

CodeNEXT Critique

Code Talks: Compatibility

At several levels the seminar on compatibility was frustrating. I don't think that the concept of compatibility was really developed very well in the presentations. The focus on physical characteristics is misleading. The physical characteristics are manifestations of some underlying neighborhood qualities. I think you have to go deeper than just appearance. The attempt to define the character of a neighborhood is a step in the right directions, but you should be determining why the examples being discussed are important or not important to the neighborhood.

The discussion of the Mueller project was a distraction. That's essentially starting with a blank slate and designing a community from the ground up. Most people in the audience were from established neighborhoods and fighting to maintain the quality of life, or in some cases restoring a disappearing quality of life. Also, Mueller is an experiment in community development. We won't know whether true communities develop around the physical manifestations employed in the design for at least twenty years.

A community is formed whenever the neighborhood shares some set of values. It's a vital community if it contains diversity of knowledge. With shared values, communication is open and the members learn from each other's diversity. New members join the community if they share some of the community's values. The physical characteristics of the community's neighborhood come to reflect its shared values. A new development that intrudes on the values of the community is rejected by the community, and if it is allowed by the City because of political alliances or the prospect of tax income, it can severely damage the quality of life within the community.

A major issue with compatibility is "compatibility with what?" As an example, consider the Loop 360 corridor. Every housing or office development is considered in only an incremental way, not in a "global" way. As a result, Loop 360 traffic continues to grow way beyond the capacity of the road because each development meets the "local" code.

Time frame is another compatibility issue. Developments must be considered with respect to the past, present and future.

Compatibility with the environment is also an important issue, as is compatibility with wildlife.

Compatibility has to be defined in a much broader, comprehensive way.

I don't know what values are imbedded within the design for Mueller, but if they are consistent and obvious at some levels it will attract new members who are compatible with those values.

The table discussions were good, but not enough time was allowed for all the community development that has to happen first at the table before communication can occur. The questions and facilitation

could have been better prepared. It's a shame that long term communication couldn't continue with the people at the table. I was impressed by everyone's thoughtfulness on the subject.

The wrap-up was too cursory. Trying to do that on the fly is almost impossible. I would never attempt it. You can alienate people because the treatment is only gloss.

CodeNEXT Approach

From my experience, CodeNEXT is working on the wrong problems. There may be gaps and errors in the present land use code, but the real problem is the process by which zoning decisions are made. It is an unequal playing field tilted towards the developers and land owners. It is undemocratic at its base level. Negotiations are carried out in secret with the City by the developers and their paid lobbyists and decisions made long before the "public" are even aware that anything is going on. Then staff advises the appropriate commission or board and the process is corrupted. The hearings are a joke, a mock trial. And, who is the "public" who gets notice of the proposed zoning change? Only those with 500 ft of the affected land. This guarantees that no proper consideration will be given to the local or "global" community. It also guarantees an incremental approach.

Also, the City has adopted twelve principles of zoning, which, if followed would help neighborhoods a lot.

"The City of Austin has established twelve Zoning Principles as a guide to preserve the compatibility of land uses. City Staff, stakeholders and property owners should use the following principles to evaluate all zoning requests."¹

¹ http://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Planning/zoning_guide.pdf, page 5