URBAN IS BACK

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PLANNING AND DESIGN

Because the City of West Fargo is such a desirable place to live, it will always face development pressure. Strategies and policies focused on the built environment can help to conserve and enhance the aspects of the city that make it special to residents and visitors. Over the past four decades, planners and urban designers have been studying the most-loved cities and towns centers around the world to learn what makes them so vibrant, and livable. What they have discovered is a set of fundamental characteristics that most-loved places possess. These principles, including walkability, connectivity, density, scale, and mixed uses, are described here in more detail.

01 WALKABILITY

The term "walkability" has become a buzzword in recent years without much effort to provide definition. As a result, it is often misunderstood to mean a pedestrian-only place. In fact, the term describes an environment where there is balance between many modes of transportation. Most importantly, it describes an environment in which people feel comfortable walking. In West Fargo, climate often makes it challenging to travel on foot during winter months but walkability is nonetheless a goal to which the community should aspire.

The constituent elements of walkability are referred to as "The 3 D's": Distance, Destination, and Design. When each of these elements is addressed, people are more likely to walk.

DESTINATION

People tend to walk more if they have somewhere meaningful to go. Meaningful destinations include parks, schools, and commercial areas like downtowns where daily or weekly shopping needs can be met. Often these destinations, when centrally located, become the "heart" of the community. In West Fargo, the downtown could act as the center for both locals and visitors, with other areas such as the 32nd Avenue and Sheyenne Street intersection serving as additional destinations.

DISTANCE

The average pedestrian is willing to walk up to one-quarter of a mile (1320 feet) or roughly five minutes to a specific destination. This walk from a neighborhood to a meaningful destination at the center is called a "pedestrian shed". Most Americans, choose to take trips requiring more than a five-minute walk by car, rather than on foot.

DESIGN

An interesting streetscape, pedestrian safety and comfort are critical for a walkable environment. Narrow driving lanes, tree-lined streets, sidewalks and on-street parking all act as effective psychological cues, helping to slow automobiles and, in turn, enhance pedestrian comfort. The design elements of the building themselves also provide visual interest and diversity of experience along the way. In West Fargo, there is a varying degree of comfort level for walking, depending on the location. There is a lack of cohesive streetscape and proper pedestrian facilities in many areas that detracts from walkability in the city.

DESTINATION

DISTANCE

DESIGN

02 CONNECTIVITY

In typical communities, “connectivity” means that all streets should be connected to other streets, maximizing the number of routes to and from a destination. By avoiding dead ends and cul-de-sacs and creating an interconnected street network, drivers, cyclists, pedestrians, and emergency services can choose from a number of different options. Greater connectivity allows for traffic to disperse, minimizing congestion by providing multiple ways to get from point A to point B. West Fargo‘s development patterns in the last couple of decades have reduced the number of interconnected streets, increasing traffic on the few major roads in and out of neighborhoods.

03 MIXED-USE

Whenever possible, activity centers should include a mix of commercial (retail, restaurants and offices), residential, recreational, and civic uses. This mix should be well-balanced, incorporating both vertical and horizontal mixed-use within the block and the building. An ideal mix allows residents and visitors to meet all of their daily needs within a short walking distance. When this occurs, the number of automobile trips per household is substantially reduced. This mix of uses is optimized when commercial establishments have residential dwelling units above to help promote active streets. In West Fargo, the sprawling nature of the community and its suburban residential style of development have limited the mix of uses throughout the community. However, downtown West Fargo and other areas of the city offer tremendous opportunities for added integration of various uses.

04 SCALE

Scale refers to the size of buildings and their relationship to their occupants, to nearby pedestrians and to the buildings around them. The term “human-scale” refers to a size that feels comfortable to people. Both short and tall buildings can be human-scale, and having variation is important. The proportions of doors and windows, the height of each story, the relationship between details of the building and the way a building relates proportionally to the spaces people occupy around it. All these factors impact whether a building is at a scale that feels “right” to a person. It is important in the design of walkable places to create a sense of enclosure and human-scale by locating buildings closer to the street and minimizing the large expanses of pavement that can make a pedestrian feel exposed and out of place. The most important aspect of creating buildings that are scaled appropriately is the design of the first floor and how it relates to the sidewalk and pedestrian areas adjacent to it.

05 INTENSITY

Developing in a more compact pattern in strategic locations, where multi-story buildings are located closely together, can minimize air and water pollution, preserve open space, and enhance social interactions and a sense of community. There is widespread global acceptance that development intensity is an integral component of environmental stewardship and sustainability. Intensity plays a role in the creation of neighborhoods that offer convenience, value and a high quality of life. In addition, more compact development patterns are likely to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMTs) by enabling more people to walk or bike to work or to run errands. Density can also produce reductions in energy consumption and carbon dioxide emissions both directly and indirectly. In West Fargo, the downtown presents opportunities for added development intensity.

06 HIDDEN PARKING

Visible parking lots in front of, and beside buildings, has a detrimental effect on people’s willingness to walk. If a pedestrian has to walk past large gaps in the streetscape, especially when it is covered with asphalt parking lots, they lose the comforting sense of enclosure and visual interest, making the walking experience less desirable. This begins to make them less likely to walk this route in the future. To combat this, parking should be hidden behind buildings in the internal parts of a block or be wrapped with buildings to screen the parking and activate the street or civic spaces. The redevelopment of surface parking lots and some existing buildings presents opportunities to hide parking either under buildings or within parking structures that are lined with buildings. Garages should incorporate wayfinding and smart parking technologies to maximize their efficiency and ease of use, and should also accommodate space for bike lockers.

Adding transparent windows to buildings on the ground floor will provide an inviting atmosphere and will help entice people to visit businesses that might otherwise feel uninviting.

For more information on these Principles for Good Design, we recommend referencing The Smart Growth Manual by Andres Duany, Jeff Speck and Mike Lydon, 2009.