

Land Use

Since World War II the growth of the suburbs has been the most important development, and possibly environmental, trend (Fig. 1.1). At the beginning of the twenty-first century more people live in suburbs than in the former urban centers. At the same time, awareness is growing that suburbs as they have evolved are unsustainable, but this knowledge has done little to slow the growth in consumer preference to live in suburban areas. There is a general acknowledgment that cities offer a greater cultural experience, but in general, populations have not started to return to urban areas in significant numbers. In fact, as they vote with their feet and checkbooks, people have shown their preference for suburban living over city living. Builders respond to market demand; they do not create it. Thus changing the trend to urban living will require changing public policy, which is politically difficult, if not impossible. Local ordinances tend to favor low-density development and highways, not parks and higher-density development. It is difficult for planners and designers to influence this suburban growth trend on a site-by-site basis. Instead, planners and designers will have to address the impacts of suburban development through design.

Paradoxically many people living in suburbs seem to prefer what might be considered urban values and character. A survey by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) found that those surveyed would prefer to live within walking distance of schools, shops, and community facilities. The study also found that in spite of the standard practices of most ordinances, most people would rather live in a place with narrower streets and more public open space. During the time that American families became smaller by nearly half, new houses have ballooned to more than twice the size. As the population has become older, however, there is an increasing interest in smaller homes. In some metropolitan areas most of the homes built and purchased are townhouses and condominiums (Fig. 1.2). Part of this popularity may be due to the cost of housing in some urban areas, but many of these units are higher-end dwellings located near shopping or social and cultural features of the city.

The southwestern parts of the United States are becoming more popular places to live, and designing for those areas presents significant challenges. The influx of people from more humid parts of the country has brought with it an expectation of life and an esthetic that often is simply out of place in the desert. The southeastern part of the United States is already facing problems with water supply. The native people of these dry places long ago found ways to live that recognized the character of their region. Our culture is faced with learning and acting on the lessons already known by so many, while our footprint is so much larger and deeper. These areas of growth are experiencing significant declines in other environmental indicators such as air quality, biodiversity, and human health. It remains to be seen if we can find the ways to live sustainably and successfully in the desert. Figure 1.3 is an example of good design.