

# Finding a Sense of Place: What Pennyville Teaches Us About Community Design

## Origins of a Neighborhood

Most people pass through a thousand neighborhoods without ever noticing how they were shaped. Street width, lot size, the location of a corner store, the presence of a front porch: these details are rarely an accident. They are the result of choices made decades earlier by planners, developers, and residents. Pennyville offers a vivid example of how those choices can create something that lasts. It was never intended to be a grand experiment in urban design. It started as a practical response to a specific need: housing for workers near a growing industrial corridor. But the decisions made there, often on a tight budget and with limited materials, produced a place that feels coherent and lived-in in a way that many newer subdivisions do not.

The original planner, a civil engineer named James K. Morrow, had no formal training in architecture. He worked from a simple principle: build close to the street, leave room for a garden in the back, and keep the blocks short so people would walk rather than drive. That last detail, the short block, turned out to be critical. It meant that every few hundred feet, a resident had to make a choice: turn left or right. That constant intersection of paths created a rhythm of chance encounters. People who might never have spoken ended up sharing a fence line or waiting at the same bus stop. Over time, that rhythm became the social fabric of the neighborhood.

## The Logic of Modest Lots

One of the most striking features of [pennyville](#) is the size of its lots. They are narrow by modern standards. A typical lot measures just twenty-five feet wide and a hundred feet deep. That leaves little room for a sprawling lawn or a two-car garage. But it does something else: it forces houses to be close together. That proximity, which might feel intrusive in a suburban context, actually encourages a kind of informal cooperation. People share the work of maintaining a hedge, keep an eye on each other's packages, and trade tools across the fence. The lot size also means that the street is the primary outdoor space. Children play in the road because there is no backyard big enough for a swing set. That sounds like a drawback, but in practice it means that the street becomes a commons. Cars move slowly because they have to share the space with people.

This is not nostalgia for a bygone era. There are real trade-offs. A narrow lot means less privacy. It means that a loud argument on one side of the wall is audible on the other. It means that parking is often a problem, because houses built in the 1920s were not designed for two

cars per household. But those trade-offs are part of what gives the neighborhood its character. They require people to negotiate with each other, to set boundaries, to figure out how to live together. That negotiation is a skill that has to be practiced. In neighborhoods where every house sits on an acre of land, the skill atrophies. People become isolated not because they want to be, but because the physical environment never requires them to do otherwise.

## **Infrastructure as a Social Tool**

The infrastructure of Pennyville was built incrementally. The first streets were gravel. Sidewalks came later, and only after residents petitioned the city. Streetlights were installed piecemeal, funded by a local merchants association. This piecemeal approach meant that the infrastructure was not imposed from above by a distant bureaucracy. It was negotiated, argued over, and eventually built by people who had a stake in the outcome. The result is a network of sidewalks that widens and narrows depending on who owns the adjacent property. The streetlights are not uniform; some are tall cast-iron fixtures from the 1930s, others are shorter aluminum poles from the 1970s. That variety is not a sign of neglect. It is a visible record of the community's history. It tells a story about who lived there and what they cared about.

That kind of organic infrastructure has practical advantages. When a water main broke on Elm Street in 2018, the repair crew found that the pipes had been laid by hand in the 1920s. They were not standard gauge. The crew had to fabricate custom fittings on site. That was expensive and time-consuming. But it also meant that the crew had to talk to the residents, explain what they were doing, and ask for permission to dig in specific places. The repair became a neighborhood event. People brought coffee to the workers. A retired plumber who lived three blocks away came over to offer advice. The process of fixing the pipe strengthened the social ties that the pipe itself served. That is not something you can design into a system. It is something that emerges when people have a long-term stake in a place.

## **How Pennyville Handles Change**

No neighborhood stays the same. Pennyville has seen waves of demographic change over the past century. The original workers were largely European immigrants. Their children moved to the suburbs. New residents arrived from Latin America and Asia. Each wave brought different expectations about what a house should be, how a yard should be used, and what the role of the street should be. Those differences created friction. Longtime residents complained about the smell of cooking that drifted out of open windows. New residents thought the old lawns were a waste of space and planted vegetables instead. The zoning code, written in the 1940s, did not anticipate raised garden beds or backyard chickens.

But the narrow lots and short blocks forced people to negotiate those differences face to face. You cannot ignore a neighbor who is planting tomatoes two feet from your property line. You

have to talk to them. And in talking, you discover that they have a reason for what they are doing. The tomatoes are not a statement. They are a way to feed a family on a budget. The smell of frying garlic is not an insult. It is a recipe that has been passed down for generations. That kind of understanding does not come from a zoning board hearing. It comes from standing in the street with a cup of coffee and a neighbor who is doing something you do not understand.

Pennyville has changed a great deal in the last thirty years. The industrial corridor that gave it its original purpose is mostly gone, replaced by a mix of light manufacturing and tech startups. The houses have been renovated, often by people who work in those startups and who value the short commute and the walkable streets. That has driven up property values and displaced some longtime renters. It is a real problem. The same physical qualities that make the neighborhood attractive to newcomers are the qualities that make it vulnerable to rapid gentrification. There is no easy answer to that. But the neighborhood has a history of organizing. Residents have formed a land trust to buy a few properties and keep them affordable. They have lobbied the city for inclusionary zoning. They are using the same skills of negotiation and collective action that the narrow lots and short blocks taught them.

## **Lessons That Travel**

The story of pennyville is not a blueprint. It cannot be replicated exactly, because the conditions that produced it were specific to a particular time and place. But there are general lessons that apply to any effort to build a livable neighborhood. First, the scale of the block matters more than most people realize. Short blocks create intersections, and intersections create chance encounters. Second, the size of the lot should be determined by the kind of social interaction you want to encourage, not by the size of the car you want to park. Third, infrastructure should be built slowly enough that the people who use it have a say in how it is built.

None of these lessons are new. Jane K. wrote about them in the 1960s. William H. Whyte studied them in the 1970s. But the lessons keep getting forgotten because they are hard to implement at scale. Developers want to build fast. Municipalities want uniform codes. Banks want standardized lots that are easy to appraise. The result is neighborhoods that are efficient to build but sterile to live in. Pennyville is the opposite. It is inefficient. It is idiosyncratic. But it is alive. That aliveness is not a luxury. It is a necessity for people who want to feel connected to the place where they live.

The neighborhood is not perfect. It has problems with flooding because the drainage system was never upgraded. It has a shortage of trees because the original planners did not plant any. The sidewalks are cracked and uneven. But those imperfections are part of what makes it real. A perfect neighborhood would be a museum. Pennyville is a home. And homes are supposed

to be lived in, not preserved. The challenge for the current generation of residents is to pass on that sense of livability to the next generation, without losing the character that makes it worth preserving.

There is no single formula for community. But if you look at places that have managed to sustain a sense of belonging over decades, they share some of the same features that pennyville has. They are dense enough to support a corner store. They are walkable enough that people see each other regularly. They are flexible enough to accommodate change without losing their identity. Those features are not expensive to build. They just require a different set of priorities. The first priority should always be the people who will live there, not the cars that will pass through, not the profit that can be extracted, and not the speed at which the construction can be completed.