

CLUSTER SUBDIVISIONS AND ZONING

SINCE 1916 we have been attempting to bring order into urban growth and development by applying zoning and subdivision regulations that specify—mostly in a negative way—the location and manner in which land could be cut up into individual lots and parcels for row houses, apartments, and one-family homes. To a discouraging degree our efforts in this direction have produced results that are not attractive, economical, or efficient.

The legal stipulations of uniformity within any one zoning district have produced a repetitive pattern of sterility and monotony.

Large-lot zoning and arbitrary “standard” engineering requirements for roadway widths, underground utilities, and grading usually designed for more intensive usage have resulted in costly and stereotyped development.

Acreage zoning, mistakenly applied to create “open development” or to prevent low-cost homes, has absorbed land at accelerated rates without producing increased amenity, desirable living, economy of layout, convenience of access, or preservation of rapidly diminishing open space.

The resulting pattern of urban sprawl is wasteful of land, utilities, and services and is costly to administer.

The pressure of urban growth and rapid absorption of suitable land in

relatively restricted areas of the country, notably along the eastern seaboard, the Great Lakes, and the west coast, make the need for more efficient methods of developing new urban residential land areas progressively more urgent.

Thus the major objectives in the search for better methods should include reductions in the mounting costs of providing and maintaining streets, utilities, and services; more variety and amenity; the creation of permanent open space; and flexibility in planning, which will release residential development from its present straitjacket of subdivision and zoning regulations based on rigid specifications for the individual lot.

The cluster method of planning for residential development has been advanced as satisfying most of those objectives.

The cluster principle contemplates the arrangement of dwellings in groups, courts, or clusters on smaller sites than those required by conventional subdivision planning or zoning specifications. The resulting differential in lot areas is then consolidated into open space for conservation and recreational uses for the common benefit of the adjacent residents with the overall density—that is, the total number of families to the acre in the development—remaining substantially the same as in a conventional layout.

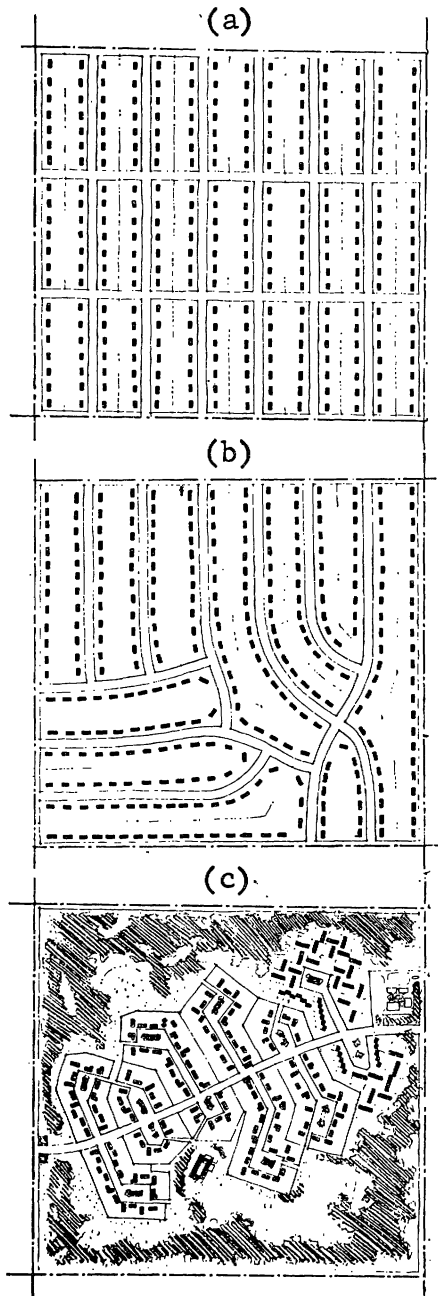
The principal advantages include flexibility in arranging building and open-space areas to fit the physical characteristics of the site; variety and diversity of site and architectural grouping; preservation of natural and topographic features; economy in the length of streets and utilities; and freedom from through traffic.

Obviously, if this type of development is to be realized in areas where regulations of public land use are in effect, provisions permitting cluster planning must be present in zoning and subdivision codes.

Most regulations are still based on individual lot specifications for minimum width, depth, and area, which are then applied in a blanket fashion to the entire development. Conversely, the cluster concept seeks to realize the objectives by grouping homes within and around common open space, with greater economy in streets and utilities and with substantial increase in the attractiveness and livability of the entire development. Thus, the zoning code needs to be based essentially on density—maximum number of families on an acre of development, rather than minimum dimensions or size of the single lot.

The density approach requires a project of some size, either in terms of area or number of families, or both.

For example, a project area of 25 acres developed for 5 homes per gross acre would accommodate 125 families on a conventional street and lot pat-



The diagrams illustrate three treatments of a site of approximately 70 acres: (a) Traditional "grid-iron"; (b) curvilinear or "contour"; and (c) cluster, with surrounding common areas. The same number of families is maintained in each layout.

tern. By increasing the density in a part of the tract most suitable for building to six, consolidated common open space of about 4 acres (16 percent of the project area) would result, with no increase in overall family density. Commensurate savings in street and utilities, not required to service this open space, should result in enhanced attractiveness and livability. The size of the development and density ratios could vary as densities were increased or diminished. Open-space areas of less than 2 to 2.5 acres are of doubtful value except for playgrounds for preschool children.

A number of communities are experimenting with zoning code provisions that will permit so-called integrated, community, or planned-unit development. While details vary, all have the common objectives of providing flexibility in layout, design, and usage within a specific project by permitting departures from conventional lot-by-lot development, while retaining comparable densities of population within any given area.

A higher degree of competency in land planning and architectural design obviously is required for this type of development than is customarily found in the conventional lot and block pattern.

The creation and preservation of open space has been stressed as a major objective of cluster planning.

Several questions then arise: Once the open area is created, by whom and how will it be used? Is it adequate for the purposes intended? Who will administer and maintain it? What is its legal status? What is the assurance of its permanence as a continuing asset to the community?

Open space is an important and at the same time an uncertain element in the cluster concept.

The consideration of use must be determined, of course—at least broadly, as part of the original planning. Proposed and actual uses of common areas range from open meadows for grazing the riding horses owned by the resi-

dents of a rural estate development to natural woodlands, water areas, golf courses, parks, playgrounds, swimming pools, and tot lots in progressively more urban and higher density developments. Obviously, the size, location, and type of maintenance and operation of such areas will vary considerably among these facilities.

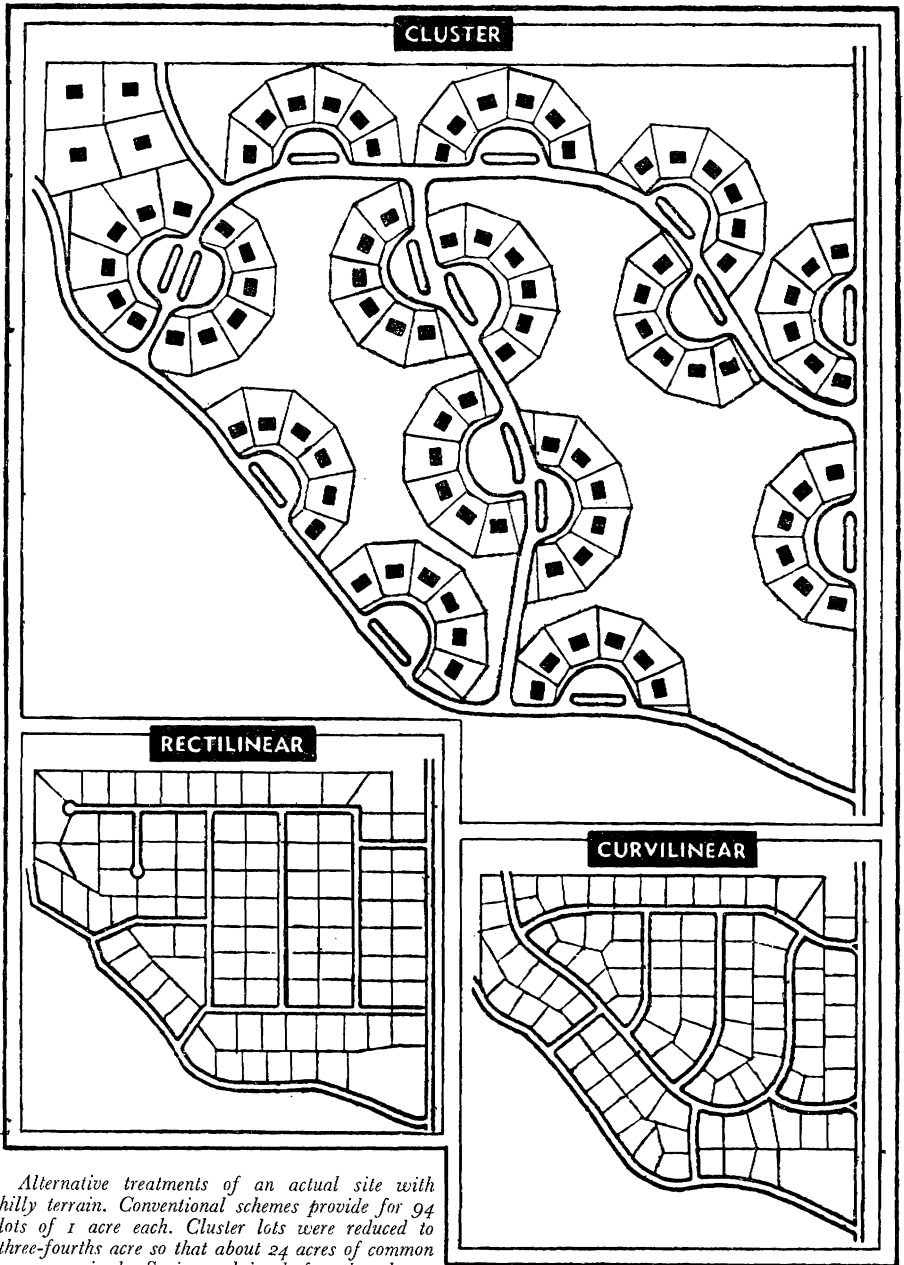
The questions of ownership, administration, and maintenance of common areas in many respects are more critical considerations in the cluster concept than are the technical aspects of design and engineering, for upon them rests the question of continued success or failure.

Two major alternatives exist. One is the dedication of common areas by the developer to the community as public open space. The second is assignment of the areas to an organization composed of the homeowners in the development.

Other, less common, approaches include the establishment of private clubs and the retention of title by the developer, who makes the areas available to the residents through fees, lease arrangements, or other methods.

Dedication of the open space to the community places it entirely within the administrative discretion of the city, town, or county as the property of the public.

This approach has a number of disadvantages. Control over future use and maintenance policy would pass to the municipality. The common areas would be open to the public at large, although an integral part of the cluster plan is that it is designed primarily for the use and enjoyment of the adjoining residents. The municipality is often unwilling to accept dedication or later is unable adequately to maintain, operate, and police the areas or continue the type of use for which the areas were intended. A few States permit the creation of recreation districts under the control of the adjoining residents, a procedure that avoids most of these objections.



Alternative treatments of an actual site with hilly terrain. Conventional schemes provide for 94 lots of 1 acre each. Cluster lots were reduced to three-fourths acre so that about 24 acres of common area remained. Savings claimed for the cluster plan include 6 thousand lineal feet of street and improved circulation and storm drainage, compared to 12 thousand lineal feet and 11,600 lineal feet for the rectilinear and curvilinear schemes, respectively.

Retention of the open areas by membership associations composed of the property owners appears to be a satisfactory way to assure the successful operation of common areas created by the cluster design. The associations can be incorporated with powers of assessment for raising the necessary operating revenues, and can retain ownership and control over policy and operation for the exclusive benefit of their members.

A STUDY of homes associations has been made by the Urban Land Institute for the Federal Housing Administration with the cosponsorship of the National Association of Home Builders, Office of Civil Defense, Public Health Service, Urban Renewal Administration, and the Veterans' Administration.

The procedure for organizing homes associations is: Before selling any of the subdivided land, the land developer incorporates the homes association and files in the public land records the legal agreements that apply to all of the land and run with it. The land agreements empower the association to collect assessments from every property owner for the maintenance of common areas. The land agreements also define other powers, rights, and obligations—such as voting rights—of the association and the property owner.

The association is an incorporated nonprofit organization, usually created by the developer, initially operated by him, and then taken over by the residents at a later stage of development or after the development itself has been completed.

In the study, the experiences of several hundred homes associations were analyzed through questionnaires, field investigations, conferences with association officers and homeowners, and legal research with relation to the administration of common properties and facilities. The study identified about 500 subdivisions having properties maintained by homes associations or other private organizations.

The study revealed the ability of properly established homes associations to own, regulate, and maintain the common open spaces and facilities in cluster subdivisions and similar types of residential development. It furnished guidelines for planning common properties and establishing effective associations under agreements running with the land.

The homes association has proved to be a successful approach to the problem, provided that legal agreements are recorded to establish a firm foundation for its creation and operation prior to subdividing the land and provided that the common properties are designed for the use and enjoyment of the residents involved.

Homes associations can help to satisfy the growing demand for open space in the urban community and the part the cluster and similar land planning ideas can have in creating a better environment.

Additional studies in new concepts in land development have been undertaken in a program sponsored by the Urban Land Institute and the National Association of Home Builders.

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For further reading:

"Cluster Plan Cuts His Costs by One-third." *The NAHB Journal of Homebuilding* (May 1962), pp. 74-76.

New Approaches to Residential Land Development, A Study of Concepts and Innovations. Urban Land Institute, Technical Bulletin 40, January 1961.