

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Creating Community: Does the Kentlands Live up to Its Goals? [The Promise of New Urbanism]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5rh277fq>

### Journal

Places, 13(2)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Kim, Joongsub

### Publication Date

2000-10-01

Peer reviewed

# Creating Community

DOES THE KENTLANDS LIVE UP TO ITS GOALS?

## Joongsub Kim

Over the last few years, New Urbanism has drawn considerable attention from the media, design professionals, academia and public officials. This is due, in part, to claims that neotraditional development fosters a greater sense of community than a conventional suburban development. Among the claims New Urbanists make are that:

- compact neighborhoods and mixed land uses will encourage residents to walk for their daily activities,
- neotraditional development that evokes the feeling of prewar communities will engender among residents a feeling of emotional bonding to the place
- the proximity of homes to each other; mixing of house types in blocks and neighborhoods; use of elements like front porches; and provision of amenities like sidewalks, pedestrian connections and local public spaces will foster social interaction, and
- the use of traditional architectural styles and urban elements like alleys, carriage houses, picket fences and common spaces surrounded by diverse housing types will create a distinctive physical character or a sense of place.

To date, these claims have been rarely substantiated. Recently published books on Celebration (*Celebration, U.S.A.*, by D. Frantz and C. Collins, and *The Celebration Chronicles*, by Andrew Ross) have shed some

light on New Urbanist qualities of this planned community at its early stage, but the authors tend to emphasize the role of the Disney Corporation (which developed the town) and public school controversies. Both books fall short of explaining the extent to which broader New Urbanist goals have been realized.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, while recent studies by Jack L. Nasar and Plas and Lewis are valuable to the examination of New Urbanist claims, both have limitations. Nasar's research is not based on actual neotraditional communities; Plas and Lewis's findings are based on the evaluation of Seaside, which is atypical because it is a resort community.<sup>2</sup>

This article addresses some of the claims of New Urbanism by drawing upon the preliminary findings of research conducted in Kentlands, a master-planned community built over the past decade in Gaithersburg, MD., a suburb of Washington, D.C. It reports on preliminary findings of a comparative case study that evaluates Kentlands and Orchard Village,<sup>3</sup> a conventional suburban community also in Gaithersburg. The research involved a survey (approximately 750 participants), in-depth interviews (approximately 130 participants) and week-long activity logs (approximately 70), all conducted during spring and summer 1999.

This article presents information drawn primarily from residents' responses to two open-ended survey questions and incorporates several emblematic examples from the extended interviews. Although the analysis

Contrasting Kentlands (left) and "Orchard Village" (right)

Photos: Joongsub Kim

## Kentlands



“It would be very difficult for me to move elsewhere. This place reminds me of the neighborhoods I grew up in.”



## Orchard Village



“I like living here because it is a very convenient, safe and quiet place...(but) I don't feel this is my permanent home.”



[ NEW URBANISM RESEARCH ]

## KENTLANDS

“It is so exciting and convenient ...to walk to the newly built cinemas in the Market Square Shopping Center, enjoy the movies, grab pizza or ice-cream in the Kentlands Shopping Center, and walk right back home.”

and findings presented here are still preliminary, they are consistent with the overall outcome of the quantitative analyses of the survey questionnaire.

### Research Sites

*Kentlands.* Kentlands and Laguna West in California are probably the two classic examples of neotraditional residential communities built to date. Whereas Laguna West is far from complete, Kentlands is nearly finished. Moreover, Kentlands is located near many conventional suburban communities in Gaithersburg, facilitating comparisons. Factors such as the climate, public facilities in the city of Gaithersburg, the quality of the school district, and the location of job market within and near Washington, D.C. are similar.

Kentlands is a 352-acre development located on the former Kent family farm in southwest Gaithersburg. It was designed by Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk in 1988 and planned for approximately 1,800 residential units and approximately 800,000 square feet of retail and office space. Construction began in 1989; completion is expected in 2002.

At the time this research was undertaken, two-thirds of the housing was occupied<sup>4</sup>; an elementary school, church, children’s center and a clubhouse–recreation center had also been built. Kentlands includes two major shopping centers: Kentlands Shopping Center, which resembles a typical suburban big-box shopping mall, is completed; Market Square Shopping Center, which consists of small-scale shops, is expected to be completed in two years.

Kentlands is characterized by: a mix of homes, retail, office and civic uses within the community; diverse neighborhood types and neighborhoods with higher densities and a wider mix of housing types than in typical subdivisions; narrow streets arranged on warped grid patterns, with a network of alleys and few culs-de-sac; houses on small lots and with narrow setbacks

## Kentlands Is The Place Everyone Is Talking About.

You’ve seen it on the national news. You’ve read about it in *Smithsonian*, *Washingtonian* and *Time*.

Old-fashioned urban planning is back in style. Cul-de-sacs are out. Grids of streets are in. Parking lots are out. Sidewalks are in. Suburban sprawl is out. Small-town charm is in.



It’s a welcome trend back to the past called Neo-Traditionalism. And its architects are the husband-and-wife team of Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk.

*Time* magazine calls them “visionary urban planners.” Their town of Seaside, Florida has been described as “the most important new piece of archi-

ture in the country.”

And, we’re pleased to announce, they are also the planners of Kentlands. Come see what they’ve done. And what all the talk is about.



from the street; architectural elements like picket fences and front porches; garages that face alleys, not streets; and plenty of sidewalks and footpaths.

The layout features several clear, formal characteristics: an entry circle fronted by an elementary school and church; a semi-circular green where a clubhouse–recreation center is located; and a boulevard that connects the two spaces. Landmark buildings terminate vistas or adjoin public spaces.

Kentlands includes roughly 100 acres devoted to public open spaces which consist of tot lots, tree saves, common greens, lakes, and parks in diverse sizes and locations; each neighborhood has a central, common green. The grading and the siting of buildings are sensitive to the natural setting, as the landscape retains many mature trees and topographic features such as hills and lakes.

Home prices in 1999 ranged from \$200,000 to \$1,000,000 and averaged \$360,000.

*Orchard Village.* Orchard Village is a conventional suburban community a few miles away from Kentlands. It is the most comparable development to Kentlands within Gaithersburg, in terms of average single-family home prices, average household income, age of development, major housing types and total number of units.<sup>5</sup> It covers about 250 acres.

Like many conventional suburban developments, Orchard Village is characterized by a plan with wide, curvilinear streets and numerous culs-de-sac. The houses are on large lots and most are similar in style and type. Orchard Village includes no local retail facilities, such as shops and restaurants; although Orchard



their community as well as feel a sense of belonging to the community by being able to walk around it.

Kentlands residents often mentioned that walkability or easy access to community services (such as the shopping centers, ele-

## ORCHARD VILLAGE

“I don’t understand why they built a sidewalk only on one side.”

Village has clubhouse–recreation facilities and picturesque wetlands, it does not have a church, an elementary school or a children’s center.

In Orchard Village, there are no central, common greens, alleys, landmark structures, picket fences or carriage-house apartments; front porches are very rare and there are fewer sidewalks than in Kentlands. Garages face the main streets and houses are set back further from the street. The landscape in Orchard Village is characterized by extensive, grassy areas with trees between the streets and the houses, a few tot lots and a large, partly accessible wetland.

The overall housing density of Orchard Village is lower than that of Kentlands. The average home price in spring 1999 was approximately \$340,000.

### Four Findings

The findings reported here focus on the two open-ended questions on the survey questionnaire: “What do you see as the greatest strengths of Kentlands (Orchard Village)?” and “What do you think are the most important weaknesses of Kentlands (Orchard Village)?”<sup>6</sup> The discussion is organized into four themes—pedestrianism, community attachment, social interaction and community identity.<sup>7</sup> The comments presented here are supported by the preliminary descriptive statistics derived from the survey analysis: Kentlands receives higher ratings than Orchard Village on all four elements.

*Pedestrianism.* Pedestrianism implies that a community is designed for walking and other street-oriented activities. Pedestrianism would promote sense of community, as the residents experience and get to know

mentary school, clubhouse and lakes) is a major strength of Kentlands. Many said they found it convenient, fun and pleasant to explore and know the community on foot due to many sidewalks and trails, well-connected path network, and visually interesting and attractive streetscapes. One night around 9:30 near the clubhouse, I encountered a resident who I had interviewed a few weeks earlier. He was pulling a cart heading toward the shopping center and yelled to me, “See this is a New Urbanism thing, you know!”

Another frequent response concerned the easy access to the shopping centers. “It is so exciting and convenient for me, my wife and kids to be able to walk to the newly built cinemas in the Market Square Shopping Center, enjoy the movies, grab pizza or ice-cream in the Kentlands Shopping Center, and walk right back home. I have [not done that] since I was a little. It was something that we couldn’t do in our previous suburban neighborhoods,” said one respondent.

On the other hand, this was a typical comment: “Walking to Market Square Shopping Center and other sections of the community has been difficult and even dangerous due to constant construction. It feels like [it is] taking forever! Kentlands Boulevard, which physically separates Kentlands Shopping Center from the rest of the community, is not very safe to cross.”

Orchard Village residents saw the lack of sidewalks as one weakness of their community. One respondent complained, “I don’t understand why they built a sidewalk only on one side.” A number of the residents wrote that they would walk more frequently if there were more sidewalks in their neighborhood. Only the

## KENTLANDS

“It would be very difficult for me to move elsewhere. This place reminds me of the neighborhoods I grew up in.”

main street has sidewalks on both sides of the street. The others have a either a sidewalk on one side or no sidewalks at all; many of the cul-de-sac neighborhoods have no sidewalks.

### *Community Attachment.*

Community attachment refers to residents' emotional bonding or ties to their community through a sense of ownership, community satisfaction, and feelings of connectedness to the past environment. Many respondents in Kentlands expressed a strong sense of this kind of attachment. Written comments such as, “This community is my home,” were frequent.

One resident wrote: “Kentlands is my home and I love this neighborhood. It would be very difficult for me to move elsewhere. This place reminds me of the neighborhoods I grew up in because architecture here looks very familiar to me. It brings back old charm and intimacy with nice modern amenity. I really like alleys and carriage house apartments (living units above garages). What an old-fashioned sensibility!”

Among the other strengths mentioned are traditional styles of architecture and traditional town planning (e.g., Colonial houses, alleys, mixed uses). A popular sentiment shared by many residents is an appreciation for visual qualities of Kentlands that remind them of their favorite childhood environments.

However, many respondents said they disliked the excessive sense of ownership demonstrated by some residents. Several comments echoed the following strong sentiment: “People who do not treat this neighborhood like their home cannot live here.” Respondents often made remarks like: “People here are too narcissistic,” or “There are zealots in this neighborhood who say, ‘This place only belongs to us.’”

Other comments sounded more positive and expressed a sense of mission: “Let’s share good things about this



community with people outside. We can educate other people who don't know about this place. We should open our door to the neighboring communities.”

On the whole, Kentlands residents have a very high degree of satisfaction with their community and a genuine sense of ownership. Taken together, these sentiments illustrate a bonding to their community, a quality that seems lacking among the Orchard Village residents.

The responses of the Orchard Village residents offered neither complaints about their community nor a strong emotional bonding to it. Many Orchard Village respondents clearly made conscious decisions to move to the community, and many do like their neighborhood, as the following statements indicate: “better housing,” “cleanliness,” “nice landscape,” “good location” and easy access to highways.” But comments to the effect of, “this place is my home” or “I feel a strong sense of belonging to the community,” were rare.

Some interviewees used the word “transient” to describe Orchard Village. For example, one said: “This is a very transient neighborhood. But I like living here because it is a very convenient, safe and quiet place, in addition to lots of children and nice houses. Nevertheless, I don't feel that this is my permanent home.” Many of their comments seemed to revolve around the theme of “quality neighborhood,” but a heartfelt sense of emotional attachment to the community seemed to be absent.

*Social Interaction.* Social interaction consists of activities like neighboring, casual encounters, community participation and social support. A sense of community can be fostered if the physical characteristics of a

## A Place Like Kentlands Comes Along Only Once Every 200 Years.



If you're partial to old towns like Georgetown and Williamsburg, you'll be totally taken with Kentlands. Because Kentlands is built along the same lines. Its narrow two-lane streets crisscross to form blocks and to slow down traffic. Its homes are built close to the

street—and close to each other—to encourage friendships. Its sidewalks take you to school, to the park and to the store.

And like the old towns, it has landmarks. On the public square, a turn-of-the-century mansion has been restored for the community. Across the street is a block-long village green. An 11-acre lake and great stands of trees frame the landscape. The Kentlands Recreation Center is just a hop,

skip and a jump from your home.



It's a close-knit community that's also part of something bigger: Gaithersburg, the social and cultural center of Montgomery County, Maryland. Which means excellent secondary schools, shopping, and restaurants are nearby. The Shady Grove Metro Station is just four miles away.



And the future of planned developments is right here and right now. At Kentlands.

other residents as a consequence of the closeness of homes, ample porches and proximity of sidewalks to houses, features that were often included in respondents' lists of community strengths. A number of respondents made comments like:

community facilitate residents' social interaction, their getting to know each other and their feeling that they are part of a community. At Kentlands, the the residents' written comments generally offered a positive endorsement of the interactive quality of the residential environment, although there were concerns about occasional incivility, the isolation of apartment and condominium residents and a lack of privacy.

One of the most frequently cited strengths of Kentlands was the interaction among residents. In their written comments, respondents said they like the "ample neighboring opportunities," "easy casual social encounter at the clubhouse," "community participation" and "social support."

Comments like "I moved here because I love friendliness, neighborliness and interaction among residents" suggest that Kentlands may attract people who are either extroverted or socially active. But other comments indicate that Kentlands also attracts many "quiet" or "shy" people who move there because of its physical beauty, pleasant landscape, convenience or amenities. Moreover, the interview findings indicate that shy or less socially active people do become more socially interactive or involved over time, at least in part due to the physical characteristics of Kentlands. One resident observed: "I know someone who is very shy and never interacted with her neighbors when she moved here a few years ago. ... Her husband really liked it here but she hated it initially. Now she is actively involved in alley parties, block parties and clubhouse activities. She seems changed."

Indeed, many survey respondents and interviewees indicated that they almost felt forced to interact with

"Homes here are so close together that you're going have to say 'hi' or whatever, while sitting on the porch, when someone's walking by. If not, people might wonder what's wrong with you." Yet other respondents echoed this comment: "I know some people who live here are painfully shy. We tried to invite them to our house for parties several times but they never showed up."

Some residents, even those who were socially active, commented on the impact that the closeness of homes had on privacy. One respondent shared the observation that "density could have been a little lower. A little more distance between houses could have been much more ideal. I bought a car one day and as soon as I got out of the car, suddenly two dozen people came out of nowhere. Actually they were my close, immediate neighbors. They gathered around the car and began to ask me questions about the car!"

There were a surprising number of comments about the lack of civility during occasions like board meetings. One respondent stated: "I have seen uncivilized behavior in the public discourse and paternalistic behaviors of earlier residents. There are some egotistical residents who are not willing to hear other residents. I once even walked out of a board meeting as a silent protest. We also have too many factions in different districts or cliques and excessive power struggles among a few residents."

Some condominium and apartment residents said they felt isolated from the rest of the community. Typical comments included: "If you don't have a child, it would be difficult to interact with single-family-home folks in the other side of the community. We are physically sep-

### ORCHARD VILLAGE

"I like living here because it is a very convenient, safe, and quiet place, in addition to lots of children and nice houses. Nevertheless, I don't feel that this is my permanent home."

## KENTLANDS

“Kentlands is a predominantly white neighborhood [and], a family and children oriented-community. Singles seem to have a limited place here. ...”

“Some architectural features, such as white picket fences and townhomes in certain blocks, seem to look alike, monotonous and repetitive.”

parated from the rest. Condominium and apartment buildings broken into smaller groups ... should have been integrated into the community near the center of Kentlands.”

Although Orchard Village residents also seemed to express satisfaction with the sociability of their community, many of their responses conveyed regret that their community is not as conducive to the formation of social interaction as the Kentlands is. Indeed, this was one of the most frequently cited weaknesses of Orchard Village. Respondents often cited features that inhibit social interaction such as “the unfit and small clubhouse, lack of tot lots, lack of residents’ willingness to participate in the board activities or lack of community activities.”

On the other hand, residents of cul-de-sac neighborhoods indicated that the intimate circle area facilitates social interaction among a small group of households within the cul-de-sac, although they did not know many people beyond their own cul-de-sac.

Many Orchard Village residents said they knew about Kentlands and expressed dislike of what they perceived to be forced social interaction and lack of privacy there.

*Community Identity.* Kentlands residents clearly expressed the sense that their community has a powerful physical character or physical identity that makes it different from other communities. Moreover, the responses indicate that that sense of character or physical identity certainly engenders a substantial sense of pride among the Kentlands residents.

Probably the most frequently mentioned strength of Kentlands is its unique physical character or identity, which its residents perceive as distinct from other communities. Both the survey and interview data indicated that many people, both socially interactive and shy, moved to Kentlands often because of its unique architectural and community character and the sheer physical beauty of both buildings and landscape.

## If Kentlands Looks Revolutionary That's Because It Is.

The homes at Kentlands come in a wide variety of sizes and styles. All designed to complement each other. Condominiums share the same street



with colonials. Townhomes face estate homes. Cottages and mansions stand side-by-side.

A closer community results. At Kentlands, singles and marrieds, adults and children, newlyweds and retirees—



white picket fences, fishing from the pier at Inspiration Lake, and celebrating at festivals on the village green.

Join them and you'll have your own recreation center with swimming, tennis, basketball, and horseshoes. Your

people from all walks of life—mix and mingle together.

You can see them visiting on their front porches, talking over



own shopping center with supermarket, hardware store, department store, and restaurants. And your own day care center right next to the elementary school.

Several model homes are open for your inspection. The Kentlands Information Center is open daily from 10 to 5. Take

I-270 to Rt. 28 West, go four miles, and turn right just past the National Geographic Society. Or call 301-948-8353.

One respondent commented that “Kentlands looks very different from others and yet looks familiar. This unique place gives me a feeling of being different. This is my kind of community. I felt a sense of pride when I gave visiting friends a tour of the community.” The physical characteristics they mentioned as strengths included traditional architectural styles, porches, alleys, central common greens, lakes, sidewalks and garages not facing the main streets.

Furthermore, a great many residents expressed a strong sense that Kentlands has an overall cohesiveness. One resident commented: “White picket fences give this place a sense of order, structure and coherent character. I like the fact that Kentlands consists of fairly similar styles of buildings, yet they don’t look identical. They are all unique. Its architectural character is very consistent throughout the community.”

On the other hand, many respondents felt that Kentlands was too cohesive, lacking diversity in terms of race and lifestyles. For example, according to one comment, “Kentlands is a predominantly white neighborhood. This is also a family and children oriented community. Singles seem to have a limited place here. Physically, some architectural features such as white picket fences and townhomes in certain blocks seem too look alike, monotonous and repetitive.”

Quite a few respondents expressed concern that residents who are excessively passionate about maintaining Kentlands’s physical character. One respondent complained that “some exceedingly nosy residents actually took the time to walk around the community only to pick on petty stuff such as flags that were not in right angles in someone’s house.”





In contrast, although Orchard Village respondents generally noted that their community offered many positive features, relatively few made specific statements about its physical character, such as “attractive buildings,” “distinctive architecture” or “physical beauty.” Quite a few Orchard Village residents made comments like, “Orchard Village does not have a kind of unique physical identity that Kentlands has.” This suggests that although Orchard Village residents who know Kentlands don’t care for its density, its physical character clearly leaves a strong impression.

#### Does New Urbanism Fulfill Its Promise?

The preliminary findings of this research suggest that Kentlands appears to fulfill some aspects of the New Urbanist promise. Kentlands residents’ responses to the open-ended survey questions reveal a higher level of attachment to their community, and a stronger sense of community identity, than the responses of the Orchard Village residents do. Kentlands residents appear to take advantage of the community’s walkability and the sociability that high density housing and other design features were intended to foster. On the other hand, the apparent success of the design goals of Kentlands is not without complication, as some of the more negative comments from residents indicate.

Two important issues must be considered in evaluating these findings. First, this research was not concerned with the matter of self-selection. Although Kentlands seems to attract both socially interactive and shy people, the extent to which the success of Kentlands is attributable to self-selection requires a further evaluation.

Second, this research does not address broader claims of New Urbanism that involve people’s interaction with

the region, such as public transit usage and the frequency and length of car trips.

The complex socio-physical dynamics of Kentlands and Orchard Village will be more fully revealed through the ongoing analysis of the larger

study upon which these preliminary comments are based. Still, the evidence to date from this study provides support for continued development and refinement of New Urbanism theory and practice.

#### Notes

1. D. Frantz and C. Collins, *Celebration, U.S.A.: Living in Disney’s Brave New Town* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999); Andrew Ross, *The Celebration Chronicles: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Property Value in Disney’s New Town* (New York: Ballantine Books 1999).
2. Jack L. Nasar, *Neo-Traditional Development, Auto-Dependency and Sense of Community*. EDRA 28 /1997: Proceedings of the Environmental Design Research Association Annual Conference (Oklahoma City, OK: Environmental Design Research Association, 1997), 39-43. J. M. Plas and S. E. Lewis, “Environmental Factors and Sense of Community in a Planned Town,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 24:1 (1996), 109-143.
3. Kentlands Visitor Center, Kentlands Management Company, & Kentlands Information Brochure, 1999. At the time of my res occupied, including 450 single-family homes; 220 condominium units, 280 townhomes and 270 apartments.
4. The real name of the development has been changed.
5. Approximately 570 units are occupied, including 380 single-family units and 190 condominium units.
6. In Kentlands, 450 of 537 survey respondents (approximately eighty-four percent) and 420 of 537 (approximately seventy-nine percent) responded to the first and second questions, respectively. In Orchard Village, 151 of 211 (seventy-two percent) and 141 of 211 (sixty-seven percent), responded to the first and second questions, respectively.
7. It is my hypothesis, based on extensive literature review, that these elements engender a sense of community.

## KENTLANDS

“White picket fences give this place a sense of order, structure, and coherent character. I like the fact that Kentlands consists of fairly similar styles of buildings, yet they don’t look identical.”