

Ahwahnee Principles

Preamble:

Existing patterns of urban and suburban development seriously impair our quality of life. The symptoms are: more congestion and air pollution resulting from our increased dependence on automobiles, the loss of precious open space, the need for costly improvements to roads and public services, the inequitable distribution of economic resources, and the loss of a sense of community. By drawing upon the best from the past and the present, we can plan communities that will more successfully serve the needs of those who live and work within them. Such planning should adhere to certain fundamental principles.

Community Principles:

1. All planning should be in the form of complete and integrated communities containing housing, shops, work places, schools, parks and civic facilities essential to the daily life of the residents.
2. Community size should be designed so that housing, jobs, daily needs and other activities are within easy walking distance of each other.
3. As many activities as possible should be located within easy walking distance of transit stops.
4. A community should contain a diversity of housing types to enable citizens from a wide range of economic levels and age groups to live within its boundaries.
5. Businesses within the community should provide a range of job types for the community's residents.
6. The location and character of the community should be consistent with a larger transit network.
7. The community should have a center focus that combines commercial, civic, cultural and recreational uses.
8. The community should contain an ample supply of specialized open space in the form of squares, greens and parks whose frequent use is encouraged through placement and design.
9. Public spaces should be designed to encourage the attention and presence of people at all hours of the day and night.
10. Each community or cluster of communities should have a well-defined edge, such as agricultural greenbelts or wildlife corridors, permanently protected from development.
11. Streets, pedestrian paths and bike paths should contribute to a system of fully-connected and interesting routes to all destinations. Their design should encourage pedestrian and bicycle use by being small and spatially defined by buildings, trees and lighting; and by discouraging high speed traffic.
12. Wherever possible, the natural terrain, drainage and vegetation of the community should be preserved with superior examples contained within parks or greenbelts.
13. The community design should help conserve resources and minimize waste.
14. Communities should provide for the efficient use of water through the use of natural drainage, drought tolerant landscaping and recycling.
15. The street orientation, the placement of buildings and the use of shading should contribute to the energy efficiency of the community.

Regional Principles:

1. The regional land-use planning structure should be integrated within a larger transportation network built around transit rather than freeways.
2. Regions should be bounded by and provide a continuous system of greenbelt/wildlife corridors to be determined by natural conditions.
3. Regional institutions and services (government, stadiums, museums, etc.) should be located in the urban core.
4. Materials and methods of construction should be specific to the region, exhibiting a continuity of history and culture and compatibility with the climate to encourage the development of local character and community identity.

Implementation Principles:

The Ahwahnee Principles

Toward More Livable Communities By Judith Corbett, Executive Director-Local Government Commission and Joe Velasquez, Councilmember-City of Cathedral City

Cities everywhere are facing similar problems - increasing traffic congestion and worsening air pollution, the continuing loss of open space, the need for costly improvements to road and public services, the inequitable distribution of economic resources, and the loss of a sense of community. The problems seem overwhelming and we suffer from their consequences every day. City character is blurred until every place becomes like every other place and all adding up to No Place.

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1. The general plan should be updated to incorporate the above principles.
2. Rather than allowing developer-initiated, piecemeal development, local governments should take charge of the planning process. General plans should designate where new growth, infill or redevelopment will be allowed to occur.
3. Prior to any development, a specific plan should be prepared based on these planning principles.
4. Plans should be developed through an open process and participants in the process should be provided visual models of all planning proposals.

If you would like more background information on the Ahwahnee Principles (including where the name came from), please read the [article reprinted from Western Cities Magazine](#).

Many of our social, economic and environmental problems can be traced to land use practices adopted since World War II. In the late 1940's we began to adopt a notion that life would be better and we would all have more freedom if we planned and built our communities around the automobile. Gradually, rather than increasing our freedom, auto-oriented land use planning has reduced our options. Now, it takes much more time than it used to carry out our daily activities. We must go everywhere by car - there is no other option. We must take a car to the store for a gallon of milk, drive the children to Little League practice, even spend part of the lunch hour driving to a place to eat. And as roads become increasingly clogged and services further from our home, we spend our time as anonymous individuals waiting for the traffic light to change rather than chatting with friends at the corner store or playing ball on the lawn with the neighborhood kids.



Pedestrian-oriented street
in Santa Monica
ROMA Design Group

Rather than designing towns so that we could walk to work or to the store, we have separated uses into homogeneous, single-use enclaves, spreading out these uses on ever-increasing acres of land. Housing of similar types for similar income levels were grouped together. Retail stores were clustered into huge structures called malls, surrounded by endless acres of parking slots. Businesses imitated the mall - creating "business parks", usually without a park in sight, and with people working in clusters of similar buildings and parking spaces. At the same time, public squares, the corner store, main street, and all the places where people could meet and a sense of community could happen were replaced by the abyss of asphalt.

Even people are segregated by age and income level. And those who cannot drive or who cannot afford a car face an enormous disadvantage. In the words of Pasadena's Mayor Rick Cole, "there's a loss of place, a loss of hope, and it's killing our souls."

The effects of single-use, sprawling development patterns are becoming increasingly clear. And, with that has evolved a realization that there is a better way. Towns of the type built earlier in this century - those compact, walkable communities where you could walk to the store and kids could walk to school, where there was a variety of housing types from housing over stores to single-family units with front porches facing tree-lined, narrow streets - these towns provided a life style that now seems far preferable to today's neighborhoods. Thus we have seen an increasing interest in a number of concepts that would bring us back to a more traditional style of development and a style of planning that would be more in tune with nature including "neotraditional planning", "sustainable development", "transit-oriented design", the "new urbanism", and the concept of "livable" communities.

In 1991, at the instigation of Local Government Commission staff-member Peter Katz, author of the New Urbanism, the commission brought together a group of architects who have been leaders in developing new notions of land use planning: Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Stefanos Polyzoides and Elizabeth Moule, Peter Calthorpe, and Michael Corbett. These innovators were asked to come to agreement about what it is that the new planning ideas - from neotraditional planning to sustainable design - have in common and from there, to develop a set of community principles. They were then asked how each community should relate to the region, and to develop a set of regional principles. Finally, they were charged with defining how these ideas might be implemented by cities and counties. The architects' ideas were drafted by attorney Steve Weissman into a form which would be useful to local elected officials and provide a vision for an alternative to urban sprawl. A preamble, topics of specific ideas, community principles, regional principles and implementation of the principles was presented in the fall of 1991 to about 100 local elected officials at a conference at the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite. There they received both a highly enthusiastic response and their title- the Ahwahnee Principles.

Community Principles

The community principles define a community where housing and all the things needed to meet the daily needs of residents are located within walking distance of one another. They call for returning to historic population densities around transit stops to provide the critical mass of people and activities in these areas needed to make transit economically viable. They call for housing which provides places to live for a variety of people within a single neighborhood instead of separating people by income level, age or family situation.

The Ahwahnee Principles state that development should be compact but with open space provided in the form of squares or parks. Urban designer Michael Freedman describes this as space-making rather than space-occupying development. Rather than surrounding buildings in the center of unusable landscaped areas (space-occupying development), Freedman says we should use buildings to frame public space (place-making design).

Freedman holds that to plan for more livable communities, local government officials must understand the human scale - that is, the basic relationship of people to the environment in which they live. In neighborhoods, for example, we must recognize the relationship of the house to the front door to the street. In doing so, we will create the sorts of places which bring people together and create a vitality, a sense of community. By framing open space with buildings which open onto it, there are more eyes to look upon the area and that creates places that feel more safe. And with that design solution comes more compact development - development which has less costly infrastructure requirements, and development which is more walkable and more easily served by transit.

Further, the principles call for an end to the monotony of contiguous, look-alike building by separating each community with a well defined edge, such as an agricultural greenbelt or wildlife corridor, so that we can actually see where one community ends and another begins. From a transportation standpoint, one of the most important principles is that all parts of the community should be connected by streets or paths - no more dead end cul de sacs, fences, or walls which prevent us from going directly from one point to another. Narrow streets, rather than wide streets, are recommended because they help slow traffic and make it safer for pedestrians and bicycles. Narrow streets also create more attractive, more people-friendly neighborhoods and shopping districts.

Finally, the community principles call for more resource-efficient land use planning - the preservation of the natural terrain, drainage and vegetation; and the use of natural drainage systems and drought tolerant landscaping and recycling. They ask that buildings be oriented properly, (as required by the California solar rights act) so that they can take advantage of the sun for heating and natural breezes for cooling.

Regional Principles

The regional principles call for the land-use planning structure to be integrated within a larger network built around transit rather than freeways, with regional institutions and services located in the urban core. A perfect example of this can be found in the City of San Jose where city planners chose to locate a new sports stadium in the downtown area, close to several rail stops rather than off a freeway. The surrounding restaurants and shops are benefiting from the increased number of passers-by before and after games, and freeway travel is not as clogged as it otherwise would have been.

The architects noted that regions should be distinct from one another rather than fading into one another as they largely do today. Each region should be surrounded by a wildlife corridor or greenbelt and the materials and methods of construction should be specific to the region. Santa Barbara and Santa Fe come forward as two excellent examples of communities who have followed these principles and who have realized that there are economic as well as aesthetic advantages of doing so. Both of these cities have implemented strict design guidelines for their downtowns which preserve the historical architectural styles of their regions. Because these cities have retained a very special and distinct sense of place, they have become highly popular both as places to live and as tourist destinations.



Santa Barbara.
*American Institute of Architects,
California Council*

Implementation Principles

The implementation strategy forwarded by the planners is fairly straightforward and simple. First, the general plan should be updated to incorporate the Ahwahnee Principles. Next, local governments should take charge of the planning process rather than simply continuing to react to piecemeal proposals.

Prior to any development, a specific plan or a precise plan should be prepared based on the planning principles. With the adoption of specific plans, complying projects can then proceed with minimal delay. The developer will know exactly what the community wants. There should be no more costly, time-consuming, guessing games.

Finally, the architects put forth the most critical principle of all, "Plans should be developed through an open process and participants in the process should be provided visual models of all planning proposals." Without involving citizens from every sector of the community, including developers, the political viability of a new plan may be limited. Citizens must be getting what they want and care enough to be vigilant about it so that the plan cannot be changed by a single property owner with a self interest.

But the stability of planning policies is not the only advantage of citizen participation. Bringing together citizens to create a common vision for the community has more benefits than just the creation of a good plan that will be upheld through time. The process itself can create a sense of community and an understanding between previously warring factions.

However, it is difficult for citizens to visualize what a new planning scheme is going to look like after it is built if they see only a one-dimensional sketch or read about the plan in a six-inch thick planning document. There are a number of techniques which have been developed to address this problem. The visual preference survey, where participants are provided an opportunity to express their likes and dislikes through judging slides, allows citizens to actually see concrete examples of their options. Another useful technique is computer simulation where the visual results of a physical plan can be created on the computer. Another method involves taking participants on a walk through their own town to determine which portions of the community look **Implementing the Ahwahnee Principles**

The concepts embodied in the Ahwahnee Principles are being implemented by cities and counties throughout the nation, with most of the activity occurring on the east and west coasts. In Pasadena, the participation of 3,000 residents from all sectors of the community resulted in a general plan with a guiding principle which states, "Pasadena will be a city where people can circulate without cars." The plan lays out where growth should occur - primarily along light rail stations and in neighborhood commercial areas within walking distance of residences. The city is now preparing specific plans to guide what that growth should

look like. One of the projects, a mixed-use housing development near a downtown rail stop, is already complete.

In San Jose, the City has produced, under the guidance of citizen advisory groups, a total of four specific plans for infill sites in various parts of the City covering a total of almost 1,000 acres. Their goal is to assure that new development will occur as compact, mixed use neighborhoods located near transit stops. The City of San Diego has adopted "Transit-Oriented Development Design Guidelines" for the purpose of redirecting existing patterns of building within the City and helping reduce the community's dependence on the automobile. The planning staff has completed the first public review draft of a comprehensive zoning code update that will create zoning designations to implement the guidelines.



Horton Plaza –
Where the mall was sited downtown.
City of San Diego

In Sacramento, Walnut Creek, Santa Barbara and San Diego, city officials have broken new ground by siting new shopping malls downtown, near transit, rather than off a freeway. The benefits include both a new surge of economic activity for downtown businesses and a reduction in auto use and the associated negative air quality impacts. The California Air Resources Board has noted that over 60% of the people arriving at San Diego's downtown mall, Horton Plaza, arrive via transit or walking.

Developer-proposed, large-scale, new development is also reflecting the influence of the Ahwahnee Principles. The one-thousand acre, Playa Vista infill project in Los Angeles will include the preservation of 300 acres of wetlands. As it is designed now, the development will feature moderately-dense housing built small neighborhood parks. Large offices, small retail stores, restaurants, grocery stores and small telecommuting offices will be integrated, allowing residents to walk when they go to work, shop, or go out to dinner. A bicycle and pedestrian esplanade will link the town with the beach. Rialto's Mayor John Longville is working with the developer of a 3,000 acre development near the Ontario airport to incorporate the concepts of the Ahwahnee Principles in that project.

With the assistance of urban designer Michael Freedman, the City of Cathedral City is no longer focusing solely on density and the control of uses as a means of guiding their future growth. At a joint meeting of the city council, planning commission, and architectural review committee, Freedman presented the Ahwahnee Principles and the key role of local government in future planning and general plan development. Cathedral City adopted the Ahwahnee Principles by resolution and has started to incorporate them into their general plan. With only 50% of the city built out and development plans on the table, the city council acknowledged the importance of having planning guidelines. An innovative city in the desert region, Cathedral City understands that the best way to deliver good planning principles is to work both with the community and the building industry to develop a comprehensive strategy of planning more livable neighborhoods

Even the US government has embraced the Ahwahnee Principles. Architect Peter Calthorpe reports that the planning concepts outlined by the Ahwahnee Principles have been written into a guidance document recently published the federal government. Calthorpe was a coauthor of the document, Vision/Reality produced by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development for local government officials interested in applying for Community Development Block Grant program and other funds.

A number of city planners believe that if they can just solve the problem of traffic, they can solve the major problems of their cities. Yet the simple needs of the automobile are far more easily understood and accommodated than the complex needs of people. The Ahwahnee Principles outline a set of ideas for planning more livable communities built for people, not just cars, and provide a vision for an alternative to urban sprawl. This new vision will lead to neighborhoods where people no longer live in a house with an isolated rear yard. They will live in a home with a comfortable relationship to the street which is part of a neighborhood. Tree-lined sidewalks with narrow streets will induce cars to drive more slowly. Children will be more safe when they play in the neighborhood and the sense of community will add a feeling of security. When they need to go to school, to the store, or to baseball practice, children will be able to walk or ride a bike rather than being dependent on someone driving them there.

The top down, traditional planning of yesterday is no longer an acceptable means of making cities. The people served must be involved. When people come together and openly discuss their visions for the future, a sense of community will result. Bringing citizens into the process of developing and revising the general

plan will also result in new development which both serves the needs of the community and is used and respected by the residents it serves. To make better, more livable cities, local governments must take charge of the process of planning while involving and utilizing its best asset, the people who work, live and play in our communities.

About the Architects

The architects who gathered in 1991 to develop the Ahwahnee Principles are all internationally known for their inspirational work and innovative ideas. Peter Calthorpe, is one of the leaders of the "New Urbanism" movement and was cited by Newsweek Magazine as "one of 25 innovators on the cutting edge." Michael Corbett, a former Mayor of the City of Davis, has received international recognition for his design of the resource-efficient Village Homes development in Davis, a project often cited as the best existing example of sustainable development in the world. The husband-wife team of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, made headlines with their wildly successful Seaside development in Florida and have become highly acclaimed architects and planners of neotraditional communities. Stefanos Polyzoides is an associate professor of architecture at the University of Southern California. He and his partner, Elizabeth Moule, are the architects of Playa Vista in Los Angeles, a model application of the Ahwahnee Principles. good and function well and which do not.



Seaside, Florida.
DPZ Architects

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