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(9/03)

# URBAN DESIGN

ADOPTED 1992 MASTER PLAN  
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

One of the most significant developments in the field of urban planning in the United States has been the rising concern among its people about how a city looks and is experienced--a concern beyond that expressed in the City Beautiful movement of the early 1900s.

Alexandria has long recognized this concern and was, after Charleston and the Vieux Carne, the third U.S. city to adopt, in 1946, an historic district ordinance to protect its Old Town area and the George Washington Memorial Parkway. There are now hundreds of historic districts in every region of the nation and, more importantly, a widening recognition that not only historic districts, but the whole city, may be beautiful as well as safe and sanitary. This widening concern is not only with the compatibility of new architecture with that of the past, but also with neighborhood impacts, the public accessibility of usable open space, pedestrian movement, street furniture, and the totality of the urban environment as it affects the people who live and work in, or visit, a city.

The long struggle to obtain judicial recognition that the police power went beyond the prescription of land use zones and regulations relating to safety and health culminated in Berman v. Parker (348 U.S. 26; 99 L. ed. 27), in which a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court said 'The concept of the public welfare is broad and inclusive . . . The values it represents are spiritual as well as physical; aesthetic as well as monetary. It is within the power of the legislature to determine that the community should be beautiful as well as healthy, spacious as well as clean, well balanced as well as carefully patrolled. If those who govern the District of Columbia decide that the Nation's Capital should be beautiful as well as sanitary, there is nothing in the Fifth Amendment that stands in the way.'

In West Brothers Brick Co. v. City of Alexandria (169 Va. 271, 192 S.E. 881, 885-6) (1937) the Supreme Court of Virginia said:

It seems to us that aesthetic considerations are relative in their nature. With the passing of time, social standards conform to new ideals. As a race, our sensibilities are becoming more refined, and that which formerly did not offend cannot now be endured. That which the common law did not condemn as a nuisance is now frequently outlawed as such by the written law. This is not because the subject outlawed is of a sensibilities have become more refined and our ideals more exacting. Nauseous smells have always come under the ban of the law, but ugly sights and discordant surroundings may be just as distressing to keener sensibilities. The rights of property should not be sacrificed to the pleasure of an ultra-aesthetic taste. But whether they should be permitted to plague the average or dominant human sensibilities well may be pondered.

Sections 15.1-427 and 489(3) of the Code of Virginia (1950), as amended establish the legislative goals for zoning and land development regulations of providing residential areas "with healthy surroundings for family life" and facilitating "the creation of a convenient, attractive and harmonious community." The Virginia Court has expressly acknowledged that these are permissible state objectives under the police power in City of Manassas v. Rosson [224 Va. 12, 294 S.E. 2d 799, 804 (1982), appeal dismissed 459 U.S.1166 (1983)].

Recognizing the increased importance of good urban design, the city council has directed staff to proceed with four studies.

- The development of specific architectural guidelines for the use of the boards of architectural review for the Old and Historic Alexandria District and the Parker-Gray District. These are dissimilar areas, and the guidelines must reflect this fact. The Parker-Gray District was largely vacant land when the landmark buildings of Old Town were new. In the latter case city council has directed that the board of architectural review for the Old and Historic Alexandria District consider the extent to which the building or structure reflects the architectural styles of the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly of the Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival, and Victorian periods. This is a standard that clearly is

inapplicable to the Parker-Gray District.

- The development of urban design guidelines to guide the planning commission in reviewing the plans under the proposed revision of the zoning ordinance. These guidelines are to be developed by staff working with neighborhood groups and are to be related specifically to, and become an integral part of, the individual Small Area Plans. The concern here is not with architectural details but with the mass, bulk, and orientation of structures, taking into account the structure's function and its relationship to the neighborhood and to specifically defined community development goals.
- The third study involves the development of criteria and a program of public and private improvements that will enhance the Duke Street gateway to the City. This study will be expandable to other city gateways.
- A set of urban design guidelines will also be prepared for the Eisenhower Avenue corridor with the objective of giving a coherent character to this rapidly developing area. These will provide guidance in the development of the streetscape, public and private open space, and bikeways, as well as in the review of individual site plans.

#### URBAN CHARACTERISTICS—A SUMMARY

Alexandria is largely built-up. Only thirteen hundred acres are vacant or considered to be redevelopable. The remaining land area contains buildings that are likely to be here in 2010. Thus, except for the development of a few large tracts, Alexandria in 2010 will look very much like Alexandria today. The development that does occur will be guided by the Small Area Plans, including their design guidelines, and will be compatible with the existing residential and nonresidential development.

Old Town will change very little. There is virtually no developable land, and existing buildings will be protected by the Old and Historic Alexandria District.

Old Town North is bounded by the river and Washington Street. The waterfront is largely built-up, and development on Washington Street is controlled by a 50 foot height limit and the provisions of the code relating to the Old and Historic Alexandria District. The space between has many opportunities for development or redevelopment, the nature of which will be determined largely by the small area plan.

The plan for the waterfront is nearly complete and will be completed when the dispute over the ownership of a few remaining parcels is settled. Public access is guaranteed for the entire waterfront, with the exception of the two Robinson Terminal wharves.

The Braddock Road Metro station area will experience significant redevelopment as the former railroad dependent industries are replaced by other uses. The Small Area Plan is designed, however, to preserve existing residential neighborhoods and to insure that new commercial or mixed use development in the areas zoned for those purposes will be compatible with the residential area. Most of this area is also protected by the Parker-Gray District.

The Southwest Quadrant will change very little in the next 20 years, with the exception of the development of the Norfolk Southern property at its northern edge. The Small Area Plan calls for that property to be developed with low-scale buildings, with residential uses along Wilkes Street and Commercial uses along Duke Street. Extension of the Old and Historic Alexandria District to embrace the south side of Duke Street will insure that its development is compatible with the existing development on the north side of Duke Street.

Cameron Valley is a major development area. The city is working with property owners in this area to establish urban design guidelines, which will be applied in the approval of specific plans or the development of more detailed criteria supplemented by the design review board, as was done in the case of the Carlyle project.

Potomac Yard and Potomac Green are both likely to be developed for other uses during the next 20 years. The nature of this development will be guided by a Small Area Plan. Both areas must be treated with care because of the impact of the Potomac Yard development on the residential areas to the west of the site and of the Potomac Greens area on the George Washington Memorial Parkway. Both areas are at major gateways to Alexandria. Both areas must be designed so as to minimize traffic impacts, not only upon the immediately adjacent residential areas, but upon the whole area east of Quaker Lane, including the important route U.S.-1 corridor.

The King Street Metro station area is nearly built out, with only a few parcels that are likely to be redeveloped. The area has been built, as desired by the city, to limited heights and relatively high density. Little provision has been made for open space, but this will be partially alleviated by the landscaping of the Gateway parcel and better landscaping of the Metro station area.

Although that part of Alexandria west and north of the railroad is largely built-up and predominantly residential, there are a few tracts of developable or redevelopable land remaining. These include the Stone Tract, the undeveloped Winkler land, the west end of Beauregard Street, and the Cameron Station site. Because these tracts are interspersed among relatively high-density residential uses, great care must be taken in their design to assure mutual compatibility and to alleviate, insofar as possible, adverse traffic and other impacts. This area also contains substantial commercial and industrial development in the areas adjacent to the rail lines; a regional shopping mall; and a number of smaller retail centers, such as Hechinger Commons, Van Dom Plaza and other developments along Van Dom and Pickett streets, and Bradlee and other developments at Five Points. Strip commercial development is found on Mount Vernon Avenue and Duke Street. It is expected these latter uses will be substantially improved in the coming years, but the residential areas adjacent to Mount Vernon Avenue and Duke Street will be protected from further commercial intrusion by the careful adherence to the appropriate Small Area Plan.