

The Idea of a Character Town ***A Pleasant and Prosperous Place to Live.***

CHARACTER.

A person with a strong, positive character is one worthy of trust and respect, one who is honest and courageous. Generally, a person who behaves honorably and with integrity is a person you would like to know and hang with.

Translating this personal idea of character to a city or town is not too difficult. Words like authentic, honest, respectful and empathetic can apply to a person of character, or to a place, like a town.

CHARACTER TOWNS.

A “character town” is a small city or town with some unique, authentic and interesting charm or fascination; the character coming from a friendly and inviting physical setting with great neighborhoods and an active downtown business community; both of which support a sociable and civil society; a society that is proud of its home town, protective of its heritage and committed to its wellbeing. A character town is a pleasant and prosperous place to live.

PRESERVE, ENHANCE, CREATE.

The mission of city builders - planners, urban designers, urban developers, architects, economists and city officials, elected and appointed - is to understand how to preserve and enhance character where it exists and to re-create or create character where it is absent. The heart of the mission is to retain, improve and create places that evoke an emotional attachment between residents and visitors with the space they occupy.

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND PHYSICAL QUALITIES.

The fundamental quest is to find the determinants of civic pride. It may be that physical design, supported by socialization and economic activities, can be the driver that builds community spirit, civility, hometown pride and social quality.

On the other hand, a poorly built town with spirit can, against the odds, leverage their economic and physical assets to preserve and enhance their social well-being. Socialization can overcome physical blandness in existing towns, but properly designed infill and redevelopment investments can reduce the town’s blandness and improve its sociability.

Whatever the starting point, economic conditions must provide the populace with an acceptable standard of living. Poverty, bad housing and poor schools don’t last long in towns with real character.

These special places give us a sense of confidence in humanity and respect for our surroundings and our fellow travelers. Creativity breeds in places with a certain character whether it comes from the “creative class” or from us more humble daily grinders. Character towns provide the sustenance that encourages human achievement and satisfaction.

There are over 2,400 small cities and towns in America; opportunity awaits.

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“CHARACTER” HAS MANY ASPECTS.

Cities with character use all their social, economic and physical assets to produce and sustain a pleasant and prosperous place to live.

- *Character places have certain physical characteristics.* While every character place is unique, each character place has many of the same qualities, as noted above.
- *Character towns are the places we feel good about.* They are the places we visit, places where some of us live and places where we all wish we could spend more time. Character places are interesting, safe, comfortable, stable, dynamic, authentic, educational, walkable, beautiful and loved. They engender a feeling of self-satisfaction as we congratulate ourselves for finding such a nice place.
- *Character places generally have character people.* Friendliness, inclusiveness, ease and community civility are generally associated with people of character. Community interests usually reflect the individual interests of the residents and businesses. Bleak, ugly and marginal places usually reflect a lack of town leadership, political bickering or historical social conflicts yet to be overcome. Strong communities usually reflect strong leadership drawn from a broad group of people sustained over many years. This sounds like a rich – poor distinction, but many modest towns with sincere people offer a wonderful lifestyle based on traditional values of hard work, fairness, sharing and personal responsibility for the larger community.

- *Character places are growing in popularity.* More people are becoming residents of small cities and towns than ever before; there are over 50 million small town residents in over 2,400 towns with populations between 10,000 and 50,000 people. People of all ages want real places where they can know their neighbors, walk the streets, afford a home and raise their families.
- *Small Town Tourism is growing.* If people cannot live in such places, they want to visit them. Small town tourism is a growing phenomenon.
- *Towns known for their character are the result of much love and attention.* Character places don't just happen. Someone along the way did something special that we enjoy today.

EXAMPLES OF CHARACTER TOWNS.

Examples can serve as guides to determining local targets or role models. Find relevant examples, contact them and learn their lessons.

- Cities and towns known to have a special character that attract residents and visitors are: Charleston, Savannah, South Beach, Blowing Rock, Newburyport, Dahlonega and Fernandina Beach. Lesser known places are Elizajay, New Castle, Bluffton, St. Michaels and Winter Park.
- Large cities also have special places that evoke an emotional attachment. Special places like SoHo in New York, Back Bay in Boston and Georgetown in Washington.
- Find and learn from sister cities.

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Physical Attributes of a Character Town

Every small city and town is, or over time can become, a town with character; a town with a friendly and inviting physical setting and active businesses all of which support a sociable and civil society; a society that is proud of its home town, protective of its heritage and committed to its wellbeing. A character town is an interesting, pleasant and prosperous place to live with:

Great Neighborhoods including:

1. **A Diversity of Housing:** A wide variety of housing types, prices and styles,
2. **Ubiquitous Access and Pedestrian Connections:** An interconnected system of streets, sidewalks and trails primarily intended for walkability,
3. **Accessible Daily Need Uses:** Accessible shops, schools, parks and civic uses,
4. **Organization:** A neighborhood organization with identifiable boundaries that protect the neighborhood from obnoxious intrusions and facilitate participation with local government.

Vibrant Downtowns: The main thing is to keep “Main Street” the main street with:

1. **Buildings** of two to four stories with active and accessible ground floor retail, restaurants and other uses active beyond nine-to-five weekdays.
2. **Streets** that are inviting, not foreboding, with two travel lanes, wide [min. 10'] sidewalks, on-street and off-street parking with about 100' building face to building face across the street, bus stops, safe crosswalks, street trees, street lights and business friendly signs; plus local ownership of the street.
3. **Active storefront uses** such as restaurants, bars, ice cream and chocolate shops, farmers' markets with regional foods, convenience shopping, drugs, groceries, books, gifts, clothing and hardware.
4. **Personal and Business Services** such as laundries, dry cleaners, barber shops, car care shops, plus tech support and business services like banks, full service copy centers, and business incubators.
5. **Hotels** and other types of visitor accommodations to support “small town” tourism.
6. **Venues for community entertainment and personal gatherings** including theaters for live performances, local history museums, religious gatherings and weddings with **programmed activities** such as book fairs, parades, festivals, car shows, sporting events and celebrations.
7. **Visitor information centers**, physical and virtual, for residents and visitors with guides to local places and activities, notice of non-recurring events and tickets to local events.

Respected Historic and Natural Resources: Amenities that engender hometown pride through the preservation, display, use and celebration of historic places and buildings, parks, lakes or waterfronts.

Community Pride built on Authenticity using an iconic place or event, unique to the town, such as:

1. The West Orange Trail in Winter Garden, Ocoee and Apopka; Central Park in Winter Park;
2. Powell's Book Store in Portland or Haslam's in St. Petersburg; S. F. Travis Hardware in Cocoa Village; The Lakeside Inn in Mount Dora or The Gold Mine Museum in Dahlonega; the lakefront parks and promenades in Clermont, Eustis, Kissimmee, Sanford and Tavares;
3. The downtown colleges, theaters, art galleries, festivals and local history museums in DeLand, Eustis, Winter Garden, and Winter Park; Carriage rides in Fernandina Beach's historic neighborhoods; and
4. The Winter Park Art Festival, the Kissimmee ESPN Bass Tournament and the Sanford Airshow.

In sum, a “character town” has a unique quality and beauty that feels good to residents and visitors.

Source: wck | planning.com

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SOCIAL ATTRIBUTES OF CHARACTER TOWNS.

Character towns are where we aspire to live; they are the places we visit; they sustain our interest and curiosity; they provide for our physiological needs within a safe, well-served, creative environment. Such cities, towns and places, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, build our character, as we build theirs.

Character towns are friendly, welcoming, open and dedicated to community goals that rival personal goals.

PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES OF CHARACTER TOWNS.

The people in every setting have the same civic, social and economic needs, residents and visitors alike. The physical features that contribute to community character are:

- Housing of all types found in urban neighborhoods, including visitor accommodations,
- Traditional “main streets” with shops, restaurants, offices and civic buildings, with entertainment, recreation and cultural venues,
- Successful multi-use development corridors,
- A system of parks and trails with accessible wetlands, rivers and lakes,
- Good schools with well-kept grounds,
- Infrastructure designed for function and appearance, and
- Trees and beauty, history and culture.

ECONOMIC ATTRIBUTES OF CHARACTER TOWNS.

Prosperity plays an important role in character towns. Prosperity does not necessarily mean extreme wealth. In fact, there are many instances where extreme wealth results in an insular, cold and unfriendly setting with a certain character, a bad character.

Prosperity translates to good jobs at decent wages supported by a strong work ethic. A “blue collar” mentality even in a “white collar” world may be a defining trait of a character town. In any case, a certain level of prosperity is necessary to sustain a community. Social and physical infrastructure work together to support the town’s economic base.

CONCLUSIONS.

- Cities have the basic building blocks and the emotional position to provide the social, economic and physical needs of its residents.
- Human needs generally remain constant over time and provide value to residents. As Maslow described them, humans have needs that relate to physiological, safety, love/belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization. They can all find satisfaction in a character town.
- Effective city management and operation requires a robust system for engaging citizens in the planning and operation of their city, imposing fair regulations and being a good steward of the public’s finances.