

CodeNEXT

Community Character Manual

Problems with Zilker Neighborhood characterizations

1. Types of Places: Walkable Urban

Bouldin Creek neighborhood is used as an example for the Walkable Urban place type.

Issues: Lots and Buildings, page 2-2

A. Under this place type description it states:

“Their relative short street frontages make it possible to incrementally combine and subdivide lots.”

- The ability to combine lots is essentially available to any properties in the city. However the ability to subdivide lots is limited to the total area of the site that is divisible by the minimum lot size.

The concern with this wording is that it suggests that current minimum lot area requirements could be reduced to allow smaller lots than now permit in most of the urban core residential zoning. This would be a significant change in the character of this neighborhood and similar urban core neighborhoods.

B. Under this place type description it further states

“A wide variety of attached and detached buildings are located at or near the sidewalk, some behind small dooryards or terraces, and many are vertically mixed use

- Again there is no way to access the proportionality of attached versus detached buildings in this character analysis so this statement could be used to infer that the character of the area is predominately one type when in fact it is not.
- Anyone familiar with this area knows that the dominate character of the residential area is houses at the front set back line or further back on the lot and not, as this suggests, up to the sidewalk with minimum front yards.
- The inclusion of “many vertically mixed uses “ is used to characterize the entire neighborhood when in fact only the commercial area on the major arterials has mixed use buildings. This inclusion could be used to suggest the existing character of the entire area has many residential vertically mixed uses when it does not.

C. Under Building forms – Residential it indicates:

“ Attached single family and multifamily; detached single family; mid and high rise”

- The order placement of these options could suggest either an order of importance or the preponderance of types. Since this neighborhood is predominately detached single family, it should be listed first but it would be far better to provide information on the percentage of units within each category as a better way to define the character of the area.
- The use of “mid and high rise” is not very informative with regard to the existing character of the area in that neither term is defined. Does this suggest that a 60 or 75 foot high apartment block is in character with existing apartments whose height is limited to 40 feet?
- The inclusion of mid and high rise is misleading in that they occur in MF or less restrictive zoning and are limited in use in this area. Certainly “high rise” is only in the small area adjacent to Lady Bird Lake and there are only a few mid-rise apartment blocks within the entire neighborhood.

The Zilker neighborhood has many of the same characteristics as the Bouldin Creek neighborhood. Therefore the incorrect characterization of what is “Walkable Urban” using Bouldin Creek as an example for this place type could later be inappropriately applied to Zilker and other similarly situated neighborhoods unless these characterizations are corrected.

2. Walkable Urban Grid 2 page 4-12 and 4-13

Zilker neighborhood is used as an example for this Place type

Issues: Character of Place

A. Under the Place Type Description it states

“Robust Transit and bike routes, along with a mix of land uses in close proximity make car use within these neighborhoods a question of convenience rather than necessity”

- This statement suggests that car use is not needed and therefore not part of the “character” of the area. However while Zilker has a major commercial street (South Lamar) with numerous businesses, these business do not provide the full range of services to support the needs of the neighborhood. An important example is the lack of a grocery/supermarket in a walkable distance to the neighborhood.

This statement also overlooks the fact that most of the business within the area cannot be financially viable with only customers that can either walk or bike to stores or offices from the surrounding neighborhoods and they are thus dependent on customers that get to their business by car if transit is not available.

This statement also does not acknowledge the fact that while there is bus service along South Lamar, CapMetro has eliminated all interior bus routes in the neighborhood and therefore the vast majority of residents in this neighborhood are outside a reasonable walking distance to transit.

- * The reference to “mixed use” is also questionable in that while there is a mixture of uses throughout the area, there is no data provided regarding the distribution of these uses. Without that context, the reference to uses suggests that the entire neighborhood has the character of “mixed use” which is not the case since most of the area is single-family SF-3 zoning with only small pockets of higher density residential zoning. There is only one small area (Bluebonnet at Anita) of commercial uses outside the commercial corridors of South Lamar and Barton Springs Road.

The concern with this description’s application to the Zilker Neighborhood is that it gives the impression that future zoning could be less demanding of parking due to this characterization, which is not consistent with the actual character of the neighborhood now and in the foreseeable future if single family zoning is to remain the predominate zoning in the area. So is this characterization to suggest that SF zoning will not be the predominate use in the future?

B. Characteristics of Place

Lot Shape: Under this heading is suggests that the majority of lots are “narrow and deep rectangular lots.”

- While there are several areas within Zilker that have original plated lots of 25 foot frontage, the majority of lots are actually at or above the minimum street frontage required by the city code, 50 foot wide or greater, certainly not “narrow”.

In addition there are numerous irregular shaped lots of varying sizes scattered throughout the area. So is this characterization meant to suggest it is okay to have smaller lots in the residential area of the neighborhood?

Form – Residential: Under this heading it states “Attached multi-family; detached single family”

This order of stating the residential types may suggest to some that the majority of our building forms are “attached multi-family”. However the vast majority of residential building forms are detached single family. It would have been important to provide some data on the percentage of the distribution of these building forms and have this distribution reflected in the order of the unit types.

Parking – Residential: Under this heading it indicates that residential parking is

“on-street, alley loaded garages, and small lots”

- This is not correct in that the majority of residential lots have off street parking as required by the current code. In fact there are very few residential lots that do not have off street parking.

In some areas with newer apartment complexes or where there is new commercial development on-street parking has become necessary due to the relaxation of the parking requirements in the urban core. This on-street parking has now created a significant safety issue in areas with small ROW width and narrow streets that are not wide enough for parking on both sides of the street that then impedes vehicle traffic especially emergency services.

Parking – commercial: Under this heading it indicates that commercial parking is “on-street, front-end, small lots”

- While there are some pockets of commercial use in the neighborhood, almost all of it has off-street parking and very few locations have front-end parking.

However the majority of commercial parking in the neighborhood is along South Lamar and with few exceptions these commercial business have off-street parking. Again, instead of overreaching generalizations which distort the actual on-the-ground situation, it would have been far more accurate to identify the proportion of commercial parking dependent on ‘on-street’ or front-end parking and use that to better characterize our neighborhood.

The concern with these descriptors is that they do not accurately reflect the current character of our neighborhood and will be used later to suggest that such “characteristics” if allowed to be stated in the community character manual, will be used to justify significant changes to reflect these inappropriate characterizations.

3. Neighborhood Reporting Area Details (Zilker area 103) Page N.103.1 to N.103.5

Zoning

- The zoning map has general categories of zoning such as single family, multi family, Commercial, office and other districts.
- But there is no data on the percentage of area for each of these major zoning categories. The current distribution of these zoning categories is essential element which defines the character of this neighborhood. Changing this distribution will have a major impact on the character of the area.
- Also there is no data on the percentage of lot sizes for single family zoning suggesting that all single family is the same with regard to the character of the

neighborhood. There should be some tabulation of the number of residential units on various size lots to better describe the character of the area.

Street Network

- This graphic does depict the streets in the neighborhood and is used to suggest good connectivity. However beyond this broad-brush information there is no data on street widths, ROW or traffic carrying capacity. While the current street network is an important part of the character of the neighborhood all streets are not created equal.
- This broad-brush depiction is insufficient to adequately show the difference in character of the various street profiles and the resultant traffic patterns and congestion that would be a better reflection of the character of our neighborhood.

Transit Access and Bicycle Facilities

- This graphic should have included transit stop locations and the extent of reasonable walking distance to those stops. If transit opportunities are a reasonable indicator of the character of a neighborhood then these should have been included in the analysis.

Future Land Use Map (FLUM)

- Zilker does not have a FLUM since it withdrew from the neighborhood planning process. However Zilker did participate in the City's efforts to establish Vertical Mixed Use Zoning. The Zilker proposal for VMU was unanimously adopted by City Council and as such would be an essential element in a FLUM. This information would have been helpful in depicting what added density the neighborhood has already accepted to be consistent with the character of the area.

Building Footprints

- This graphic is interesting but could have been much more useful if the current impervious cover and the extent of the existing tree canopy calculated since both the open space and our tree canopy are essential part of our character.

Residential Character Photographs

- While all the photos presented in the Community Character Manual are from the Zilker area, do the ones chosen adequately reflect the character of the area? Out of the 16 pictures selected for the printed manual there are 9 single family homes, 3 duplexes, and 4 small apartment buildings. So of these photos only 12 are of buildings in single family zoning with one quarter of them duplexes. Is that a true reflection of the character of the area?

- And is the inclusion of apartment complexes, small and large, in this photomontage in any way suggestive of them being a part of the general character of the

predominately single-family area? Why is the “Sage” project on South Lamar included in the residential character photos while the Bridges, the Cole and Post South Lamar are included in the Commercial Character photos? Is this to imply that smaller scale apartment projects are somehow consistent with the existing residential character and are acceptable in residential zoning?

Commercial Character Photographs

- Of the 12 photos on this page 7 are of entertainment or restaurant venues, 3 of apartment/condo blocks and only 2 of local business service providers. Is this a true reflection of the distribution of business types in the area?
- Do the photos suggest that the South Lamar/ Barton Springs Road areas of the neighborhood has little local business service and are predominately bars, restaurants and fast food establishments which some may suggest is the character of a entertainment district and not of a neighborhood center with diverse services supporting the adjacent neighborhood?

4. Important indicators left out of the Neighborhood Reporting Area Details

While most of the indicators of neighborhood character are easily identified due to their visual presences, what can not be seen is also fundamental to the existing character of an area. In particular the existing natural and built environment is underpinned by the existing infrastructure. Drainage, water, wastewater, roadway, and sidewalks extent and capacity should have been included in this analysis.

Conclusion:

While much of the information in the Community Character Manual is acknowledged as being “broad brush” and not a detailed analysis, such an approach to describing a neighborhood’s character leaves the door open to vastly different impressions of the “DNA” of our neighborhood.

It is also a concern that the format, word order, graphics and selected emphasis and examples have been chosen to support a particular prejudice toward new urbanism and greater density, using this Community Character Manual exercise to set a direction for the development of the new code which would not be in keeping with the character of the existing area, but rather presented in such a way as to justify zoning changes that are aligned with this prejudice.

To ensure that this Community Character Manual is useful in the subsequent CodeNEXT steps, significant revision to this analysis and the inclusion of specific data (as noted above) are needed to better define the real character of our neighborhood. As it is now constructed, this Community Character Manual is inaccurate in its portrayal of the Zilker Neighborhood and should not be relied upon in future development of CodeNEXT.