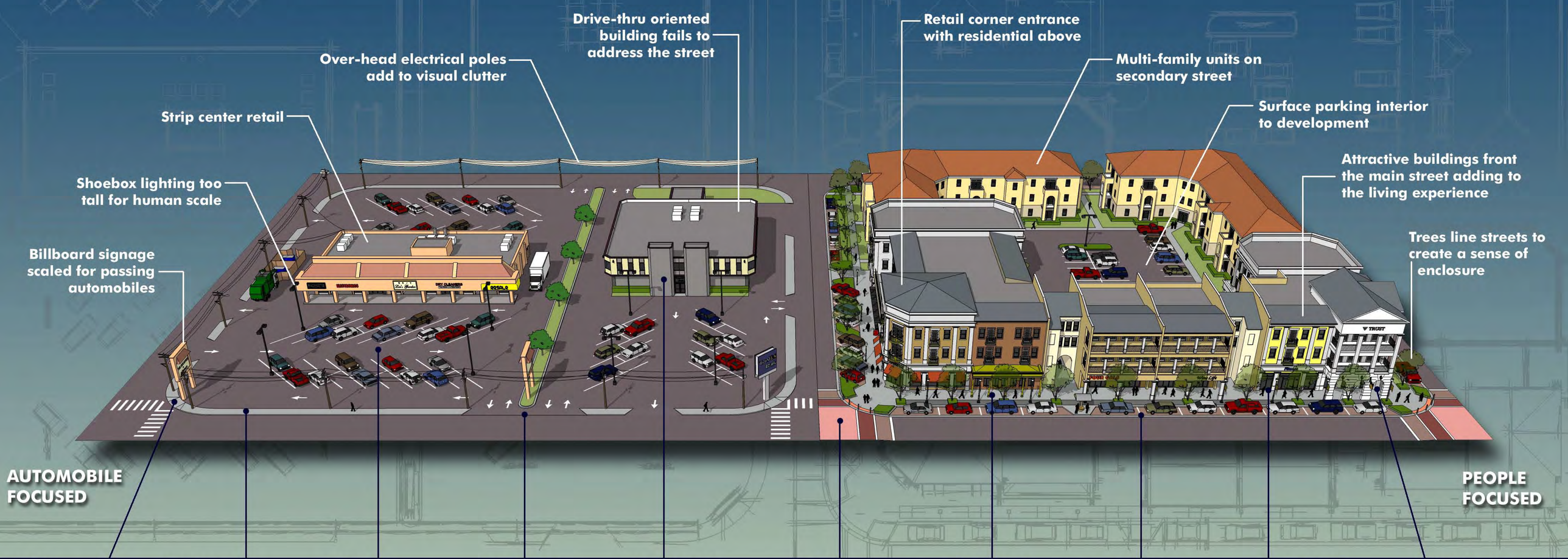
TOWN MAKER'S GUIDE:
Healthy Building Placement

Walkable and Livable Communities Institute



EDGES

Edges are essential for a comfortable walk. Edges define spaces and provide visual cues to guide appropriate behaviors. Open areas such as this create high levels of discomfort for both walkers and drivers. Without an edge, walkers feel they have entered the motorist's realm and motorists feel that pedestrians do not belong, so they do not respect them. Edgeless streets look sick and make people feel sad.

SIDEWALKS

Sidewalks must be a comfortable width (typically 6-10 feet for suburban commercial areas), be separated from the curb with a planter strip of 6-10 feet, be continuous and not open to numerous driveways. In general, the higher the roadway speed the wider the planter strip. This space lacks a sidewalk completely, but even the portion with a walk does not "invite" walking.

PARKING

Parking set to the front of a building devalues walking in many ways. It creates building-to-building swaths of asphalt as wide as 400 feet. Such inhospitable environments (too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter and lonely all the time) do not honor walking, bicycling, transit, or even auto arrivals. Off-street parking takes three times as much land as on-street parking.

BUILDINGS

Walkability requires easy and complete access to buildings. When buildings are set back, arrival by foot is plagued with problems. Individual properties often carve up the front of a block into independent parking lots and this fractionalizing of land creates ugly and unpleasant spaces to traverse. It devalues the overall experience and also the overall land value. Property owners rarely take care of these spaces, investing instead in large signs advertising to drivers.

CHARACTER

Suburban style strip malls and building types are often devoid of character and personality. They are large, faceless, lifeless, uninteresting, uninspiring spaces. Walkers tend to shun such "voids" and motorists tend to speed up when they come across them. These spaces can be anywhere - they have a universal ugliness. Health studies reveal that people in ugly places have elevated blood pressure. Road rage also increases.

EDGES

Quality edges provide a protective enclosure satisfying the human eye, heart and foot. Edges address our need for comfort, safety and security. Creating a sense of enclosure usually requires building to the interior edge of walkways, planting ground cover and trees, and including on-street parking to buffer the pedestrian from moving traffic. Edges are essential to an enjoyable walking experience.

SIDEWALKS

Sidewalks of sufficient width allow walking to be the most natural, fun, rewarding and healthy way to travel. They allow people to enjoy walking, a relaxed conversation with another, to linger or sit outdoors at a café, and they encourage people to stay and socialize. Although sidewalks can be made of a number of materials from concrete to pavers, the most pleasant walkways have a simple elegance—they are well constructed and maintained.

PARKING

The combination of on-street parking and urban buildings carefully screen or fully hide off-street parking. Off-street parking is placed in interior courts or in well landscaped gardens to the side or rear of the building. Thriving downtowns or pleasant villages rarely require off-street parking minimums. In many cases today, municipalities prescribe maximum number of spaces that are allowed, which makes better use of limited space.

BUILDINGS

Quality buildings not only create an address, they address the street. Well designed urban buildings have 70-90% glass at grade, giving natural surveillance to the street. A palette of colors, shapes, tones, textures, window styles add predictability, authority and dignity to a street. In order to improve mobility and accessibility, buildings need to have convenient breaks and pauses, certainly every 400 feet and sometimes less.

CHARACTER

Buildings can be simple in their designs, but they must help contribute to the character, personality, style, complexity, elegance, charm and experience of the street. In this way, they define where we are. We want to play in our environment, celebrate great artistry and cultural achievements, and create a place that is always fun to come back to, enjoy and protect. A great street is also great theatre.

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