

WORKING DRAFT

Community Planning and Development A Frequently Misapplied National Register Area of Significance A National Register White Paper

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“Community Planning and Development” is one of the most frequently applied areas of significance in National Register nominations, but it is also one of the most frequently misapplied. In this paper, the appropriate applications of this area of significance will be explored in terms of National Register Criterion A and Criterion C. Note that this area of significance applies almost exclusively to historic districts, although in unusual cases a single building may have been significantly influential to a community’s development and under Criterion B individual buildings or sites may be relevant. Only historic districts will be addressed in this paper.

A number of State Historic Preservation Offices (or their consultants) attribute significance in the area of community planning and development almost routinely to commercial areas and residential neighborhoods considered historically significant. The nominated areas may have been among the earliest parts of the community to be developed, they may simply be “well established,” or they may be areas that waiver on one side or the other of the 50-year mark. Often the reason for applying this area of significance is not clear.

In applying Community Planning and Development, either the “planning” or “development” aspect may be emphasized. According to *A Planners Dictionary*, the American Planning Association considers planning as “furthering the welfare of people and their communities by creating convenient, equitable, healthful, efficient, and attractive environments for present and future generations.”¹ Other definitions in the *Dictionary* emphasize the process of planning.

A Planners Dictionary includes a number of definitions for “development” taken from various municipal sources. The definition adopted by the California Planning Roundtable is useful for National Register purposes. It reads, in part, “the physical extension and /or construction of urban land uses. Development activities include: subdivision of land; construction or alteration of structures, roads, utilities, and other facilities.”² Beaverton, Oregon, uses this definition: “The act of bringing about growth; to construct or alter a structure, to make a change in use or appearance of land, to divide land into parcels, or to create or terminate rights of access.”³ Then, there’s the definition of development from Glen Ellyn, Illinois, which provides the most latitude: “Any man-made change to improved or unimproved real estate, including but not limited to construction of or substantial improvements to buildings or other structures, the placement of mobile homes, mining, dredging, filling, grading, paving, excavation, or drilling operations.”⁴

¹ Michael Davidson and Fay Dolnick, *A Planners Dictionary* (Chicago: American Planning Association, 2004), 111.

² *Ibid.*, 142.

³ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

Planning is presented as a deliberate activity, intended to control and organize municipal growth according to certain defined standards. Development, on the other hand, results in changes to the landscape, but these changes may or may not be part of a broader, more deliberate effort to control city-building.

Often, if planning significance is emphasized in a National Register nomination, in a juxtaposition of Descartes famous words, “I think, therefore I am,” the spirit of the justification may be “it exists, therefore, it was planned.” This, of course, may only be true in certain parts of the municipality. If the process of planning does not directly apply to the nominated area, this area of significance does not pertain.

If the “development” aspect of this area of significance is emphasized in a nomination, it may simply convey that because roads and buildings appeared, the area “developed.” Sometimes the fact that a “developer” was involved inspires the inclusion of this area of significance in a nomination. The developer may have purchased the land, platted a subdivision, sold lots, and designed and built houses. In short, he developed it.

The National Register bulletins provide some guidance on the use of this area of significance. In *How to Complete the National Register Registration Form*, Community Planning and Development is defined as an area of significance that pertains to “the design or development of the physical structure of communities” (p. 40). The bulletin *Historic Residential Suburbs* addresses the use of this area of significance as it relates to the design significance of nominated properties under Criterion C. The Suburbs bulletin states, “Community planning and development applies to areas reflecting important patterns of physical development, land division, or land use” (p. 99). It does not address the use of this area of significance under Criterion A, but it clarifies:

Where subdivision design resulted from the collaboration of real estate developers, architects, and landscape architects, significance in all three areas—community planning and development, architecture, and landscape architecture—should be recognized and the contributions of designers representing each profession documented. Historic suburbs may be eligible under Criterion C for their reflection of important design characteristics or as the work of a master; those that made important contributions to the theory of landscape design or community planning may also be significant under Criterion A (p. 99).

The bulletin *How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes* considers “city planning or civic design” and “subdivisions and planned communities/resorts” to be terms that describe certain types of designed historic landscapes. In this case, the community planning and development area of significance is more like to be applied under Criterion C, although Criterion A certainly could pertain.

Thus, the following problems are evident in the application of this area of significance:

1. Does it apply?
2. Does it apply to Criterion A or Criterion C?

The next problem concerns the *significance* of a district in terms of community planning and development. Often, the significance is not adequately justified in Section 8 of the nomination—neither in the introduction, the background history, nor the context statement. This, of course, violates a basic premise of the nomination instructions, as stated in the *How To* bulletin, “Enter only areas that are supported by the narrative statement” (p. 38).

Statements of significance tend to be particularly lacking if Criterion A has been applied because the district is considered historically significance in terms of the city’s planning and development. In some cases the historical significance in terms of this area of significance is not entirely avoided, but is weakly stated, perhaps in terms of the chronological history of the development of the town or neighborhood. Assumptions of significance may be implied, without explicit rationales or comparative information. For example, if there was a building boom in 1890 and the commercial district sprung up that year—it must be significant. An explanation of the significance of this building boom from economic, transportation, demographic, architectural, and community growth perspectives may be neglected, and a comparison with other commercial areas may be completely overlooked. **Insert University Heights, Madison, example.**

When the design or planning aspects of the district are considered significant under Criterion C, nominations may be more successful at justifying significance. It may be demonstrated in Section 8 that the district is a significant example of the work of the firm or designer responsible for the plan. Or, it may be demonstrated that the plan incorporates distinctive or innovative design strategies. In both cases, comparative examples are presented. Criterion C cannot be successfully applied without this type of information. **Insert Ladue, St. Louis, example.**

Either of the above examples (note: University Heights and Ladue) are appropriate applications of community planning and development as an area of significance. Also, in both examples, the districts’ significance can be justified for this area of significance under both Criterion A and Criterion C. For a district that is a strong candidate in terms of its place in the planning and development history of a town, this is not unusual. However, there are examples of districts that have been nominated only for Criterion A or C under community planning and development. . . .
. need to get examples

Add:

Other misapplications of this area
More examples