

## Thoughts About Lake Forest's CBD – by Jan Gibson

This paper will offer questions about the CBD Study Area, show examples of aesthetics that other cities possess that could relate to those in Lake Forest, explain features of a traditional city, and question why the consultant used the examples that do not relate to Lake Forest.

I like to think of Lake Forest's uniqueness is comparable to that of Savannah's, Charleston's, and Alexandria's special historic districts that are all different but also charming and enduring. Lake Forest's unique character transcends Chicago's North Shore and is worthy of comparison to commercial districts on a national basis. Market Square has been cited as a special and influential commercial area in several books. According to Andres Duany's, et al. *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, we have rebuilt our nation every fifty to sixty years. We have impositions such as federal policies, local zoning laws, the demands of the automobile, and more recently an awareness of sustainability that intersects environmental, economic, and equity (health) concerns. This is a critical time for our CBD committee, City Council, and those of us who care about our historic city.

### Why do old places matter?

Why do old places matter so much to us? What is the essence of their enduring pull? Some writers have highlighted how places help us to establish a sense of identity – to recall who we are and where we come from. Although many people study place, only a handful choose to focus their work on older and existing places. Almost all the attention is on new places – on placemaking rather than place sustaining.

Thompson Mayes, vice-president and general counsel of the National Trust said in his book *Why Old Places Matter*, "Much attention is given to green products and to building new green buildings, but little attention is given to the importance of continuing to use the resources we already have. Similarly in the world of planning, particularly new urbanism, much attention is given to building new communities that are walkable and dense in a way that fosters people's capacity to form community, but very little attention is given to sustaining existing communities, which have already become *community* through the intertwining of people and place over times. It's almost as if these existing older places are so much a part of our lives that they are invisible."

Lake Forest is evaluating its Central Business District (CBD) to determine its future configuration and what would be appropriate for its function. Recently the City had its consultant, Teska & Associates host a public display of urban design concepts, presented at the Gorton Community Center on Dec. 8, 2022. In the presentation was a map of the proposed CBD Study area and visual displays of building concepts for a revised CBD.

### CBD Study Area

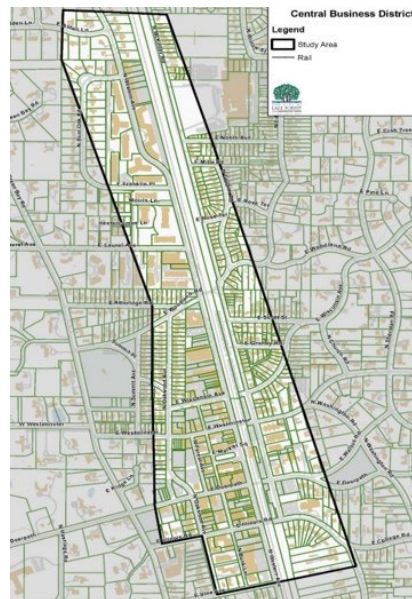
The CBD Study Area is enormous—defining areas well beyond what most people would outline as the business district. However, I've never been aware that the CBD Study Area would include a plot so large to reach north as far as Alden—almost all the way to Lake Bluff and encompass so many single-family homes.

Are the residents who live in this area aware that they are in a CBD Study Area?

Why does the Study Area intersect individual properties (see Burr Oak lots)?

Why would the Study Area include a portion of streets and eliminate the rest of the street (see Atteridge and Scott)?

What constitutes the defined (or arbitrary defined) Study Area boundaries?



CBD Study Area map

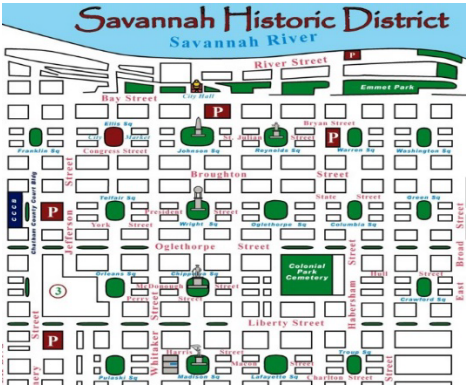
If the subject is growth for the economic portion of our city's sustainability, it would be constructive to have a third choice available from either bad growth or no growth. We need good growth but not just for growth's sake. The problem is that one cannot easily build a Charleston, Boston's Beacon Hill, Nantucket, or Santa Fe – all well-known places, now having become tourist destinations due to their charm, but all exist in direct violations of current zoning ordinances with small, well-intentioned steps, traditional towns have changed for good or bad.

### **Examples of Aesthetics in Cities That Lake Forest Should Emulate**

At the Gorton Center program, Teska displayed a series of photographs of possible development ideas. The photographs were of suburban development work that is found throughout the Chicago-land area, and they are developments that were of no particular architectural quality or interest. Instead of displaying the Styles and Materials visuals on design boards as well as online, Teska should have produced something from communities with the same aesthetic value as Lake Forest. Savannah, Ga; Charleston SC; Santa Barbara CA; Alexandria VA; or Poundbury in Dorchester, England; or even from Plymouth, MA, or other historic districts in the U.S. that have charm, character, and the feeling of historic significance, calming yet beautiful style. Instead Teska gave us the cookie-cutter designs that we see throughout the country: designs without fenestration, confused asymmetrical elements, materials that would never be allowed in our historic districts, and lack of open space that we would wish to have weave throughout Lake Forest.

Please review the below photos that Lake Forest could use in analyzing its design aesthetic:

Savannah, GA: Savannah is famous for being built on a grid in the 1750s of multiple garden squares and open spaces, low profile buildings of mainly two and three-stories (not four and five-story structures); narrow streets; mixed use throughout; tall building tower (similar to Market Square towers and Lake Forest's City Hall).



Charleston, SC: Retail and residential uses mixed together and also mainly three stories with exception of a few of buildings and church steeples (also similar to that of City Hall and the Market Square towers); hotels are also built of three stories to relate to the city.



Santa Barbara, CA: Spanish Colonial style architecture is codified for the Historic Landmark business district—white washed colonial style buildings with red tile roofs. (See Guidelines, El Pueblo Viejo Landmark District.) Low profile business area; narrow charming walkable alleys; State Street – tower  
This also reminds me of our own Market Square and City Hall towers.



Alexandria, VA: Residential – low profile homes; walkable narrow streets; interesting fenestration; low profile businesses.



Poundbury, UK: Poundbury is a planned community and urban extension of the town of Dorchester-- spearheaded by King Charles III when he was Prince of Wales-- Dense; mixed use; narrow streets; compatible; designed by multiple architects-over a period of years.



In today's urban/suburban environment we have cities that sprawl and produce traffic congestion, and are increasingly unlivable. Luckily, Lake Forest is not one that experiences sprawl. However, we need to be aware that the modern trend in urban design is to consciously mimic older town planning designs that focus on dense communities that are walkable and livable. Communities need to be energy and resource efficient.

### **Good Design in a Traditional Community Uses Six Fundamental Rules:**

Lake Forest is a traditional community that should follow rules for being the community that it is.

According to Duany's *Suburban Nation*, traditional neighborhoods (like Lake Forest) have six fundamental rules:

1. The center – traditional neighborhoods need a clear center. We have that with Market Square.
2. The five-minute walk from ordinary needs of daily life: living, working, shopping. We lack this. Where's the corner grocery store within a five-minute walk? If we develop the Forest-Oakwood area within the CBD, we will need more amenities than we currently have. We do have Walgreen's and CVS located in adaptively-reused buildings, but do they expand their selections? Do they morph into local grocery stores, too? Do we have more shopping locations for the needs of the residents?
3. The street network: continuous web -- numerous paths connect one location to another. Blocks should be short. Parts of the CBD have pedestrian-only walkways with the cut-throughs to Market Square South Court and Market Square North. We need to encourage these pedestrian-only pathways in the CBD, and we should connect the corridors to bike paths as well.
4. Narrow streets – This slows down traffic. Our streets are becoming tenuous. Look at Western Ave. and people trying to maneuver the width of the street. Look specifically at Kelmscott with sidewalk jutouts that direct pedestrians to the street edge—confusing both pedestrian and drivers. Residents walking their dogs have walked on the sidewalks then forced to walk in the streets due to the snow last month. Walkers are unaware of the car traffic speed as they move into the streets. It's an area for a potential problem. We might also avoid one-way streets that promote speed.
5. Mixed use – Urban planning now looks to have more mixed use—rather than separate uses. Commercial, business and residential should all be mixed together to promote living close to work, recreation and transportation.
6. Special sites for special buildings. Public buildings need to be incorporated into traditional neighborhoods. City Hall and the US Post Office are prominent public buildings in our CBD. The most important public community building is the neighborhood elementary school, which should never be more than a fifteen-minute walk from the students' homes.

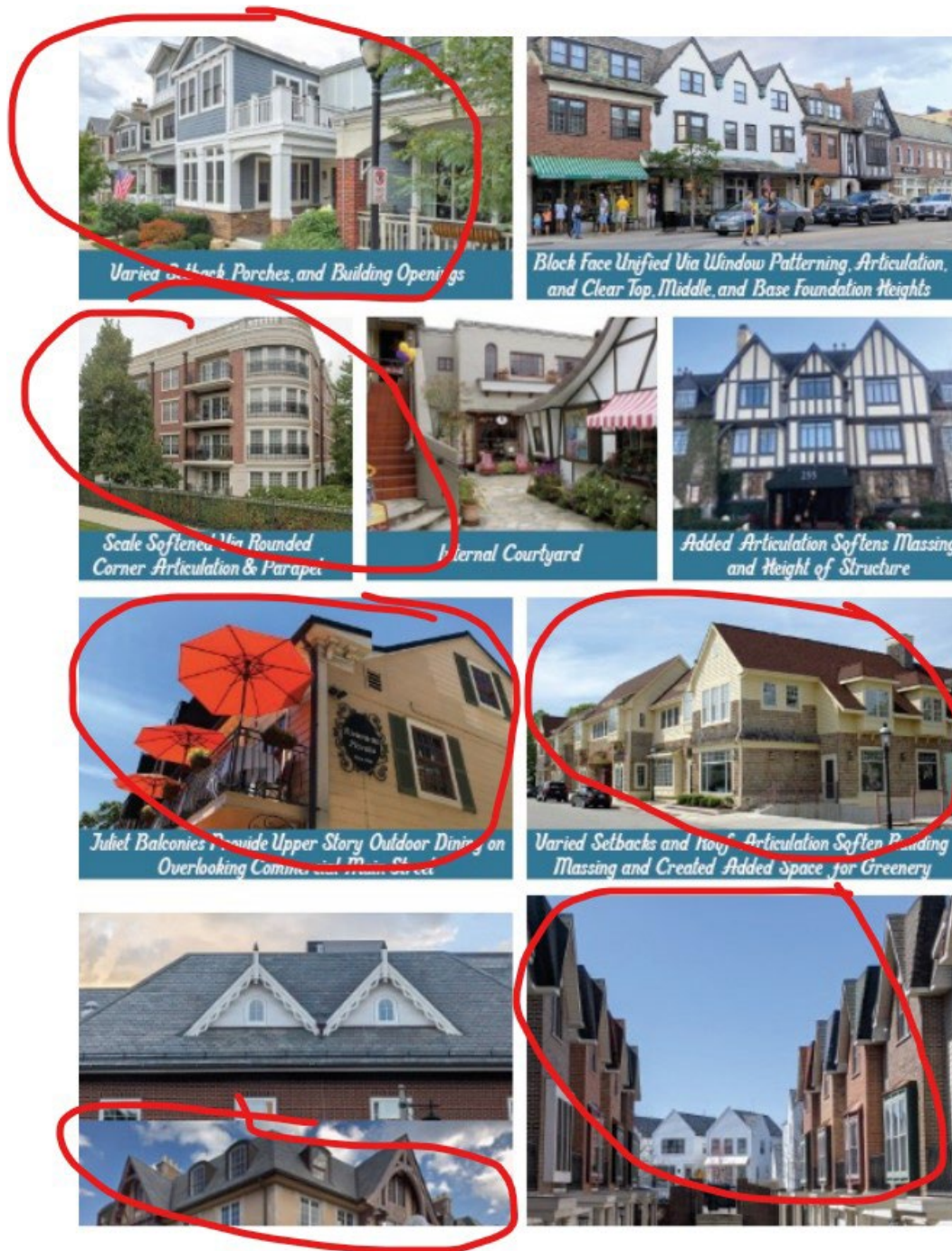
According to Fannie Mae, Americans prefer a good community to a good house by a margin of three to one. (*Suburban Nation*, 112) We need to keep this in mind when planning changes in the city.

Modern development is notorious for its unique approach to nature, typically which is to level the site first; design it later. CBD Planning should follow Thomas Jefferson and spend our resources on designing the plan. Lay it out with the sustainable urban principles that we know to date, the watershed runoff that is needed, and the infrastructure that is needed to promote growth for the next 50 years.

The City of Lake Forest has hired the consulting landscape firm of Teska. Does Teska, who has been hired in the past, really understand our beloved city? Their other clients-- Dubuque, Round Lake, and others do not have the history or charm that Lake Forest has. Are they equipped to evaluate Lake Forest?

Perhaps the City should take the suggestion from Stefano Polyzoides, Dean of Notre Dame's Department of Architecture, who in a presentation this fall at the LF-LB History Center recommended holding a charette of national planning experts and architects who know historic districts. They would be here for a period of time and work through a series of plans.

Please review the designs Teska has given us for the Style and Materials pieces. Eliminating the Lake Forest examples, are these visual examples worthy of even discussing as something Lake Forest would even consider? Some design examples, by the way, do not even meet our current ordinances.



Please review the styles Teska presented to us:

Upper lefthand: We see this style all over cheaper developments -- gray with white trim boxlike with upper porches and brick skirt at ground levels. It juts in and out not applying a clean line anywhere in the design. One will not find this style in the Virginia McAlester book *A Field Guide to American Houses* on American architecture.

Row two from top on left: Probably the worst possible design. We've been presented this rounded tower-like design before. Rounded corner (of which *Suburban Nation* disapproves) -- actually a modified

'tower' that we were shown that Park Ridge used as well as Highland Park and other suburban communities. In the 1990s, we were shown this prior to the Kelmscott design. This is passe, and Lake Forest should never have any structure than resembles this, in and out of the historic districts.

Row three lefthand: This is not what Lake Forest needs -- a bunch of umbrellas hanging over Juliet balconies too small to seat the guests. How do customers reach their tables? What community would allow this?

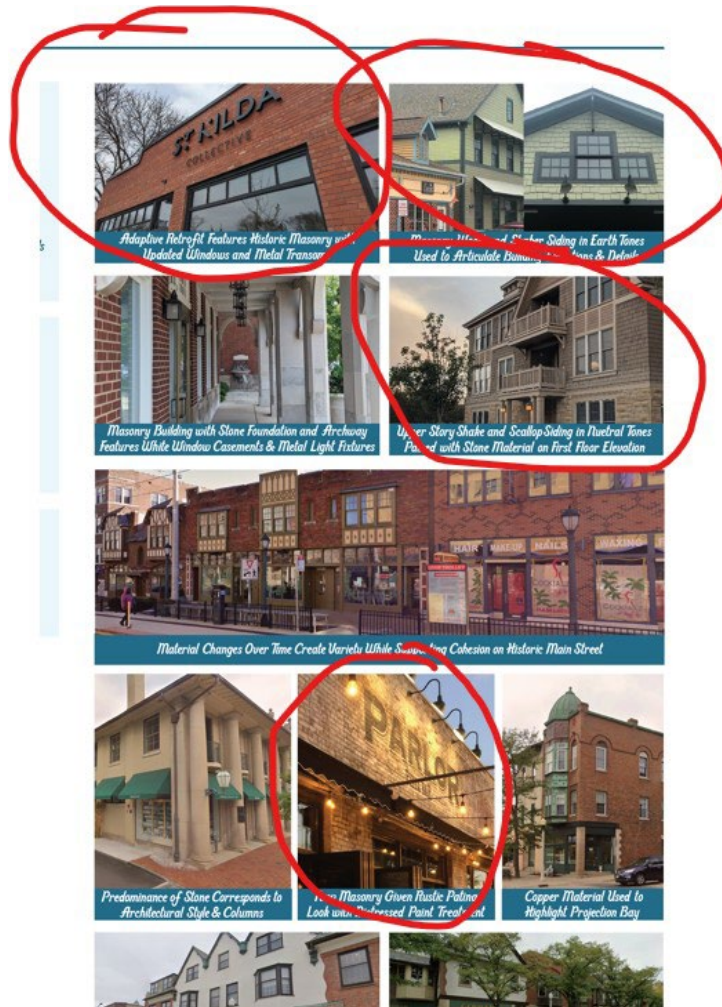
Row three righthand: This ranks among the worst. Notice it says the varied setbacks...created added space for greenery. What greenery? They must mean that 10' by 2' space under the picture window (notice no windows on perpendicular wall). Second, look at the square mansard dormers. This would not even be found in the book entitled, *Get Your House Right*, where we see bad designs and good designs. There is also a lack of fenestration.

Bottom row lefthand photo: Contrived dormers.

Bottom row righthand photo: Here's where we deal with density overload as true urban living, not even acceptable along Chicago's Lake Shore Drive. This is far too dense for our community. This image loses its charm due to its density. Just look what has occurred along the North Shore with Highwood, Highland Park, Winnetka, and Wilmette with their heights, scale, and massing.



Review the Materials example that Teska presented:



In Lake Forest's Historic District, there should never be an experimentation of new materials. Refer to Nantucket and many other historic districts nationwide that have thoughtful, tough, and realistic ordinances that have kept their districts intact. New materials can be experimented with in other areas of our city. Lake Forest could experiment with new materials in area outside of the historic districts. However, the Historic Districts and landmarked buildings should not use materials other than natural stone, wood, brick.

Upper lefthand: What stands out, even more than the stark metal transoms, is the awkward lettering that is contrary to our local ordinance. Once again, no fenestration is presented. This is not an adequate example of what we should be seeing for materials. Compare the materials to those presented in earlier photos of Savannah, Charleston, etc.

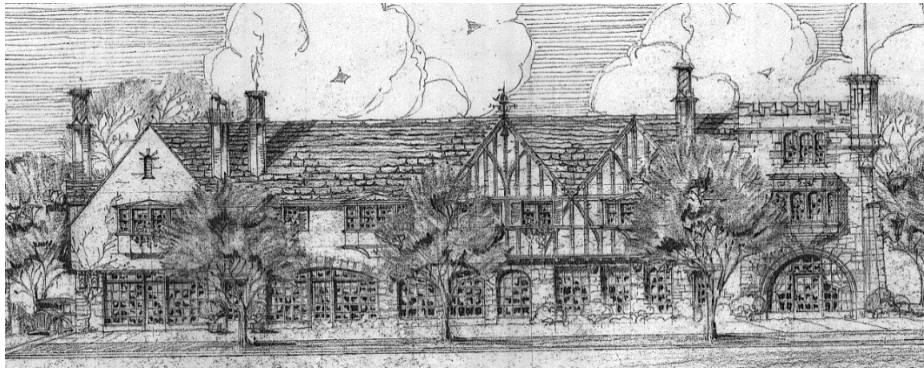
Upper righthand: The windows are generic manufactured windows. The historic districts do not allow substandard windows like these to be on new structures and certainly not on existing historic structures.

Second row righthand: One normally doesn't see two materials combined like this in the historic district. We are seeing stone and shake. It has to be handled carefully. A suggestion is to keep the material unified – all stone or all shake. Also – look at the post-modern windows. No fenestration. Very flat and not an inviting structure. This structure should not be an example of what we should be selecting for materials.

Fourth row center: Lake Forest takes pride in its lighting ordinances. If you check our ordinance, I don't believe you will find this allowed in the historic district. This consultant should have been more familiar with our lighting. This example should not be included in the design board.

Once again, we need to move forward and select a consulting group that understands Lake Forest as well as our historic districts, landmarks, and sensitive growth. We have an English Village design that has been used throughout the CBD for more than 100 years. Our residents take our visitors around town to proudly show them our town.

Here's one of the unbuilt renderings of a Stanley D. Anderson building designed for apartments on the second floor and businesses on the first floor on Bank Lane between the Deerpath Inn and the Deerpath Theatre on Deerpath Road. Something like this design aesthetic could be built for residents and businesses in other areas of our CBD.



Rendering of the J Held Building (never realized)

We believe in structure compatibility, proper scaling, and massing appropriate for Lake Forest. In addition, we know that we should include more on sustainability in environmental, economic, and equity (health) concerns. We suggest that the CBD committee review why the CBD Study Area is so large. Also we suggest that the committee review comparable properties similar to that of Savannah, Charleston, and other noted U.S. historic districts and examples of building aesthetics used in cities much like Lake Forest. And we hope that the committee will recommend a charette to be performed by nationally-recognized architects to present plans that are sensitive and visionary for Lake Forest to last. I think all of us agree that proper planning is important.

Regards,

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January 2023