Envisioning Better Communities:
Seeing More Options, Making Wiser Choices

by Randall Arendt, FRTPI

Planners Press, March 2010
(approximately 235 pages)
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This new Planners Press book from the APA is about *seeing familiar things in unfamiliar ways.* The wide array of pictorial examples helps readers to envision how their community could evolve in ways that would positively re-inforce its best aspects, and how local land-use regulations could stem the steady erosion of community character.
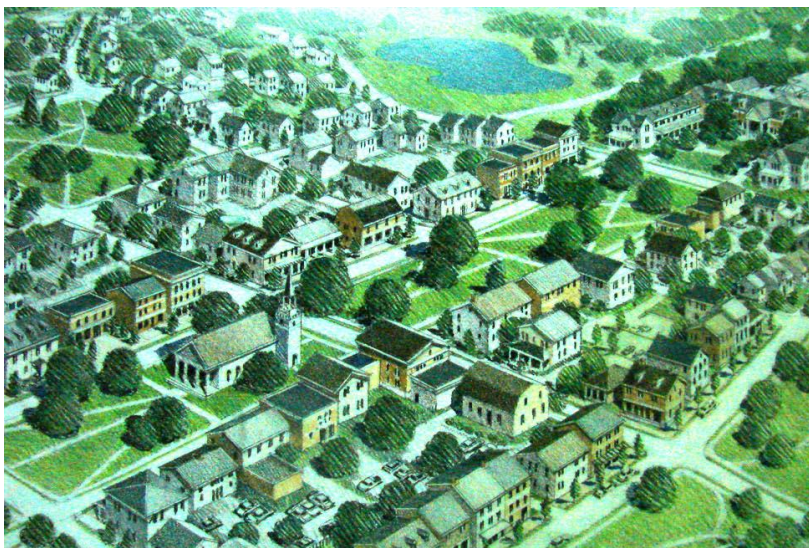
Nearly 600 color photographs and drawings illustrate positive and negative examples of residential, commercial, industrial, and mixed-use development. Presented in a reader-friendly writing style, it translates technical aspects into easily understandable language speaking to the concerns of volunteer members of local planning boards and commissions.

Envisioning Better Communities, Randall Arendt's sixth book, is intended as both a thought-provoking read and a handy reference for use at meetings with applicants, helping staff and officials suggest better ways for new development to be sited, designed, landscaped, and integrated into the community fabric.

It brings together a wide array of progressive ideas:
- **Conservation design (to protect land as permanent greenbelts and greenways)**
- **New Urbanism (to create walkable, mixed-use communities)**
- **Form-Based Zoning (locating different building types appropriately according to scale & massing)**
- **Low-Impact Development (to reduce the negative effects of new construction, particularly involving stormwater infiltration).**

These four approaches are treated together, unlike in other publications, as the author believes the best results often result from hybridizing related techniques, as exemplified in the Pine Hills community in Plymouth, Massachusetts, designed by Sasaki Associates (shown below), where two-thirds of the property has been preserved by building compact neighborhoods and mixed-use centers.

Examples illustrate practical, feasible solutions to common problems -- solutions that developers and local officials can work together to effect in their communities.

Part 1 speaks to the challenge of conserving inter-connected networks of permanently-protected open space, following easy-to-use techniques with proven track records, supplementing the more challenging approaches such as TDR's, PDRs, and Urban Growth Boundaries (which typically take considerably longer to implement, in most states).

Part 2 describes the technique that is the easiest and most achievable for towns and counties on the metro-edge: *Conservation Subdivision Design (which has enabled Hanover County VA to protect 5000 acres of land within the last decade, at no public cost, nor at any sacrifice to landowners or developers*).

Part 3 illustrates over twenty design techniques to improve neighborhood livability, based on historical examples and recent experience with New Urban design.

Part 4 details ways in which established town centers can be improved, based on the author's experience administering a downtown historic district in Lowell, Massachusetts.

Part 5 provides readers with a cornucopia of ways to prevent highways from becoming unattractive, dysfunctional commercial strips and to use the process of progressive redevelopment to gradually transform already-blighted areas into economically vibrant, mixed-use districts.

The appendices contain articles, model ordinances, links to recommended design guidelines, and a detailed list of suggested further reading.

Envisioning Better Communities provides readers with a ready-reference for addressing a wide spectrum of issues affecting how their communities look and function, whether their concerns involve protecting open space, providing attractive, livable neighborhoods, strengthening and rejuvenating downtown centers, and/or dealing with the decades-old legacy of unsightly and dysfunctional highway strips. The book treats this material from the viewpoint of local officials and interested community residents who often share similar goals but do not yet have the length or breadth of experience to know how to get there. It is an equally valuable resource for staff planners, helping them explain better approaches to applicants, commission members, and citizens. Readers learn about impressive results that have been achieved in a variety of other communities, broadening their understanding of what could be accomplished locally with imagination and improved land-use standards.

Target Audiences:

Volunteer members of local planning boards and commissions, and their professional staffs, in growing communities on both sides of the metro-edge, are the primary audiences for which this book was written.

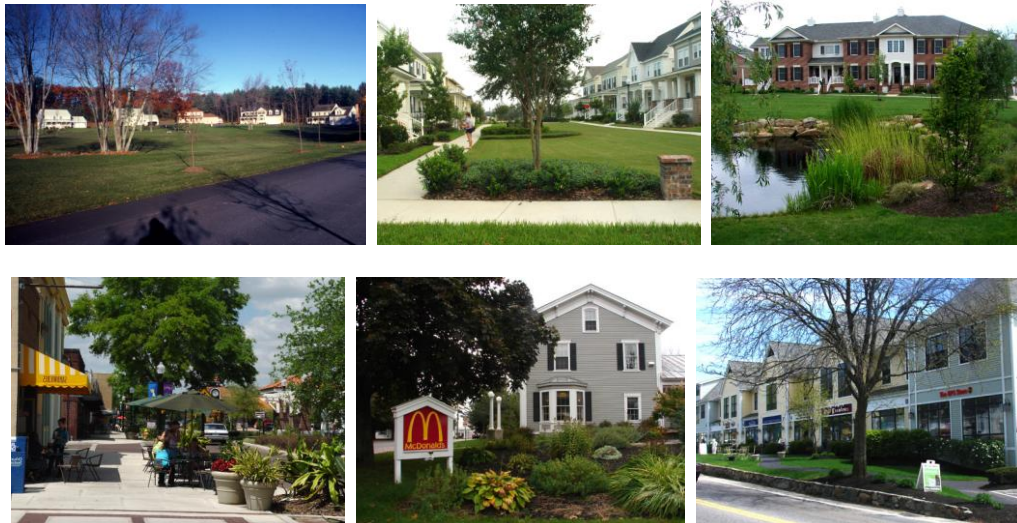Other target audiences include:

Developers of residential, commercial, industrial, and mixed-use projects.

Development and design communities, because there is a real dearth of practical, reader-friendly books focusing on the design aspects of land-use planning, and this volume addresses that gap.

Landscape architects interested in community planning, or in creating site designs for clients, will find a number of design approaches that they might either learn from, or use when discussing their designs with their clients and with local officials. They too will find the ready-reference aspect of the book to be very helpful.

Civil engineers could benefit greatly for similar reasons. The more progressive ones could cite the book in discussions with clients or officials. Others in the profession might learn new ways to expand their design capabilities – or come to appreciate the value of collaborating more closely with landscape architects and physical planners, *particularly at the conceptual design stage.*

- Interested citizens, realtors, bankers, members of local land trusts, and chambers of commerce

- University students at the college and graduate school levels. If APA state chapters are involved in promoting enrichment courses for secondary school students, this would be appropriate for those students, as well.

"Envisioning Better Communities reminds me of a technicolor version of Christopher Alexander's *Pattern Language,* and I believe is a reference equal to that work. Because the procedures, logic, and graphics are well constructed, this book will appeal to a wide audience by virtue of its easily understood principles and reasoning. This book has real value in its graphic examples and diverse location references. I can imagine many schools of planning and design flocking to have this text in their libraries and the faculty using this text in their studios."*

– Prof. Jon Rodiek, Texas A&M University, and Editor of *Landscape & Urban Planning*