



Wendy Lathrop is licensed as a Professional Land Surveyor in NJ, PA, DE, and MD, and has been involved since 1974 in surveying projects ranging from construction to boundary to environmental land use disputes. She is a Professional Planner in NJ, and a Certified Floodplain Manager through ASFPM.

About Face

The way we choose where to live is complicated. The meaning of the traditional “location, location, location,” is more nuanced than it may first appear. While the phrase would appear to strictly physical in nature, there are a variety of factors (and more than three) that loosely translate as “location.”

- Location = proximity to amenities such as schools, recreational areas, cultural venues
- Location = access to highway systems, trains, airports, and public transportation (enabling escape from as well as access to the physical place)
- Location = physical safety (“good” neighborhood, “bad” neighborhood)
- Location = interaction (or protection from interaction) with neighbors and others; gated community, private entrances to apartments, small yards with shared open space in the immediate vicinity, front porches for watching and talking with passersby
- Location = climate, environmental variables (although difficult to predict lately in regard to rainfall and temperature)

But location can be something a little less tangible and more an impression, an appeal to the senses that a place is calm or exciting, historically influenced or modern, inviting or sterile. The same physical “location” can attract or repel different people, even on the basis of a drive-through or short walk on local streets. Creating and preserving a public

face and an ambience that translate into “positive location” is part of the objective of zoning and development ordinances, not as easy a goal to achieve as might be thought.

The character of “place” is the focus of zoning discussions in a nearby borough about how to preserve its face without freezing it in time. This small walkable municipality of just under 1500 individual tax parcels grew up along one side of the Pennsylvania Railroad, formed as the communities then known as Libertyville and Elm grew together.

Incorporated in 1895 as Narberth, its first zoning code was adopted in the 1940s and hasn’t changed since. The time has come to move to more modern times, playing catch-up to safety and construction codes.

The concern is that adding new structures to a community dominated by buildings from the late 1800s and early 1900s will change the character of Narberth. The predominating (and non-compliant) architecture and setbacks could not be replicated under the present zoning code, so worries about losing Narberth’s face under pressure to

modernize. The exercise of imagining what might happen if an entire block were destroyed and became open for rebuilding even under current zoning has fueled questions about how to update zoning without creating what some residents have referred to as a possible “Nightmare on Elm Street.”

If that possibility seems far-fetched, think back to September 11, 2001. The space once occupied by more than just two tall plane-impacted buildings has changed irrevocably since that day. The downtown financial district of a decade

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ago has experienced tremendous construction and a shift toward residential use. Formerly home to fewer than 1,000 people, the area now has a population of about 8,000.

Think “New York City” and the iconic structures first coming to mind after the two destroyed World Trade Towers (north tower erected 1970, south tower in 1972) often include the Statue of Liberty (gifted to the United States in 1886), the Empire State Building (completed 1931, and first climbed by King Kong in 1933) and perhaps even the Chrysler Building (erected 1930).

The geospatially challenged might also include the Brooklyn Bridge (finished in 1883 and ever since the butt of many jokes beginning “If you believe that, I’ve got a bridge to sell you...”), of which only the northwestern end is in Manhattan. Scores of structures both older and newer line the streets and avenues, creating not a unified look but one that reflects the city’s history: the opulence of magnificent older structures, with reflections of the evolving trends of Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and varying degrees and phases of modernism interspersed. One could think that the area is “built out”, unable to accommodate more, but that is not entirely true.

If we were to look at the nearly \$24 billion invested in rebuilding the disaster area after 9/11, we would see the face of downtown Manhattan as a modern city. 17 million square feet of office space were destroyed by the attack, but nearly 10 million have been rebuilt for this same purpose. Over 9 million square feet of former financial district buildings have been converted

to “upscale” (read: expensive) housing, and more than 8 million square feet of new residential space have been added. Over a million square feet of new hotel space has opened to accommodate the surge in tourism, doubling prior capability. Sports clubs, restaurants, and physicians’ offices have opened or expanded to accommodate this growth. It is clear that development continues in a different mode as needs and desires change.

Many of us serve on our own community planning and zoning boards or appear before other such entities, both as professionals and as concerned private citizens. These are important roles, vested with stewardship of the community’s character and livability. The process of development should begin with sound planning to create a vision (involving the community), and then create zoning to effectuate that vision of a community’s character.

Contrary to arguments in some locales, planning is not simply about creating a taxable base to support public

services, but to enhance business and residential attractiveness harmoniously. This requires a balance between density and open spaces (think “Central Park” in crowded downtown Manhattan: 853 acres in a half-mile wide strip 2.5 miles long, preserved in 1857). It demands assessment of environmental and social impacts, including traffic studies and the acceptable level of aggravation to and safety for drivers and pedestrians. It entails a vision of how the area will look and feel if construction allowable by code is actually developed to the fullest extent possible.

As surveyors, we are often the first on site for any planned development, and the data we collect is crucial to understanding the full natural and social impacts of such projects. We recognize that full build-out affects drainage and that shading from taller buildings blocks solar collectors. Our first-hand knowledge and experiences impart responsibility in helping those who want to save the face of their communities. *A*