# PERSPECTIVES

**Daniel Bollman, AIA** is the founder of 'east arbor architecture', a project-based firm which focuses on historic preservation, traditional detailing and critical regionalism. Daniel frequently speaks and writes about architecture and the built environment, including a regular weekly feature in the Lansing City Pulse. He lives with his family in East Lansing's Bailey Neighborhood.

## Authenticity in Design and Planning

### Daniel E. Bollman, AIA; east arbor architecture

Since the founding of Seaside, Florida in 1985, architects and developers have sought to create character-rich, mixed-use environments called Traditional Neighborhood Developments (TNDs). While efforts at building, these exacting developments have been successful, they are often dismissed by critics as being financially restricted. Proponents often respond that TND's capture the essence of neighborhoods as they were once built, but modern zoning prevents replication. TNDs are popular and exclusive because they are not like typical developments.

To create these authentic places requires an attention to detail and a knowledge of architecture and urban design at all scales. This article will touch on three levels of scale—building, neighborhood, and region—that may be easily achieved by developers, their design and construction professionals, and their clients.

#### Building detail
The images below illustrate two houses of similar size and mass. In the first, the entire building is carefully composed. All four elevations are considered. The appearance of the public's view of the windows is balanced with the views they offer from within. In the other example, the designer's focus was primarily placed on the front elevation. The side elevation lacks any order, with windows placed solely for their impact on the interior.



Even if located in a walkable, compact neighborhood, the details of individual homes can impact a building's authenticity. These drawings – taken from real examples – may initially seem comparable, but are quite different.

The buildings' overall forms also suggest a different approach to design. The authentic building rests on a simple rectangular footprint, which easily accommodates its elegant main roof form. The other example exhibits a complicated roof, resulting in part from the designer's choice to include additional detail (and corresponding additional cost).

Further, the roof is complicated by necessity, resulting from an irregular building footprint. Whereas the simple roof form follows a simply shaped floor plan, an overly busy roof frequently results when minimal effort is expended early in the design process. When individual rooms are assembled without regard to the overall plan and walls extrude from the resulting composition, the roof structure

**Key Points:**

• This elaborate style gains its opulent appearance through the varied wall treatments and decorative woodwork.
• Traditional design is about providing the details that were once second nature and useful—that could make for better places to live.

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will be correspondingly chaotic. From a historic point of view, even elaborate Queen Anne style homes are relatively simple in plan. This elaborate style gains its opulent appearance through the varied wall treatments and decorative woodwork.

Porches offer a sheltered window to the street, where occupants may watch the neighborhood activity and choose their level of engagement. But a functional porch requires sufficient depth to permit people to gather and linger. Too frequently – likely in an effort to offset the costs of an excessively busy roof – the porch is too shallow to be of any use. A chair or bench might fit, but there is little room for persons to sit. Similarly, when richer materials are used only at the front wall, this presents a phony images of "home." Apparently, the mere appearance of a brick house with a full porch is more important than actually living in such a place. This is not a home, it is a stage set.

### Neighborhood detail
In conventional suburban developments, the car is given priority over all other modes of transportation. In many subdivisions, sidewalks are not provided, since they are essentially unnecessary. While this might make sense on busy arterial roads, it is less convincing to suggest that neighborhoods composed primarily of residential buildings sited along relatively narrow streets should defer to automotive transport.

While these two streetscapes appear similar, there are significant differences that separate the authentic neighborhood from the affected.

The most obvious difference between the authentic and affected streetscapes shown above is the respective dominance of the double-wide garage door. Where the access to the garage in the established neighborhood is at the rear of the houses, either through an alley or a secondary road, the garage doors in the modern development are blatantly obvious. Since the auto-doors are placed in front of the main house, they become the primary focus from the street, while the entrance for people is relegated to a secondary, and often hidden location.

Although both photographs exhibit sidewalks, it is often the case that where walks are provided in a contemporary subdivision, there are very few places one would care to walk to. Modern conventional subdivisions are frequently isolated from mixed-uses or public amenities. Actual places, from parks and other public spaces, to corner grocers and local pubs, should ideally be located within walking

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distances of the heart of the neighborhood. When those uses are deliberately segregated due to aggressive zoning, each trip to the office park, to the shopping mall or to another subdivision adds to the congestion on the main arterial road.

### Regional detail
One beneficial consequence to rear access garages is a kinder public realm. As illustrated in the authentic photo above, there are no garages or drives at the street. The homes are set close together. Since cars cannot easily fit between the buildings, the sidewalks are not perforated with driveways, allowing pedestrians to reclaim the street. The resulting street wall formed by the collective fronts creates a tighter, better-defined urban space.

The formation of this pedestrian friendly environment encourages other forms of non-motorized transportation within the neighborhood. Paths for bikes, whether at the edges of the streets in well-marked lanes or set along paths in between municipalities, can develop as more neighbors and commuters adopt alternate methods of transport. Reaching beyond the boundaries of individual neighborhoods and municipalities, authentic developments does not need to be exclusively urban or suburban if reasonable access to public transportation is available.

Adopting the details and characteristics noted above should not be particularly difficult. While some of the details require additional finances to implement, some certainly cost less. Many of the details are cost neutral. Regardless of the expense, the details are not specifically intended to make buildings look nostalgically old—several Modern TND's have been undertaken.

Traditional design is about providing the details that were once second nature and useful—that could make for better places to live. However, to be truly authentic, they do require an attention to detail frequently lacking in standard speculative housing. Without the individual and larger details, an authentic environment will not result.