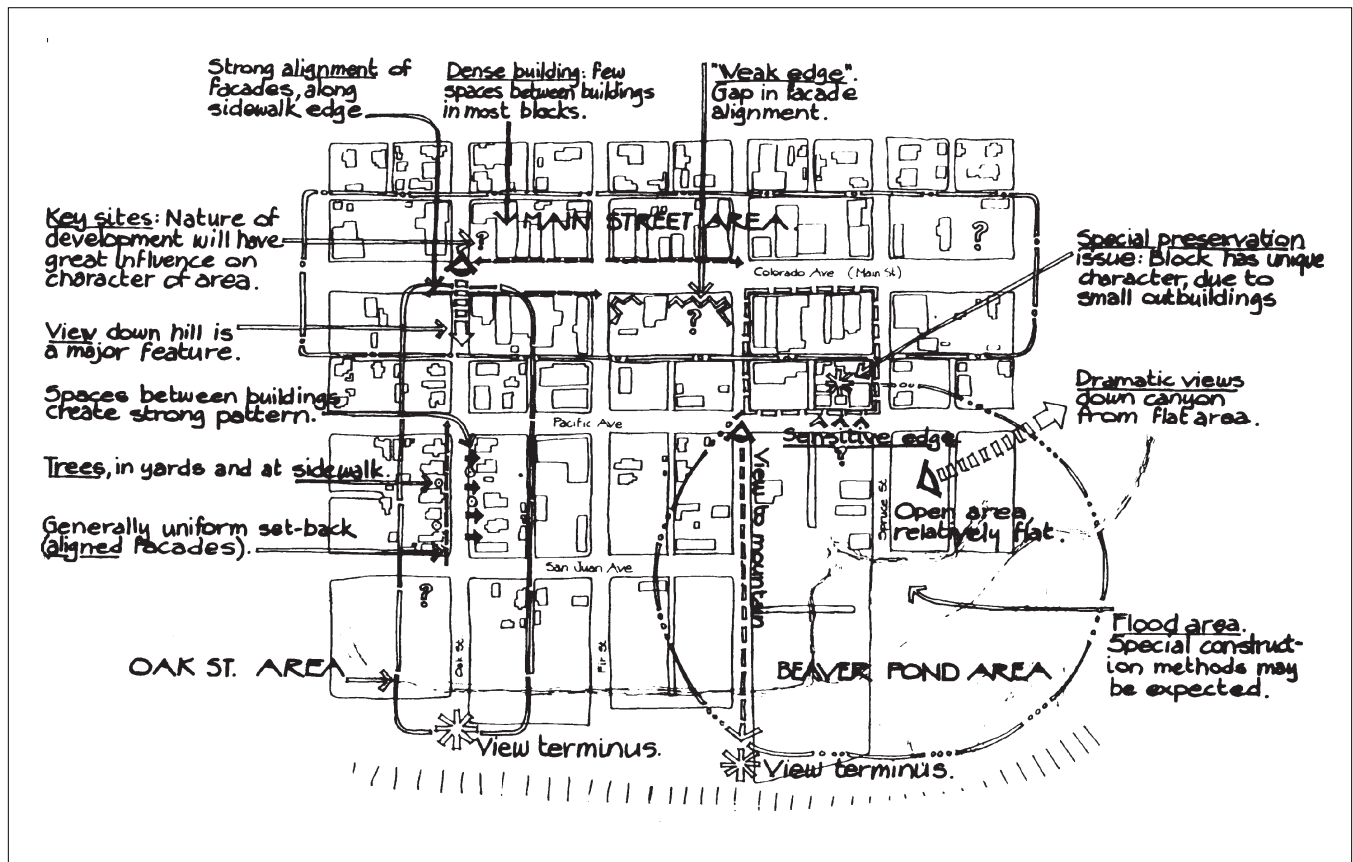
In another case, a trend toward dividing large, single-family houses into apartments may indicate the need for other zoning amendments, or for guidelines that will address rehabilitation issues associated

with such adaptive use. For each scenario that you develop, answer these questions:

- Will the integrity of the district be preserved if the subject scenario occurs?
- Will this scenario help the community meet its design goals for the district?

If the answers are "yes," this should indicate that the policies that would lead to the subject scenario are appropriate ones for preservation of the district, and that design guidelines should be written in conformance with this approach.

If the answers are "no," this indicates that the policies leading to the subject scenario are problematic. Regulations



This map shows interrelationships of visual characteristics that may not be visible from the street.

should be modified to better support preservation goals.

Note that many of these policies will be addressed in the design guidelines, but some may be handled with amendments to zoning codes or other regulations.

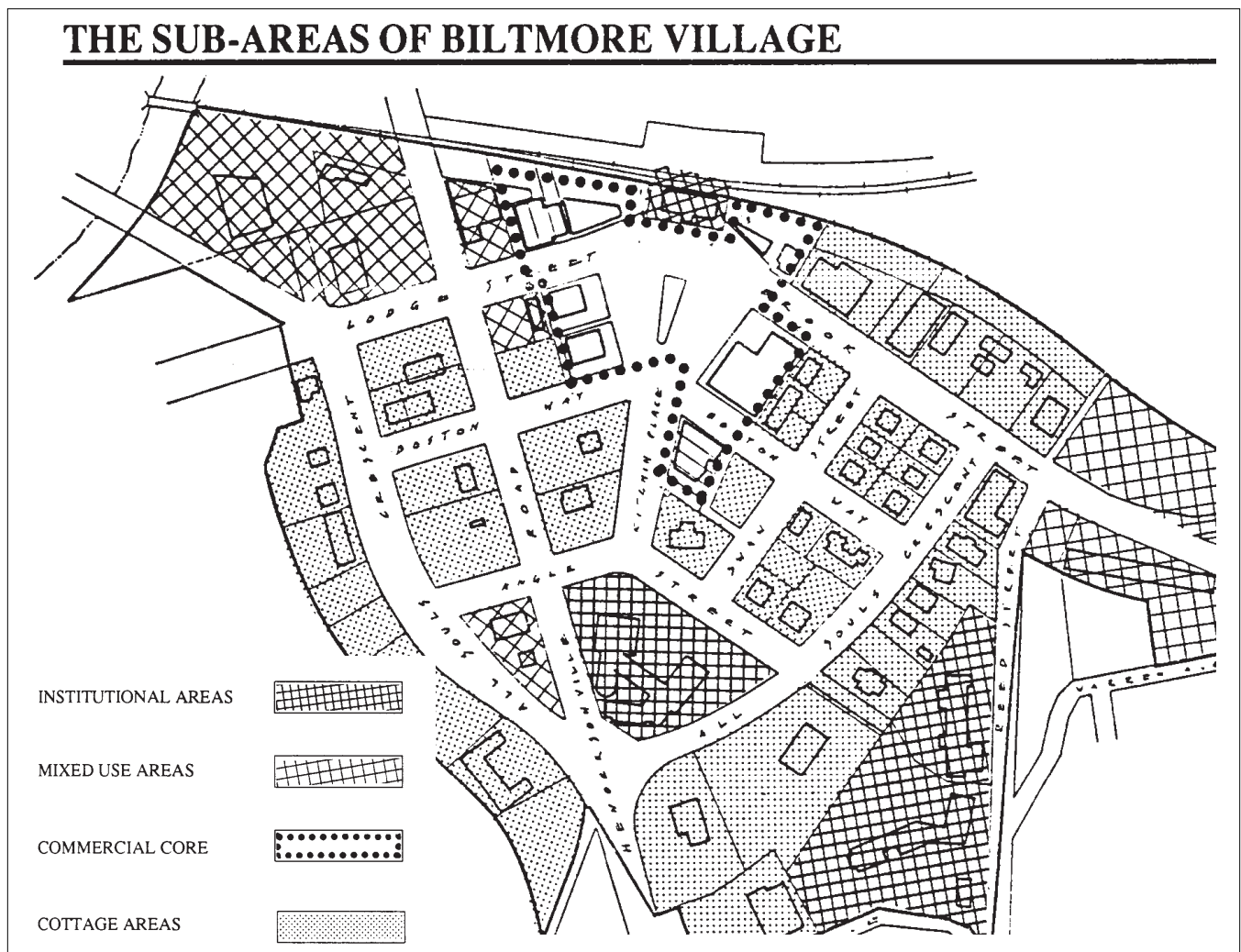
Forecasting potential future development also helps to identify topics on which the guidelines should focus. With this analysis, the character of the district, in all of its tenses, can

be described and the three conditions can be compared. This analysis also forms the basis for developing the goals of the district and will help you identify topics that will be addressed in the design guidelines.

When conducting this evaluation, also review existing zoning ordinances, building codes, and other design review regulations to determine how the guidelines would relate to these laws. These are especially important when the guidelines are

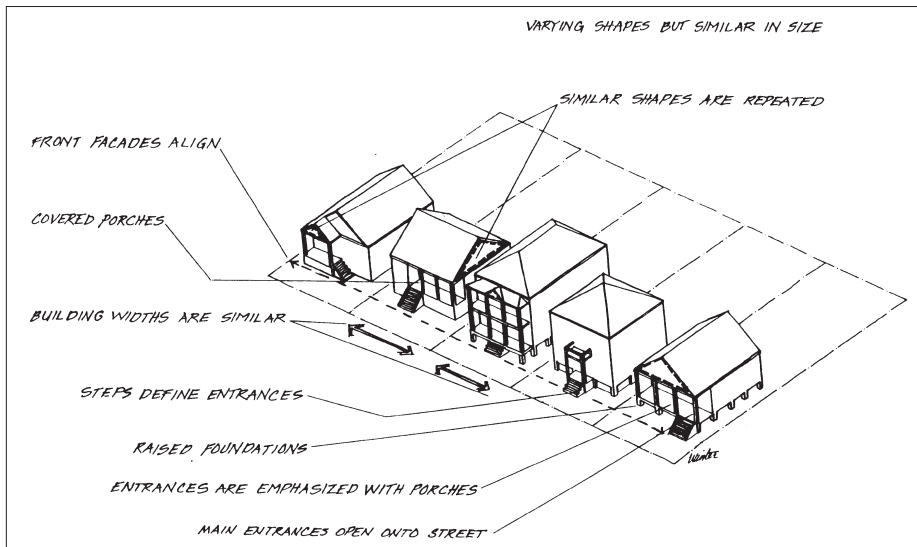
used for mandatory review. It may be that amendments to some of these other regulations will be needed to accomplish some of the design goals for the district. It is very important that potential conflicts be identified early in the process so they can be resolved, and coordination with city staff will be necessary.

THE SUB-AREAS OF BILTMORE VILLAGE



Some communities identify sub-areas within a district that have their own distinct features. This map illustrates the boundaries for areas within the Biltmore Village Historic District.

These illustrations from Galveston, Texas, demonstrate how a series of variables combine to form a district: First, the basic elements of buildings that face the street, each with a porch identifying the entry...



...then, site features are added, including fences and alley structures.

