

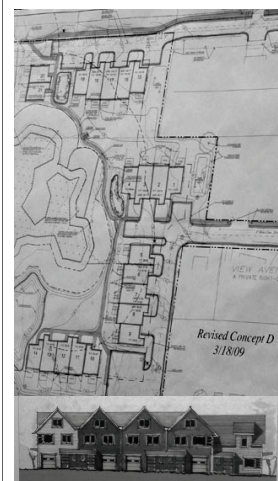
How to Avoid Classic Infill Design Mistakes

In our previous advertisements regarding the Kohl Construction proposal to build 23 condo units off North Street, we noted its close encroachment to wetlands, the experience of flooding on this property, the loss of trees and the possible presence of filled wetlands. We have examined longevity and heat loss issues with respect to its slab foundations. In this ad, we draw from the experience of other cities to show how Kohl's proposal would commit a number of classic urban infill design mistakes.

Knoxville, Tennessee: "Infill Housing Design Guidelines"

"For the past few decades," write Knoxville area planners, "the construction of new houses on these vacant lots—infill housing—has often been incompatible with the historic features in neighborhoods of the late 1800's to 1950's. Inappropriate infill has been a problem in the 'Heart of Knoxville' neighborhoods..."

"Following World War II, many single family neighborhoods were rezoned to permit apartments. This was done under an urban development theory that the highest density housing should be close to the central business district. The results have been mixed. In some instances the design of multi-unit buildings are completely out of context to older neighborhoods with apartment buildings looking like they should have been part of suburbia. In places where multi-unit housing is per-



Kohl condos proposed off North Street (two condos on Northern Avenue not shown)

mitted...it is essential to neighborhood stability that new apartment buildings be designed in scale and context with the early architectural features of the neighborhood...

"Multi-unit housing (where permitted by zoning) should have similar front yard space to that of the traditional single-family houses along the street... Multi-unit housing should be designed to continue the architectural rhythm of the block. In addition to the same 'build-to-line', porches, bays and breaks in the front façade should be created that mimic the look of older homes when looking down the block. This should be done by dividing the building into separate sections which are proportionally similar to original houses on the block."

Knoxville's guidelines go on to warn, "When a house is built on slab with a low pitch next to a traditional older house, the proportions of the two houses clash, resulting in an absence of architectural harmony."

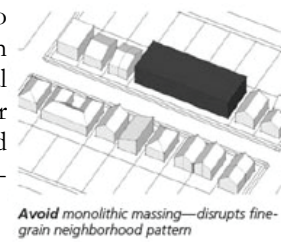
("Heart of Knoxville Infill Housing Design Guidelines", Knox County Metropolitan Planning Commission et al., archive.knoxmpc.org/plans/dguides.htm)

Portland, Oregon: "Best Practices for Context-Responsive Infill Design"

Portland's experience with Smart Growth traces back to the 1970s. Its Bureau of Planning recommends preserving the cohesion of neighborhoods through strengthening existing patterns of "street-oriented buildings, fine-grain 'rhythms' of development, and green street edges created by front yards and gardens." Portland values preserving established building setback patterns and the relationship of buildings to grade level, and avoiding disruptive "monolithic massing".

Portland notes that medium-density neighborhoods like ours have established patterns of backyards. These "create a much-valued 'private realm' of outdoor spaces that contrast functionally with the 'public realm' of street frontages. Infill development which intrudes

significantly into the backyard realm can have substantial privacy and solar access impacts and is often a key concern of neighbors."



("Infill Design Strategies: Best practices for context-responsive infill design", City of Portland Bureau of Planning, December 2008, www.portlandonline.com/planning/index.cfm)

Toronto: "Urban Design Guidelines: Infill Townhouses"

The City of Toronto has prepared a 34-page guide focused exclusively on the design of infill townhouses. They advise, "as with any type of infill development...it is very important that new townhouses 'fit' within the existing context, and minimize impacts on the surrounding neighborhood." Specific guidelines include:

- enhance and extend the local street network into the new development to create strong visual and physical links with adjacent neighborhoods
- have front entrances on existing or newly created public streets, and that avoid back-to-front facing relationships (such as front doors facing rear yards or service areas)
- create a street wall without interruptions to enclose and frame the street, with front doors facing the street
- preserve and protect existing healthy trees and green space
- design streets and sidewalks without dead-ends that could lead to areas of entrapment

("Toronto Urban Design Guidelines: Infill Townhouses", City of Toronto, January 2003, www.toronto.ca/planning/)

Bad Infill: The Kohl Condo Proposal

With the guidelines from Knoxville, Portland and Toronto in mind, problems with the Kohl condo proposal are readily apparent:

- The development would convert close to an acre of urban greenspace into impervious surface, with many mature trees cut down
- The monotonous repetition of design throughout the development would be out of character with the individuated appear-

ance of the existing homes, a key part of our neighborhood's charm

- The condos would exhibit "monolithic massing" in contrast to the fine-grain neighborhood pattern
- The condos' slab foundations would put them in different relation to grade than the surrounding homes, most of which sit on basements or crawl spaces
- Most condos would lack the setbacks, "green edges" and porches that characterize how nearby homes typically greet the streets in front of them
- No consistent street wall would enclose and frame the condo access roads; no 'urban room' would be created. Several units would have front entrances that don't face the roads. Contrast this with the cozy feel of nearby Northern Avenue, with its consistent street wall on both sides
- The access roads would be an awkward cross between private driveways and regular streets. They wouldn't resemble the surrounding city streets. The visual and physical links to the existing neighborhood would be poor. Most of the condo units would be hidden from North Street
- Compounding the disconnection, the access roads would be dead-ends and uninviting to neighbors walking by
- The condos would intrude on the backyard realm of the existing homes next to them

The Sustainable Northampton Plan can succeed *if* we heed the lessons of good and bad infill from other cities. Ask the Planning Board to hold developers to those principles that protect and enhance neighborhoods. **Come to Kohl Construction's hearing before the Planning Board on Thursday, May 14, 7:00pm, at City Council Chambers, 212 Main Street, and learn more at www.northassoc.org.**

"We will have to admit that it is beyond the scope of anyone's imagination to create a community. We must learn to cherish the communities we have, they are hard to come by."

- Jane Jacobs, quoting Stanley Tankel