



Best Practices Review

A quarterly publication on National Register Bulletin guidance

Area of Significance: Community Planning and Development

Introduction

Nominations for historically significant commercial areas and residential neighborhoods often include “community planning and development” as an area of significance. Common reasons provided in these nominations include

- “It is the earliest part of the community to develop”
- “It is a well-established neighborhood”
- “It is the commercial center for the town”

In these nominations, significance in community planning and development is often attributed simply because planning activities or development took place. The period of significance described may span decades, yet lack adequate documentation to support such a broad date range. This issue of the *Best Practices Review* presents guidance, based upon National Register Bulletins and through examples, for applying community planning and development as an area of significance.

What is Community Planning and Development?

“Community planning and development” in National Register practice is “the design or development of the physical structure of communities” (*National Register Bulletin: How to Complete the National Register Registration Form* (Form Bulletin), p. 40). *National Register Bulletin: Historic Residential Suburbs* (Suburbs Bulletin) provides a similar definition: “Community planning and development applies to areas reflecting important patterns of physical development, land division, or land use” (Suburbs Bulletin, p. 99.)

This publication compliments the guidance provided in National Register Bulletins by providing examples on specific topics. Your feedback is welcome; please contact Sherry Frear, Chief & Deputy Keeper, sherry_frear@nps.gov.

For copies of the nominations referenced in this document, please visit our [Sample Nominations](#) page.

For National Register Bulletins and other guidance, please visit our [Publications](#) page.

All images are from National Register nominations unless otherwise noted.

Likewise, *National Register Bulletin: Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes* (Rural Landscape Bulletin) provides that “[c]ommunity planning and development applies where the spatial organization and character of the landscape are the result of either a consciously designed plan or vernacular patterns of land use or land division” (Rural Landscape Bulletin, p. 29).

Common to all of these definitions is a shared understanding of the terms that comprise “community planning and development”:

- “Community” is generally understood to be a city, town, or other specific geographical location, and not a group of individuals linked by a common interest (e.g., scientific community or specific religious community).
- “Planning” is a deliberate activity intended by design or intent to direct and manage growth or use.
- “Development,” on the other hand, is the change to the physical environment through activities such as the subdivision of land or construction of buildings and infrastructure.

In all cases—be it urban, suburban, rural, or some other geographic environment—the scale of community planning and development is variable: the changes intended through planning and development may or may not be part of a broader, more deliberate effort to direct and manage the built environment. Examples below discuss this area of significance for a range of properties, from historic districts to single resources.

When Does Community Planning and Development Apply?

Acts of planning and development alone are not sufficient to demonstrate the significance required for inclusion in the National Register. As explained in the Criteria Bulletin:

Mere association with historic events or trends is not enough, in of itself... the property’s specific associations must be considered important as well (p. 12).

A nomination’s author may incorrectly assume community planning or development took place simply because buildings and streets exist, but this may be the case only in certain parts of the area or municipality. Likewise, the involvement of a “developer” may inspire the inclusion of this area of significance in a nomination because the developer purchased the land, platted a subdivision, sold lots, and designed and built resources—in short, they developed it. However, neither the act of planning nor developing a place equates to significance for community development.

As with all nominations, the significance of a historic property can be judged and explained only when it is evaluated within its historic context (*National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (Criteria Bulletin), p. 7). Additionally, unless the property is the sole example of a property type that is significant in illustrating the historic context or it clearly possesses the defined characteristics required to strongly represent the context, comparison to similar areas or resources in a community is necessary to support significance (Criteria Bulletin, p. 9). For example, to better demonstrate the significance of a property

Key Concepts

- ✓ Acts of planning and development alone are not sufficient to demonstrate the *significance* required for inclusion in the National Register. A property’s specific associations must be considered important as well.
- ✓ It is unusual for a single resource to influence or serve as an important reflection of a community’s broad planning principles and development trends.

or district, the nomination typically discusses the planning and development history of the surrounding community. A property may be eligible for listing if it

- serves as an important response to a planning effort
- has directly influenced later developments
- reflects historic planning or development trends or practices better than others, or
- has introduced innovative planning and design concepts to the area.

Although “community planning and development” as an area of significance is comprised of two activities, only one of those activities—“planning” or “development”—may be the focus of a property’s significance. Nevertheless, “community planning and development” should be cited in the Registration Form’s Section 8 under “Areas of Significance.” The discussion in Section 8’s “Statement of Significance” should clearly describe whether the property is significant for planning, development, or both.

Choosing the Right Criteria for Evaluation

The four basic National Register Criteria for Evaluation recognize different types of values embodied in buildings, structures, objects, sites, and districts (Criteria Bulletin, p. 11). Community planning and development as an area of significance typically applies to properties nominated under Criterion A (events) or Criterion C (design). However, Criterion B (person) may be applicable for a property associated with the productive life of a significant planner or developer. More than one criterion may apply to a property.

In choosing a criterion or criteria, it may be helpful to consider whether the importance of the nominated property is related to its physical characteristics or to the circumstances that led to its construction. Criterion C would be appropriate if the property’s significance is primarily related to its design, while Criterion A would be appropriate if significance is tied to a trend or event, such as an important population increase, or if the property is a response to a community’s important housing, commercial, or other need.

Example: Criterion A

Burglund Heights Public Housing Project

McComb, Pike County, Mississippi, NR Ref. 100009940

Listed in 2024 as a district at the local level of significance for the period of 1940–1975 under Criterion A in the areas of community planning and development, social history, and Black heritage.

Burglund Heights Public Housing Project significance is grounded in the McComb community’s housing history and its relationship with federal programming. The property was listed under Criterion A. As with other communities nationwide, there was a great need for affordable housing in mid-twentieth century McComb, Mississippi. The nomination details the Burglund Heights Public Housing Project as locally significant as one of the first planned public housing developments of the nascent McComb Housing Authority, which was established under the Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937. The law required the formation of local authorities to supervise construction of low-rent housing under the new United States Housing Authority. In addition to so-called “slum” clearance, two public housing projects in McComb were federally funded: Burglund Heights for low-income Black residents and White Acres for low-income White residents.

The nomination provides the context needed to understand the significance of Burglund Heights in McComb’s development history within the context of national and state housing trends. This discussion is critical in conveying the need for public housing and the role the nominated property played in meeting this need. Additional context is provided in a discussion of housing projects that followed Burglund Heights. The period

of significance for community planning and development begins in 1940 when the land was cleared and construction started. It ends in 1941 with the opening of the complex. (The period of significance for the property extends to 1975 for its additional significance in social history and Black heritage.)

Example: Criterion C

Barberton Downtown Historic District

Barberton, Summit County, Ohio, NR Ref. 100007724

Listed in 2022 as a district at the local level of significance for the period 1891–1967 under Criterion C in the areas of community planning and development as well as architecture.

The Barberton Downtown Historic District is the physical manifestation of planning practices, making Criterion C in the area of community planning and development appropriate for this property. Planned by the Barberton Land and Improvement Company, the Barberton Downtown Historic District comprises the core of the industrial community. Barberton was considered a “magic city,” along with Jeannett and Charleroi, Pennsylvania, because these three cities appeared to materialize overnight. All were laid out in an orthogonal grid and shared “a land use plan governed by strict separation of residential, commercial, and industrial uses, with a commercial district located between the industrial tracts and residential streets” (Barberton Nomination, p. 25). The period of significance for the Barberton Downtown Historic District begins in 1891 with the sale of the land, layout of the physical town, and construction of the first buildings; and ends in 1967 with the construction of the last significant commercial building constructed until the 1980s.

The nomination methodically documents the initial planning of the city and its development over the decades, concluding that

The district is unique in its layout around a large natural lake and public park, and the original Barberton plat of an orthogonal grid centered around Lake Anna is still evident. The original land use plan, which separated residential, commercial, and industrial uses, with a commercial district located between the industrial tracts and residential streets, continued to be the defining community plan for Barberton throughout the period of significance. The Barberton Downtown Historic District displays integrity through its intact commercial streetscapes, residential streetscapes, and Lake Anna Park setting that creates a visually distinct environment different from the surrounding areas.

(Barberton Nomination, p. 53.)

Determining the Period of Significance

The period of significance for a property is the length of time when a property was associated with important events, activities, or persons, or attained the characteristics which qualify it for National Register listing. The period of significance usually begins with the date when significant activities or events began; for the built environment, this is often a date of construction (Form Bulletin, p. 42). While the actions associated with “planning”—such as holding meetings and preparing drawings—certainly support “community planning and development,” the planning process is not typically included in the period of significance, because the National Register recognizes the physical resources associated with actions and values, and the planning process predates the physical resource. For the area of significance of community planning and development, the period of significance typically begins with the earliest construction date. As explained in the Rural Landscapes Bulletin,

The period of significance begins with the date of the earliest land use or activity that has importance and is reflected by historic characteristics tangible today.

(Rural Landscape Bulletin, p. 21.)

This concept is typically applicable to any property—be it commercial or residential, urban or rural—as is the direction for selecting an end date or multiple periods of significance:

The period closes with the date when the events, activities, and construction having historic importance ended. Properties that have evolved and achieved importance during separate periods, some spanning several hundred years, should be given several periods of significance.

(Rural Landscape Bulletin, p. 21).

Applying Community Planning and Development to Residential Areas

National Register Bulletin: Historic Residential Suburbs (Suburbs Bulletin) provides many examples of situations where citing community planning and development as an area of significance would be appropriate for residential areas. For example, if

- the neighborhood’s planning and construction related to the expansion of local industry, wartime industry, important stages in metropolitan development, or broad national trends such as returning GIs, the Better Homes movement, and the bungalow craze,
- the neighborhood was designed to conform to FHA-standards and represents one of the “earliest,” “most successful,” “largest,” “finest,” or “most influential” examples locally, or
- the neighborhood introduced or established patterns of subdivision design, housing, financing, or building practices that became influential in the local community, metropolitan area, or elsewhere.

(Suburbs Bulletin, p. 89.)

A nomination for a property that is the “earliest” or “finest”—or any of the other superlatives noted above—should include a historic context and comparison to other properties to support these conclusions. The nomination should discuss why a property is important within the local, state, or national context, and that argument will vary dependent on the resource and context. For example, the Criteria Bulletin provides that Criterion C “applies to properties significant for their physical design or construction, including such elements as architecture, landscape architecture, engineering, and artwork. To be eligible under Criterion C, a property must meet at least one of the following requirements: Embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction” (p. 17). Additionally, a property is eligible as a specimen of its type or period of construction if it is an important example (within its context) of building practices of a particular time in history (p. 18).

Criterion C is not always the right choice for a residential development, but whether nominated under A or C, *significance* must be established in the nomination, as the National Register of Historic Places is a list of places buildings, structures, objects, sites, and districts “*significant* in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering and culture” (36 C.F.R. § 60.1 (emphasis added)). The nomination should explain the importance of the suburban neighborhood in each area of significance by showing that it is a unique, important, or outstanding representative when compared to other neighborhoods of the same period or type or with similar historical associations (Suburbs Bulletin, p. 111).

Applying Community Planning and Development to Organic Growth

Organic development—growth without a formal plan—may be significant, resulting in an important concentration of resources. The **Sugar Loaf Historic District, Orange County, New York, NR Ref. 100010981**, is an example of a collection of domestic and commercial resources that coalesced at an intersection along Kings Highway, an important transportation route. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the hamlet of Sugar Loaf evolved over the following decades to contain a church, taverns, and a school, as well as businesses such as a blacksmith, a cooperage, and a creamery, all strung along the Kings Highway. Sugar Loaf's economy was centered on nearby dairy farms and was bolstered by the construction of a rail line adjacent to the creamery in the 1860s. The district was listed in 2024 under Criteria A and C in the areas of community planning and development and architecture. Its period of significance extends from 1780 to 1974 to account for the village's rebirth in the 1960s as an arts and crafts colony.

Applying Community Planning and Development to a Single Resource



Upper Rockville Mill, main mill, west elevation (Kathryn J. Cavanaugh).

It is unusual for a single resource to influence or serve as an important reflection of broad planning principles and development trends. However, there are exceptions, such as the **Upper Rockville Mill, Hopkinton, Washington County, Rhode Island, NR Ref. 06000552**. This property was listed in 2006 as a building (with six contributing resources) at the state level of significance with multiple periods and areas of significance, including community planning and development. As described in the nomination, the two surviving mill buildings, dating from the mid-nineteenth century, served as the nexus for the development of the village of Hopkinton:

Within the first three decades of the mill's construction, the adjacent village took shape: by 1875 Rockville had a church, a school, a post office, two stores, and about 40 houses, many occupied by mill workers and about a dozen built by the Rockville Manufacturing Company. The mill was Rockville's largest landowner, business, and employer for over a century, and dominated village life for several generations.

(Upper Rockville Mill Nomination, Section 8, p. 1.)

Likewise, **Ten Main Center, Kansas City, Missouri, NR Ref. 15000760**, is a single property significant for its role in community planning and development. It was listed in 2015 as a building at the local level of significance with a period of significance of 1965 to 1968 under Criterion A (for community planning and development)

and Criterion C for architecture. As described in the nomination, this multi-use complex of retail space, offices, and public parking

was the first solely commercial urban renewal project within Kansas City’s central business district spearheaded by the newly developed Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority (LCRA). The process of implementing Ten Main Center paved the way for urban renewal within the central business district of the city and was, therefore, pivotal for Kansas City’s economic future.

(Ten Main Center Nomination, p. 7.)



Palatka Water Works, view of north side and façade of Pump House (Andrew Waber).

Properties vital to the establishment or operation of a town—such as a post office, city hall, fire station, or jail—may be eligible individually for their significance in community planning and development. For example, a resource associated with critical infrastructure, such as a water treatment facility, may be eligible under this area of significance. The **Palatka Water Works, Putnam County, Florida, NR Ref. 100008739**, was listed in 2023 at the local level of significance with a period of significance of 1886–1887 under Criterion A for community planning and development (as well as Criterion C for engineering, with a period of significance of 1886–1963). This facility provided clean drinking water and supported a network of fire hydrants throughout the community, greatly aiding community growth.

A Strategy for Evaluating Many Potential Resources

Not every property constructed due to a national planning and development initiative or trend is significant. Likewise, while a post office or fire station certainly provides a critical community service, not every public service facility in a community is “significant” as that term is used in National Register practice. The development of a Multiple Property Document Form (MPDF) may be helpful: this is a cover document and not a nomination in its own right, but serves as a basis for evaluating the National Register eligibility of related properties. It may be used to nominate thematically related historic properties simultaneously or to establish the registration requirements for properties that may be nominated in the future. For example, there could be more than one neighborhood in a city with a strong association to the city’s streetcar system or its post-war suburban planning practices. An MPDF can establish registration requirements for evaluating and demonstrating which properties or district are illustrative of an important practice or trend. Refer to *National Register Bulletin: How to Complete the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form* for detailed guidance on developing an MPDF.

[The National Register of Historic Places](#)
is the official list of buildings, structures, objects, sites, and districts
significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture.

