

Residential Architecture and Site Design for Compact, Safe and Secure Neighborhoods

Summary of Issues

Not since the turn of the century have city master plans regularly offered advice regarding the proper form of residences, yards and landscaping. Yet more land in the City of Salisbury is taken up by homes and yards than by all other forms of development combined. The collective impact of the individual actions of each homeowner in producing and maintaining an attractive, safe and secure city should therefore be evident.

Residential Architecture Guidelines

With the advent of standardized building materials and methods, as well as central heating and air conditioning, new homes built in Salisbury may differ only slightly from those built in Massachusetts, California, Florida or Michigan. This is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing comes from the wide variety of home styles available in today's home buying market. The curse comes from the complete loss of character and uniqueness that was once associated with regional architectural styles.

Thus, while architecture is clearly in the realm of individual taste, this plan can at least offer some brief guidelines that might restore some of the indigenous character of the area to our new neighborhoods as they develop. These guidelines include the following:

- (1) Homes should be raised up off the ground to avoid dampness and encourage natural cooling and ventilation. (Basements and crawl spaces, rather than homes built "on-slab".)
- (2) The floor plan should allow for high ceilings and tall windows with free airflow between, thereby encouraging cross ventilation.
- (3) Homes should not be set back excessively from the street, but rather pull up to the street, so as to create a human scaled streetspace.
- (4) Functional front porches and rear porches, decks or patios should be an integral part of the home to allow for outside activities in both a public setting (front yard/street space) or private setting (rear yard).
- (5) Garages, when provided, should be placed to the rear of structures and should be accessible by a service alley or by a narrow drive between houses.

We need to think of the street, the district, and the town as larger wholes, and find a glorious function and a worthy guidance for the decorative treatment of each plot and each house in so designing them that they shall contribute to some total effect. For is it not a finer thing to be a part of a great whole than to be merely a showy unit among a multitude of other units?

Raymond Unwin, 1909

In former days a general harmony of building in any district was secured by the economic necessity of using mainly local materials.

Raymond Unwin, 1909



Residential Landscaping Guidelines

In the hectic pace of the early 21st century, many homeowners have lost touch with the art of landscaping that was so much a part of the lives of our parents and grandparents. For many, the compact neighborhood offers an opportunity to have a small yard of one's own without spending valuable time in the mindless row cutting of the lawn mower (not to mention wasteful use of water, pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, etc.) Therefore, the following guidelines are offered specifically for yards that have a compact form.

(1) Keep shrubs along the border of the yard and near the foundation of the house. Small yards look best when a maximum expanse of uninterrupted lawn area is preserved.

(2) Hedges are meant to serve as fences or walls. A hedge-like row of shrubs of the same species and height planted around a front porch or along a house wall produces monotony.

(3) In planting against a porch or against the house itself, allow certain portions of the foundation to remain open to view, and to encourage ventilation.

(4) Vary the heights of shrubs, placing more shrubs and taller growing ones at the corners of the home, leading away with lower growing shrubs.

(5) Some shrubs and trees make good specimens; that is, they have interesting forms and can be used for special visual impact. Never "spot up" a lawn with such plants, however, and never plant them in a row around the house. Use them sparingly and rely on mass planting of shrubs in most places.

(6) To make Salisbury's hot, often humid summers more enjoyable, every lot should have two or three shade trees. If the house is built close to the street, it is best to allow street trees to perform this service in the front yard. Otherwise, arrange the trees to enframe the house when seen from the street.

(7) Homes built close to the street should have a walk leading from the front porch to the public sidewalk. This walk ties the house to the rest of the neighborhood, by providing a door into the room of the streetspace.

*(8) A low hedge, masonry knee wall, or ornamental fence across the front of the lot at the edge of the sidewalk is oftentimes a good idea. This subtle divider helps frame the yard and creates a clear boundary between public and private space. (See **Defensible Space Guidelines** later in this section.)*

*(9) For some structures, a trellis might be installed on the south or west sides of the building upon which one or two vines may climb.**



* Many of the landscaping principles for this section were taken from *A Plan for the City of Vancouver, British Columbia*, prepared in 1929 by Harland Bartholomew. Though the plan was prepared over sixty years ago, and the climate of Vancouver is quite different from Salisbury's, a careful review of the recommendations reveals the timeless, proven value of these concepts to the landscaping of compact residential spaces.

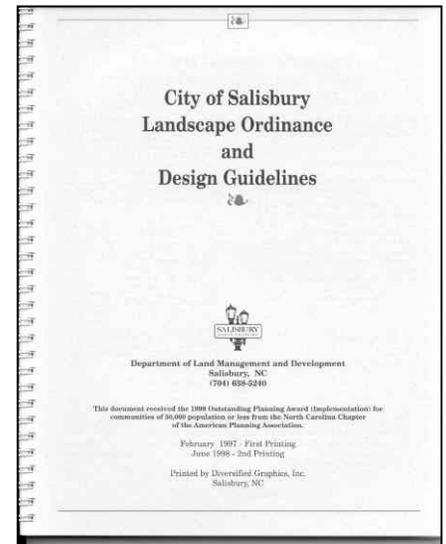
Other Suggestions for Residential Landscaping

Budgeting for Landscaping- In building a new home, the budget for landscaping is often much lower than it should be. Too often, the landscape budget is addressed only as an afterthought, or perhaps something that “We’ll get around to it eventually.” Adding to the problem are builders and developers who take the “five shrubs and two trees” approach to landscaping. Unfortunately, this type of bare bones standard is often also the minimum requirement established by lending institutions involved in financing new construction. A good rule of thumb is that the landscape budget should be not less than 5% of the total construction cost, excluding the cost of the lot. Thus, for a home that costs \$200,000 to build, the landscape budget should be not less than \$10,000.

Private Landscape Design Standards- This plan suggests that developers of new neighborhoods establish landscape design standards for new construction. Many neighborhoods have design standards for building construction (e.g. minimum heated square footage, placement of heat pumps, use of building materials, etc.) but give little or no guidance to landscaping. The establishment of private landscape design standards at the outset of a new neighborhood, tailored to the price range of the homes, could be most helpful in raising the level of landscape treatments in Salisbury.

Public Landscape Design Standards- The City of Salisbury has adopted a *Landscape Ordinance and Design Guidelines* setting forth minimum landscape standards for commercial and multi-family developments. While single-family homes are exempt from the requirements, the appendix to the ordinance booklet contains a useful listing of large trees, ornamental trees, and shrubs well suited to the Salisbury area. The appendices also include illustrations on planting and pruning trees and shrubs. In the future, the City should consider preparing a similar booklet offering design guidelines (not requirements) for residential landscaping.

For More Information- Many do-it-yourself home gardening books are available at home improvement stores in the Salisbury area. The *Rowan County Cooperative Extension Service*, located on Old Concord Road, has a variety of information pamphlets and other resources on residential landscaping and maintenance practices appropriate for the Salisbury climate and area soil conditions. The Extension Service also offers a *Master Gardeners Program* for anyone so interested. This is essentially a detailed short course in gardening and home yard care. Finally, a wealth of information is available on the World Wide Web from the Cooperative Extension Service at NC State University (www.ces.ncsu.edu)



Defensible Space Guidelines

“Defensible space” is a concept that employs the physical design of homes, yards, streets and neighborhoods to prevent crime. There are six levels of defensible space that a community and its homeowners can employ to help prevent crime. Each level refers to the point at which a potential criminal “enters” an increasingly protected space. The following criteria may be used to determine whether the city, its neighborhoods, and its individual homes are following defensible space principles at each of the six levels:

Level 1: Entering the community: Do the City’s entrances or gateways create a clear sense of entry into the community? The **city entrances** section of this plan includes policies on how to treat city entry points to announce the visitor’s arrival in a special place. Upon entering the city, are there a number of streetscape “treatments” which differentiate Salisbury from the surrounding area? These treatments may include sidewalks, curb and gutter, street trees and streetlights, for example. In much the same way that the medieval gate suggested entry into a defensible city, do entrances into Salisbury convey a similar message of defensible space to those who would seek to do no good?

Level 2: Entering the neighborhood: Neighborhood entrances can also create a clear sense of identity for its inhabitants, but on a smaller scale than the city. Do neighborhood entry points establish a clear theme in terms of the style of street lights, the types of street trees, and other features? Do neighborhood entrances display attractive yet noticeable signs announcing a strong commitment to “neighborhood watch”? The apparent life of the neighborhood can also send clear messages to the potential burglar. Is the neighborhood alive with people on the street, on sidewalks and in yards?

Level 3: Entering the streetspace: How the streetspace is designed says a lot about how secure it is. Are the houses pulled up to the street, with front porches encouraging many “eyes on the street”? Are streetlights pedestrian-scaled and frequent enough to render a uniformly well-lit neighborhood? Are neighborhood parks within full view of homeowners and neighborhood business owners, or hidden away, out of sight, where troublemakers can get into mischief? Are the homes relatively close together, where neighbors can look after neighbors, and view the perimeter of each other’s homes? Are there sidewalks and front porches that encourage the daily informal exchanges of information that keep a neighborhood close and caring?



Level 4: Entering the yard: The design of a residence should create a clear separation of ownership and control between the private space of the yard and the public space of the sidewalk and street. Is the private yard clearly separated from the public streetspace by a low masonry wall, hedge, picket or wrought iron fence, or other attractive barrier at the edge of the public sidewalk? Even a low fence or hedge, just a couple feet in height, creates a clear, psychological and physical barrier for the intruder. Once the intruder crosses over that barrier, there is no doubt that he is in a place where he does not belong.

Level 5: Entering the porch: Is the porch raised in elevation so as to clearly separate it from the yard and street below? Does the porch have a railing to control access? Is it screened? An intruder on a porch has moved another step closer into the private realm of the home.

Level 6: Entering the house: Can the residents inside the house see the person at the front door without first opening the door? Does the door have a slide bolt and chain? Are the windows raised up off the ground due to the elevated foundation of the home? Do the elevated windows provide a reasonable level of privacy from the person walking at ground level? Has the homeowner planted prickly shrubbery at the base of each window around the house? Are there motion-activated spotlights at vulnerable locations around the perimeter of the home? Is there an alarm system and/or alarm system labels attached to all windows and doors? Is the garage detached, thereby, eliminating an opportunity to enter the residence under cover of the garage?

Why defensible space concepts are often lacking in large lot neighborhoods

As is evident from the criteria outlined above, the pre-world war two city and the compact neighborhood include most of the features of defensible space. In contrast, the “modern” sprawling city and the large lot subdivision fails to include defensible space principles. Consider the following:

(1) There is no clear sense of entry into the sprawling city. The city bleeds into the countryside with little or no sense of entry. (Wrongdoers feel free to roam the city and come and go as they please.)

(2) Streetlights in the post WWII city cater to the automobile and are infrequently spaced, offering a poor sense of security to the pedestrian.

(3) New homes are often built “on slab”, with windows close to ground level, rendering homes easy targets for break ins.

(4) Suburban, large lot homes are pulled back from the street, often without front porches, with few “eyes on the street”.

(5) The absence of porches and sidewalks discourages informal neighborhood dialogue, keeping neighbors remote and uninvolved. Further, upon arriving home from the daily commute, residents may simply pull into their remote-control-accessed garage, closing the door (and their neighbors) behind them.

(6) Yards are generally undifferentiated from the street by hedges, fences or walls, thereby eliminating this level of defensible space altogether.

(7) Homes are spread out on wide lots limiting the ability of neighbors to look after neighbors, or perhaps even to hear the breaking glass or splintered door jams of a break-in.

(8) Attached garages provide convenient cover to burglars breaking into a home.

In summary, compact neighborhoods lend themselves quite well to defensible space strategies, while sprawling cities and subdivisions generally do not.

Lowly, unpurposeful and random as they may appear, sidewalk contacts are the small change from which a city's wealth of public life may grow.

Jane Jacobs, 1961

The first thing to understand is that the public peace- the sidewalk and street peace- of cities is not kept primarily by the police, necessary as police are. It is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves.

Jane Jacobs, 1961

A word about compact neighborhoods and community policing

It should be observed that many of the defensible space features of the compact neighborhood are entirely consistent with Salisbury's objectives for community policing. There is much to be gained, for example, by the casual, informal dialogues that occur on the front porches of homes pulled up to the street. A tight knit neighborhood with many *eyes on the street* is at the foundation of an effective community-policing program.