

## LIVABLE COMMUNITIES (2001, R2008, R2021)



### Policy Statement

The American Society of Landscape Architects believes that communities are more livable when they address, balance, and cultivate the natural, built, and cultural systems that make communities adaptable in the face of change. ASLA encourages both individuals and community leaders to work collaboratively, with the goal of improving quality of life through sound and creative planning, design, construction, and management of the natural and built environment.

ASLA supports the following principles of Livable Communities:

- Equitable and sustainable economic development
- Housing and accessibility for all
- Healthy and safe neighborhoods
- Social and environmental equity
- Sense of place and connection
- Active transportation options

ASLA encourages the use of best practices and development incentives that create ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable communities.

### Justification

Landscape architects bring the issues of health, safety, and welfare into the forefront of each design decision while simultaneously creating spaces that improve the quality of life for each community member. Landscape architects design communities and community spaces, adding value to solutions that sustain diverse, livable communities. Landscape architects work on a wide range of project types, making them uniquely positioned to impact the public in the following elements of an individual's daily life:

- Land Use and Development
- Housing
- Transportation
- Educational and Institutional Landscapes
- Restorative and Therapeutic Landscapes
- Parks and Open Space
- Environmental Mitigation, Restoration and Conservation

Livable communities work best when the diverse elements of daily life, as listed above, are skillfully woven together by landscape architects.

### Issue

Communities nationwide have long suffered from inequitable and unsustainable growth and development patterns. Historically, white wealthy communities were provided the regulatory framework and funding necessary to enhance livability and create desirable places to live, while underserved communities have not shared in the same benefits. Livable communities exhibit a strong sense of place and connection to the environment where all species can thrive.



**Housing, Land Use, and Development:** Environmental and economic racism, classism, and discrimination have been institutionalized in our communities through redlining, discriminatory zoning, and land policies such as exclusionary zoning, density restrictions, highway development policies, and urban renewal. These policies, along with spectatorship, have led to inequitable and unsustainable growth and development patterns, and oftentimes gentrification.

Contemporary land development strategies such as New Urbanism, Smart Growth, Transit-Oriented Development, and Traditional Neighborhood Design help guide community leaders to create livable communities. These concepts, along with land use tools and development mechanisms such as inclusionary zoning, affordable housing requirements, mixed-use development, and form-based codes promote livable communities.

- *Policy makers, scholars, and researchers argue that zoning can and has been used to steer industrial activity towards communities of color, leading to disproportionate rates of negative health outcomes and depressed land values (Zoning, Equity, and Public Health, Mantay, 2001)*
- *The U.S. has a shortage of 6.8 million rental homes affordable and available to extremely low-income renters, whose household incomes are at or below the poverty guideline or 30% of their area median income. (GAP: A Shortage of Affordable Homes, Arund, Emmanuel, Threet, Rafi, & Yentel, March 2021)*
- *Owner-occupied homes in Black neighborhoods are undervalued by \$48,000 per home on average, amounting to \$156 billion in cumulative losses” (The Devaluation of Assets in Black Neighborhoods, Perry, Rothwell & Harshbarger, 2018)*

**Transportation:** Livable Communities address the planning, development, and maintenance of cohesive, multi-modal transportation options. These communities provide well-connected, universally accessible transportation systems that promote attractive, safe, comfortable, and cost-effective access; improve convenience and mobility; and support economic vitality and environmental quality. Policy and program initiatives such as Transit Oriented Development, Low Emission Zones, Congestion Pricing, and innovative technology support livable communities.

The design of our transportation systems greatly impacts community health and can improve community sustainability and resilience. When designed well, these systems promote social equity and access by reducing transportation costs and giving more freedom of mobility to all residents, regardless of income, age, or ability. Safe streetscape design, such as Complete Streets, encourages physical exercise, which reduces obesity and other chronic illnesses. The incorporation of green infrastructure and landscaping through Green Streets can improve air and water quality, reduce stormwater runoff, mitigate the urban heat island effect, and reduce pollution.

- *“We dedicate a high percentage of land to the automobile: within automobile-dependent cities, up to 50 percent of the available land use consists of roads and parking lots.” (Rodrigue, 2020)*
- *“On a global scale, the looming threat of climate change has focused attention on the environmental impacts of the transportation sector, which contributes more than 25 percent of our nation’s greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions” (Guide to Sustainable Transportation Performance Measures, US EPA, 2011)*
- *“The number of people struck and killed by drivers nationwide while walking increased by an astonishing 45 percent over the last decade (2010–2019). Older adults, people of color, and people walking in low-income communities are*

*disproportionately represented in fatal crashes involving people walking—even after controlling for differences in population size and walking rates” (Dangerous by Design, 2021).*

- *“Combined with the benefits of public transportation access and mixed-use development, modest increases in walking and bicycling could avoid 69 billion miles driven; more substantial increases in travel by walking and bicycling could avoid nearly 200 billion miles driven.” (National Complete Streets Coalition)*
- *“Exposure to toxic air pollution can cause heart attacks, premature deaths, delays in early childhood development, asthma, and other health issues”. (Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, March 2020)*

**Parks, Playfields, Gardens, and Open Spaces:** Parks, playfields, gardens, and open spaces have a positive impact on people and the environment. When well located, designed, and funded, they provide both physical and mental benefits for communities. They promote physical activity, provide connections to nature, and enhance air and water quality while providing a sense of place. Studies have shown that access to parks and open spaces can provide a range of benefits, from lowering blood pressure and cholesterol to alleviating symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Environmentally, parks and open spaces can be designed to address stormwater management and flood control, preserve ecological functions, and encourage biodiversity. Through thoughtful design, open-space systems also protect and enhance the natural processes required to create sustainable, resilient communities. The social equity benefits of parks forge community ties, create learning opportunities, and strengthen social connections, all of which help foster safe, livable neighborhoods where residents feel connected and supported.

- *‘The Benefits of Playgrounds on Child Development’: “Landscapes have the potential to promote mental well-being through attention restoration, stress reduction, and the evocation of positive emotions; physical well-being through the promotion of physical activity in daily life as well as leisure time and through walkable environments; and social well-being through social integration, social engagement and participation, and through social support and security.” (Abraham, Sommerhalder and Abel, 2009)*
- *“Pollution removal (O3, PM10, NO2, SO2, CO) varied among cities with total annual air pollution removal by US urban trees estimated at 711,000 metric tons (\$3.8 billion value).” (Nowak, Crane & Stevens, 2006)*
- *“A recent UCLA report found that about 95 percent of people who participated in PAD [Parks After Dark] in 2016 said they felt the program improved their relationships with neighbors, and of participants who described their own neighborhoods as ‘unsafe.’” (Clement Lau, AICP, National Parks and Recreation Association, Parks and Public Health, April 2018)*
- *“Patients in hospital rooms facing a park had a 10 percent faster recovery and needed 50 percent less strong pain medication, compared to patients whose rooms faced a building wall.” (National Parks and Recreation Association, Parks and Chronic Disease Management)*

**Environmental Mitigation, Restoration, and Conservation:** Successful livable communities ensure the integrity and protection of our natural resources through environmental mitigation, restoration, and conservation, while also providing access to conservation areas. Natural resources are an integral component of livable communities that simultaneously protect the natural environment and improve quality of life. Linking restored or preserved natural areas provides for greater continuity and access for both wildlife and members of the community.



Historically neighborhoods of low economic profile have received the greatest levels of environmental degradation and neglect. Every community can benefit from mitigating, restoring, and conserving our natural resources through thoughtful design and education.

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- “Analysis of the Chicago 1995 heat wave, which led to over 700 deaths, showed that risk of heat-related mortality was higher in the black community and for people living in certain types of low-income and multi-tenant housing, including living on the top floors of buildings.” (*Klinenberg, 2002, Urban Heat Island Mitigation can Improve New York City’s Environment*, 2008).
- “The U.S. Forest Service estimates that trees reduce the energy consumption needed to cool homes in the U.S. by more than seven percent.” (*Measuring Equity through Trees*, Draxler, March 2021)

## Resources

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*The Benefits of Playgrounds on Child Development.* (2020). Foundations for Learning. <https://www.thefoundationforlearning.com/day-care-glastonbury/the-benefits-of-playgrounds-on-child-development/>.

Urban Land Institute. (2013). *Intersections: Health and the Built Environment*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute. <https://uli.org/wp-content/uploads/ULI-Documents/Intersections-Health-and-the-Built-Environment.pdf>.

*Livability.* U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration. <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/livability/>.

### **Interrelated Policies**

- Urban Growth and Development
- Human Health and Well-being
- Transportation Corridors and Facilities
- Urban and Local Agriculture
- Housing
- Outdoor Lighting
- Environmental Justice
- State, Regional, and Local Parks and Trail Systems
- Vegetation and the Built Environment
- Air Quality
- Safety and Security Design
- Universal Design
- Open Space
- Visual Character and Scenic Resources