

Section 2: Six Elements of Flourishing Neighborhoods

At the outset of this project, the Neighborhood Improvement Committee sought to create a framework encapsulating and describing the principal factors that create an environment in which neighborhoods flourish. The work group primarily responsible for writing this report considered a number of adjectives to describe the chief goal we wished to achieve for Holland’s neighborhoods. The term “flourishing” was chosen because it seemed both appropriately broad and aspirational. By “flourishing,” we mean a neighborhood that is thriving, growing, healthy, and prosperous for all residents, such that no one is left out from benefitting fully from what the neighborhood has to offer.

Several members of the Neighborhood Improvement Committee submitted lists and descriptions of what they considered to be the core elements of a healthy, thriving neighborhood. These lists were compared with several examples of frameworks found from various sources. Eventually, over the course of several meetings, the work group refined these lists and definitions and agreed on the following framework of six key factors.



CONNECTEDNESS, ENGAGEMENT, AND INCLUSIVENESS

The neighborhood is socially cohesive and inclusive, has a positive social climate with a strong sense of collective well-being, community, and neighborhood identity. Residents report a sense of belonging, in particular those who are frequently on the fringes of mainstream society. Residents regularly engage in neighborhood life. The neighborhood is capable of organizing itself either for social purposes or to address particular needs or challenges, whether through the organizing efforts of a neighborhood-based organization, or by neighbors organizing of their own accord.

SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

The neighborhood consists of a safe environment that is resilient in response to difficulties and challenges. Health and safety infrastructure and services are effective and integrated (e.g., mental health services blended with traditional public safety services) and provide residents with a general sense of safety and well-being. Formal and informal communication between local government, public safety entities, neighborhood-based organizations, businesses, and among neighbors is effective at providing all with an adequate level of awareness of safety related matters.

“When we talk about healthy communities, we often talk about economic prosperity, access to fresh produce, or chronic disease among populations. But there’s more than one way to gauge a community’s health, and it’s not about dollars or waistlines or longevity statistics. It’s about engaging in your community and being a part of the world around you.” (Sarah Kobos)

DIVERSITY

The neighborhood both exhibits and welcomes diversity (socio-economic, race, ethnicity, age, religion, ability) among its residents and visitors. An assortment of housing types is present, such that suitable and affordable housing options are available for a range of household sizes, configurations, and income levels. Individuals and households are able to remain in a particular neighborhood, if desired, throughout changes in household size and life transitions.

SENSE OF PLACE AND CHARACTER

A sufficient number and variety of gathering spaces, such as parks, plazas, and certain businesses function as neighborhood gathering spaces. Public infrastructure, such as sidewalks and safe street crossings, and other features, such as the tree canopy and right-of-way landscaping, increase walkability and attract residents to neighborhood gathering spaces. Art, signage and logos reflect the neighborhood’s features and identity. The built environment exhibits a variety of designs and uses providing a sense of place and character.

“Walkability describes the degree of pleasantness of the walking experience, which in turn relates to safety, comfort and convenience.” (Becky P.Y. Loo)

ACCESSIBILITY OF AMENITIES

Sufficient, accessible, and quality services (such as social, health, education, employment, and childcare, etc.), along with amenities (such as public transit, libraries, schools, parks, and recreation facilities and programs) are present and accessible within neighborhoods. Accessibility must include an absence of structural, design, or programmatic barriers to the use of such services and amenities for persons with disabilities.

ECONOMIC VITALITY AND OPPORTUNITY

The neighborhood fosters, attracts, and sustains appropriate business and economic development. Residents have the opportunity to flourish financially by participating in a vibrant, sustainable, multi-sector economy. Residents have the opportunity to participate in varied economic roles, such as business owners, employees, consumers, volunteers, etc. The neighborhood’s economy allows for maximum economic exchanges.

“A good community insures itself by trust, by good faith and good will, by mutual help. A good community, in other words, is a good local economy.” (Wendell Berry)

Why the Six Elements Matter

Many of Holland’s neighborhoods could be described as having each of these various elements, to greater and lesser degrees. All neighborhoods have opportunity for improvement. The list above should be considered aspirational. The six factors represent an ideal that won’t likely be achieved in full, yet they provide a vision of what is desirable and worth working toward. These factors formed the lens from which the remaining sections of the report, the analysis of the data provided, and the selection of proposed tools and strategies, were viewed and considered. They provided the framework undergirding the entirety of the report.

Alignment with Other Studies and Approaches

Upon settling on this framework, it was found that the selected factors align quite closely with the findings of a landmark study, called the *Soul of the Community* study, subtitled “*Why People Love Where They Live and Why It Matters, A National Perspective.*” This study consisted of a three-year survey conducted within 26 US cities by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Key findings from this research were that the core factors that attach residents to communities differ very little across the country. “Whether you live in San Jose, Calif., or State College, Pa., the things that connect you to your community are generally the same.” They include:

- **Social offerings** – places for people to meet each other and the feeling that people in their community care about each other,
- **Openness** – how welcoming the community is to different types of people, including families with young children, minorities, immigrants, older people, and college graduates, and,
- **Aesthetics** – the physical beauty of the community including the availability of parks, playgrounds, trails, and greenspace.

As compared with other possible factors, such as the state of the community’s economy, the availability of jobs, and a city’s basic services, the three factors noted above “have an even larger effect than previously thought when it comes to resident’s attachment to their communities.”

Similarly, a related set of concepts can be found in reports and community development tools put out by the AARP, in particular their Livable Communities team. The AARP defines a “Livable Community” as “one that is safe and secure. It offers choices as to where to live and how to get around. And it equitably serves residents of all ages, ability levels, incomes, races, ethnicities, and other backgrounds.” The AARP publishes a wealth of material providing recommendations and tools for creating what they refer to as livable communities. Several of these resources are referenced in Section 8, Sources and Resources.

Finally, the work group for this report also found much affinity with the work of the organization *8 80 Cities*. The goal of *8 80 Cities* is to help create safe, happy and resilient cities that prioritize the well-being of all members. This organization summarizes its approach as follows,

We believe that if everything we do in our public spaces is great for an 8-year-old and an 80-year old, then it will be great for all people.

Appropriately, 8 80 Cities strongly promotes seeking citizen engagement as cities explore strategies toward the improvement of parks, streets and public spaces for all. They acknowledge that seeking such engagement from residents can be challenging yet assert that it is of tremendous value toward achieving results that are well considered and likely to achieve genuinely positive outcomes that meet the broad approval of the public.

“Children are a kind of indicator species. If we can build a successful city for children, we will have a successful city for all people.”
(Enrique Penalosa)

In close alignment with the work of 8 80 Cities is the analysis found in a recently published report titled *Child in the City: Planning Communities for Children and their Families*. This report begins with the acknowledgment that “children are disproportionately vulnerable to the dangers of urban life, including pollution, poverty, crime and traffic.” The authors surveyed the literature to compile a list of the basic needs of children and families in relation to their interaction with their immediate community. Among the basic needs listed are:

- a) Children need access to safe, uninhibited outdoor play to support their physical and mental health. Outdoor play should include opportunities to interact with the natural environment.
- b) Children need environments that are safe from traffic, pollution, and undue physical or social hazards, including safe routes to and from school and local playgrounds.
- c) Children need stable, appropriate, and affordable housing.
- d) Children benefit from the opportunity for their parents to work locally.
- e) Children benefit from walkable communities, with infrastructure for safe walking, cycling, and recreation.
- f) Children benefit from diverse, multi-generational communities where they can interact with – and learn from – children, adults, and seniors of all races, religions, cultures, and incomes.

This report is particularly helpful in highlighting the interrelationship between housing, child-care, education, employment, transportation, recreation, and neighborhood design, and calls for a “whole-of-government” approach to supporting thriving children, families and neighborhoods.

“The best future for children is shaped by the stability of their homes, families, and communities. Access to appropriate housing, quality schools, safe communities, and healthy natural environments are all critical contributors to healthy child development.” (Child in the City)

Overall, this approach to considering what makes for a flourishing neighborhood **for all** by focusing on how the neighborhood serves and benefits those who are more vulnerable or require special consideration, along with placing strong emphasis on garnering citizen engagement along the way, provides helpful guidance for the way forward as the City of Holland continues to pursue a strategy for helping all neighborhoods to flourish for all.

The Relevance of the Built Environment

The role of the built environment on neighborhood flourishing shows up in several of the six elements noted above, such as the call for diversity in housing types and styles, its contribution to a neighborhood’s sense of place and character, and its role in creating the conditions for economic vitality. The argument goes further that these factors combined frame the environment that will facilitate

“The physical disposition of buildings, the arrangement of land uses, streets, and transit can serve to foster human community or to frustrate it; they can work to isolate others or incorporate them; they can reflect and inspire a sense of the common good or obscure it; they can pay attention to the needs and capacities of the human body or largely ignore them.” (Lee Hardy)

connection and engagement within neighborhoods. For some, this may all seem intuitive, but others may wonder why the built environment is important to building flourishing neighborhoods. The argument in favor of paying attention to the built environment and striving to create conditions that will allow for and encourage the conditions laid out in the six elements is articulated clearly in the Charter document of the Congress for the New Urbanism: “We recognize that physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.” In other words, neighborhood health and vitality, while not guaranteed when the built environment is designed well, is unlikely to be fully realized when those conditions are absent.