

Pattern Books: A Planning Tool

by Amy Souza

Think of an older neighborhood with smallish houses set back from tree-lined streets. Then picture a new home, three stories high, pushing to the edge of its lot, towering over its neighbor. Even if the design is right – Craftsman on a street of bungalows – the scale is all wrong. The house looks bloated and out of place. Or maybe three blocks of modern townhouses are built just outside a village of historic single-family homes. Most people know when buildings do not fit their surroundings, but many communities struggle with how to combat such construction proactively.¹

What's at stake is a sense of place, which comes as much from a town's man-made landscape as from its natural setting and the personality traits of its residents. New England's picket fences,

1 Some people actually favor overly large houses, sometimes called monster homes or McMansions. See the May 2002 issue of *Planning* to read why Robert Lang and Karen Danielsen think large infill buildings benefit both the economy and neighborhoods.

San Francisco's colorful Victorians – these speak to each area's character and uniqueness and are part of what attracts people to visit or live there. But what of the street lined with nearly identical garage-fronted homes lacking architectural details and providing no regional clues? That generic street could be anywhere, and for many people that's a problem.

"A lot of things get done hastily, without people being very aware of what gives a place distinction," says Philip Langdon, senior editor of *New Urban News*.

CONTEMPORARY PATTERN BOOKS ARE THE DESCENDENTS OF THE BUILDING GUIDES WRITTEN BY THE WORLD'S EARLIEST ARCHITECTS...

Pattern books filled with historical and architectural data and guidelines can help cities and towns steer development efforts to more easily protect and enhance their identity. Sometimes they contain regulations that must be followed; other times they offer suggestions.

While pattern books have been called a tool for New Urbanism, and many are used to promote traditional neighborhood design, that is not their only purpose. The push to create a pattern book often comes after a city witnesses out-of-place building – a log cabin in the seaside town of Denton, Maryland, or rebuilt dwellings crowding small lots in Kansas City's post-World War II suburbs – or after a municipality creates a special redevelopment zone.

Norfolk, a city on Virginia's southern

coast, has experienced extensive infill development and renovation of older homes.

"The houses have character and history, but often lack the modern amenities that support today's lifestyles," Acquanetta Ellis, Norfolk's assistant director for planning and community development. "We were seeing construction that was not compatible or appropriate and were concerned because it's devaluing the communities."

City officials turned to Pittsburgh-based Urban Design Associates (UDA), an architecture and urban design firm, to develop a citywide pattern book. Created as part of Norfolk's strategic housing initiative aimed at strengthening the city's neighborhoods and increasing home ownership, the pattern book was intended, in part, to educate residents about the architectural and historic significance of their homes – in the context of Norfolk's neighborhoods and housing patterns.

Virginia law does not allow a city to dictate residents' architectural style choices, Ellis says, but "what we find is if you educate residents about the choices, most of the time they will make better decisions."

UDA cataloged the various types of Norfolk architecture, by looking at neighborhood and housing patterns. The resulting document provides historical data and ideas for renovation or new construction.

The city gives out the pattern book free of charge and would like every resident and builder to have a copy, notes Ellis. "Residents are better able to understand the significance of their property within the context of their neighborhood and the city," she adds.

1. The Result of a Process

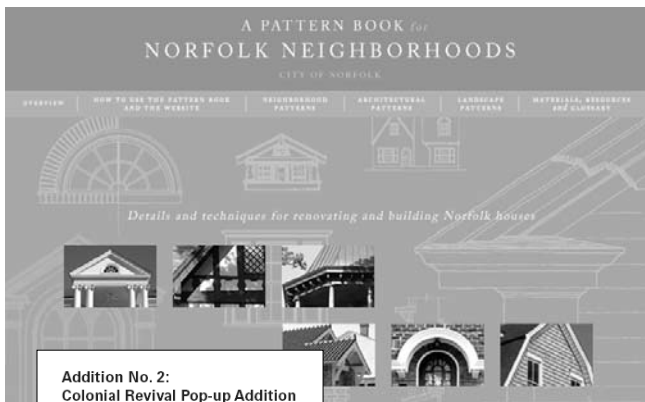
UDA literally wrote the book on modern-day pattern books. *The Architectural Pattern Book: A Tool for Building Great*



Many Minds' Eyes

"Part of the big gap that comes with layperson planning commissions is that everyone envisions something else," says Rob Robinson of Urban Design Associates. "No one's a great 3-D visualizer." Even people with technical knowledge, like engineers, architects, and builders, have trouble forming a mental picture from floor plans or CAD drawings, he notes. So for every project, UDA builds a three-dimensional physical model at a scale of one inch to twenty feet. Robinson calls the models "a great equalizer." "Your eighty-three-year-old grandmother can walk in and say, 'What's that?'"

Once a group has reached consensus on the types and scale of buildings, UDA develops drawings from the 3-D models.



Norfolk's pattern book includes a focus on how renovations and additions can fit with the neighborhood character. This is an important issue in many cities having a large stock of small, post-World War II single-family houses.

If You Create a Pattern Book

The pattern book process doesn't have to be intimidating, but it does require forethought and intention. In addition to the usual project management concerns like budget, timeline, and ownership, here are some things to consider:

- Write down the goals you have for the book. Is it for a specific development area or broader in scope? Will it detail regulations or make suggestions? How will it be used and by whom?
- Gather stakeholder input and facilitate open communication among area builders, realtors, planning commissioners, public works staff, and the public. Consider using a charrette process to reach consensus.
- Seek out other communities, in your region or beyond, that have created a pattern book for a similar project. Gain the benefit of their experience.
- Determine staffing. Will you hire a consultant or manage the project in-house? You will also need a number of professionals, including an architect for drawings, a graphic designer to layout the final document, and a writer for the text.
- Determine how you will distribute the book. Will you give it away or sell it? If it will not be printed, will it exist on your web site as a pdf file, and will the public have access to downloading it?

If you plan to print the book, consult with a design professional early in the process to make sure you're not designing a document that will exceed your budget.

Addition No. 2: Colonial Revival Pop-up Addition
 This addition provides a generous quantity of living or bedroom space on a new floor by "popping up" a second living level over the majority of this relatively long house. By stepping in the addition so it isn't as long as the house itself, the proportions of the front facade are reduced, thus giving the house a more vertical appearance, which is more typical for this style. This addition could allow for existing first floor bedrooms to move upstairs and thus create larger living, kitchen and dining spaces on the first floor. An important consideration on the redesign of the first floor is finding an appropriate location for the new stair to the second floor.
 Building on the Colonial Revival tendencies of the house, this addition shows architecturally correct second-floor windows and trim, and a new door with sidelights. Lower-level windows are replaced with a triple window composition of traditional proportions to match the windows on the opposite side and provide a symmetrical facade composition in keeping with traditional Colonial Revival houses.



Neighborhoods compiles highlights and lessons learned from the firm's 30+ years developing and producing the guides for municipalities across the globe.

Architect Rob Robinson, a UDA principal and the book's co-author, started using pattern books in the 1970s as a UDA client. His then employer, the Richmond (Virginia) Housing Authority, hired the firm to develop a master plan for a particular redevelopment zone. Newly constructed commercial buildings in this area (despite the city's written regulations and guidelines) bore no relation to Richmond and looked as if they could have been built anywhere. City officials decided that, in addition to a master plan, they needed a detailed visual guide, in part because the usual images – what Robinson calls "bad engineering CAD drawings" – didn't provide much useable data for builders or for city planners faced with approving a construction project.

"Pattern books have been around forever," Robinson said, "but in Richmond we took it just one more notch of con-

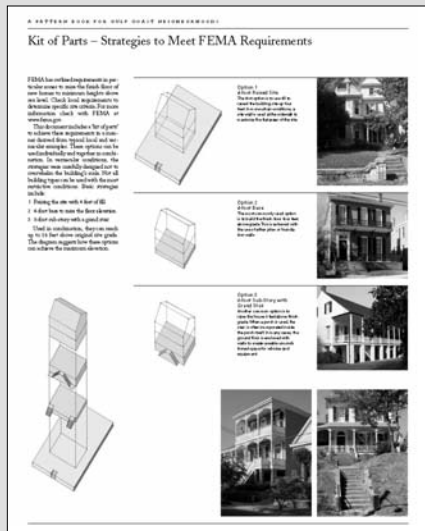
necting the pattern book to the master plan, which resulted in an approval tool for the city and an implementation tool for the housing authority."

That connection – between master plan or a project's goals and the actual pattern book – is crucial, Robinson says, as is a high degree of specificity making clear what can be done and how. "You can't cover every last thing," he notes,

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Gulf Coast Pattern Books

Perhaps the most widely reported on pattern books have been the result of recovery efforts from Hurricane Katrina. State agencies, drawing on planners, architects, and urban design professionals, have released pattern books as a key tool in rebuilding communities.



A *Pattern Book for Gulf Coast Neighborhoods* includes several well-illustrated pages focusing on strategies for meeting FEMA requirements.

One of the most significant examples, prepared in Mississippi under the leadership of the Governor's Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal, is A *Pattern Book for Gulf Coast Neighborhoods*. As Governor Haley Barbour describes in its Introduction, the pattern book "follows the tradition of American town building by providing practical tools and resources for small builders, homeowners and suppliers. In an effort to conserve and restore the sense of place that is specific to each locality, this book provides a kind of DNA code for our communities and our inherited architecture." Barbour urges builders to make use of the pattern book in both renovation and new construction.

Under the guidance of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, a comparable pattern book (*Louisiana Speaks: Pattern Book*) has been prepared for hurricane devastated communities in that state. The two books focus, in large part, on practical ways to rebuild housing for a range of income levels. They also include detailed information on how building designs can comply

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"but if you just lay out a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts,' you've just spent a lot of money for something with very little teeth."

The ideas in the book should also be regionally appropriate, Robinson explains. That's why UDA's process starts with gathering as much information about a place as possible. "We spend a lot of time looking at what a community's inherited patterns are ... and we spend time with builders, looking at the floor plans they use."

UDA designers travel to a town and take photographs of houses, noting where certain styles appear and which occur most frequently. They note, too, the natural surroundings, which helps inform both landscaping and building material choices, and then compile what they've learned to create a regional palette. This allows UDA to open a dialog with local officials, builders, realtors, and residents about what the municipality wants to see and to make suggestions based on their observations.

2. The Importance of the Process

Community-wide pattern books like Norfolk's generally provide suggestions that homeowners and builders can choose to utilize or not. In contrast, pattern books are created for specific projects (such as the redevelopment of a downtown area) often spell out rules and regulations. But whether community-wide or area specific, pattern books are usually the end product of a months-long process that, in addition to basic information gathering, includes public input sessions, sometimes in the form of a charrette. *Editor's Note: For more on charrettes, see "An Introduction to Charrettes," in PCJ #71 (Summer 2008).*

"We advise all of our clients to open up the process to public input, and if it's opened early that's the easiest time to respond to people's concerns," UDA's

2 Editor's note: Subsequent to completion of the article and just prior to publication, we heard from Brentwood Planning Director Joe Lassus that the project Amy Souza describes in the following paragraphs "returned to the planning commission in September with some design change and received approval by a vote of 7 to 3."

Robinson says. "This is the best way to gain public enthusiasm, goodwill, and responsiveness." "By the time you get to the guide, everybody knows how you got there," he adds.

Ray Heil, revitalization project manager in the Baltimore County Office of Community Conservation, agrees. As part of its Renaissance Redevelopment Pilot Project aimed at revamping neglected areas, the county acquired an 18-acre site on which sat a blighted, World War II-era apartment complex. The county ran a seven-day charrette, open to all community members. The first night, people met in small groups to discuss what they'd like to see done with the property. Professional architects then drew plans of those ideas for a "pin-up" session the next night, during which residents could comment on the drawings and provide additional suggestions.

This input-design-pin-up process continued until the group reached consensus on the area's look and amenities, and came away with a plan to create a mixed-income neighborhood of single-family houses and townhomes.

"The pattern book is the document that provides assurance to the community that the project is ultimately going to be consistent with what everyone agreed to in the charrette," Heil says. "The value is that it builds a level of trust within the community. We were able to get support for a relatively dense project with mixed-income housing that we think couldn't have been done any other way than this: getting buy-in up front and having a document to refer to."

After the county demolished the old apartment complex, however, the site sat empty for a number of years. Local newspapers reported that residents feared builders were being scared off by the detailed pattern book. This year, though, the county entered into an agreement with a builder who is now preparing the site.

3. The Visuals

Pattern books themselves come in many shapes and sizes. Baltimore County chose not to print theirs, so it lives as a .pdf document on their web site. The



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History

Contemporary pattern books are the descendents of the building guides written by the world's earliest architects in Greece and Rome. European regions, notably France, England, and Italy, each produced own pattern books that guided design, and early American settlers had books to refer to as they expanded west. Plan books remained popular in America in the late 19th century on through development of kit houses, such as those by Sears and Roebuck in the early 20th century.

While architects have often been instrumental in putting together pattern books, one of the very purposes of pattern books (and reasons for their popularity) has been to allow smaller-scale local builders and home buyers to avoid the extra cost of needing their own architect. Interestingly, some recent pattern books have specifically focused on providing well-designed, low-cost housing. One example, "A Pattern Book for Neighborly Houses," developed for Habitat for Humanity, was one of the recipients of the 2008 Congress for the New Urbanism Charter Award; www.cnu.org/node/1822.

Sears has a truly remarkable online archive of its mail order homes. As the company notes, "From 1908–1940, Sears, Roebuck and Co. sold about 70,000 - 75,000 homes through their mail-order Modern Homes program. Over that time Sears designed 447 different housing styles, from the elaborate multistory Ivanhoe, with its elegant French doors and art glass windows, to the simpler Goldenrod, which served as a quaint, three-room and no-bath cottage for summer vacationers."

FOR LESS THAN \$2,500⁰⁰ YOU CAN BUILD
THIS ELEGANT CONCRETE AND FRAME CONSTRUCTION
NINE-ROOM \$4,000.00 HOUSE

BY USING OUR PLANS, SPECIFICATIONS AND BILL OF MATERIALS WHICH YOU CAN GET FREE, AS EXPLAINED ON PAGE 4.

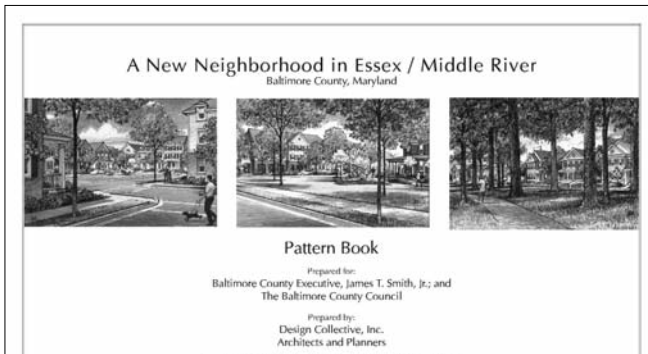
MODERN HOME No. 111
The arrangement of this house is as follows:

First Floor: Living Room 12' x 16', Dining Room 10' x 12', Kitchen 8' x 10', Parlor 12' x 14', Hall, Bathroom, Porch 6' x 8', Entry 6' x 8'.

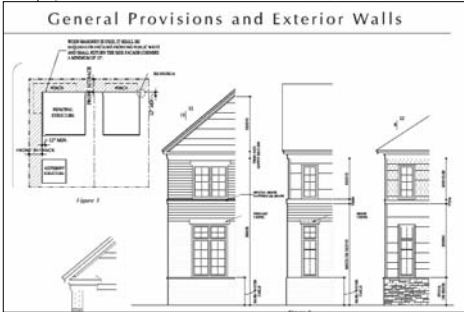
Second Floor: Bed Room 12' x 14', Bed Room 10' x 12', Bed Room 10' x 12', Hall, Bathroom, Porch 6' x 8'.

Roof: Gable roof with dormer.

BOOK OF MODERN HOMES - 13 - Sears, Roebuck & Co., Chicago, Ill.



Holding a week-long charrette was key to developing plans for a new neighborhood on the 18-acre site of a demolished apartment complex in Baltimore County. The charrette also laid the groundwork for putting together the pattern book.



Mid-America Regional Council's *Idea Book for Updating Post-World War II Homes* is 11" x 17" and spiral-bound. Its 36 pages contain information and images of home types found in the city's innermost suburbs (ranch, two-story, Cape Cod, and split-level), as well as historical data and ideas for tackling renovation projects to address what homeowners dislike about their older homes: too few bathrooms, small kitchens, one-car garages, and a lack of energy efficiency.

Most books contain extensive visual evidence, such as photographs of sample homes and buildings, architectural drawings of outdoor and indoor spaces, and size and scale dimensions. Yet it still sometimes happens that different people to refer to the same book yet don't envision the same thing.

This year, Brentwood, Tennessee's planning commission voted on a new development project and split four to

four, despite having a pattern book to guide them.² The book focused on a special zoning district developed in 2004, the goal of which was to establish what residents had continually expressed they wanted: a traditional downtown with walkable amenities that gave the town a sense of identity. The 40-acre area with commercial buildings dating from the 1940s to 1960s hadn't seen new construction or extensive renovation in 30 years.

After a public input session, approval of the new zoning, and creation of the pattern book, the town spent \$3.5 million for infrastructure investments, including building a road into the area, complete with a roundabout and clock tower.

"The pattern book is a reiteration of the regulations with graphic and photographic elements to guide builders," says

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Pattern Books in Conway, Arkansas

by Donald Anthony

Conway is a city of just over 52,000, located about 30 miles north of Little Rock. In 2007, the Conway Planning and Development Department created two pattern books based on guidelines included in ordinances enacted by the Conway City Council.

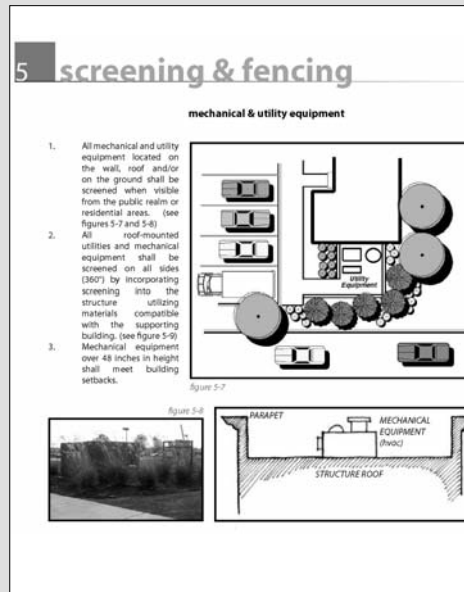
The *Design Standards Pattern Book* includes city-wide development guidelines and is the result of an amendment to the city's Zoning ordinance; the amendment created a development review process for new developments and expansions of existing developments.

The *Old Conway Residential Design Guidelines Pattern Book* includes development guidelines for residential developments in the Old Conway Design Overlay District.

Why develop a pattern book? As explained in the introduction to the *Design Standards Pattern Book*, it "is intended as a reference point from which all persons involved in the development process can gain a common understanding of the minimum design expectations in Conway. Designers and developers are urged to become familiar with these guidelines and to apply them to the design of their projects from the very beginning. This is to assure that projects can be designed, then reviewed and permitted by the City, as efficiently as possible."

As the introduction continues, "This Pattern Book identifies techniques and minimum standards for achieving the level of design quality that the citizens of Conway will come to expect in all new development, as well as redevelopment. ... No claim can be made, however, that the guidelines contained within this Pattern Book encompass every possible technique for achieving a high level of design quality. The designer is encouraged to use his or her own creativity and experience to improve upon the means for achieving individual objectives."

The *Design Standards Pattern Book* clarifies the ordinance and includes illustrations of desired and/or acceptable site characteristics, which are grouped into six categories: design and architecture; traffic, access, parking, and loading; screening and fencing; landscaping; lighting; and signage. An additional chapter contains illustrations and guidelines for atypical developments such as mixed-use areas, big box stores, outdoor din-



Conway's *Design Standards Pattern Book* even offers guidelines on issues like the screening of trash receptacles and utilities – concerns which, while perhaps minor on any one project, can add up to having a major impact on the visual character of the community.

ing establishments, and intensive industrial areas.

We have found that the *Design Standards Pattern Book* is much more user-friendly than the "legalese" language of the ordinance itself. The pattern book includes all of the necessary items (the "shalls") from the ordinance as well as the Planning and Development Department's recommended items (the "shoulds").

By illustrating the ordinance and offering scenarios and examples, we find that we are better able to find a common language with landowners and developers regarding the most important components of the ordinance.

The *Old Conway Residential Design Guidelines Pattern Book* simplifies the ordinance that regulates residential development within the Old Conway Design Overlay District, which encompasses downtown Conway and the neighborhoods immediately surrounding it. As with the *Design Standards Pattern Book*, it is illustrated and conveys the items found within the ordinance itself (the "shalls") as well as the items encouraged by the Conway Planning and Development Department (the "shoulds").

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Joe Lassus, director of planning and codes department. "It also outlines the technical standards written into the code. The code is not definitive; it contains more 'shoulds' than 'shalls.' There is some latitude that the planning commissioners can use."

A local developer purchased four lots and in June brought two designs before the commission – one, for a spec building, which the commissioners approved; the other, which would sit on a prominent corner in the new downtown and was to be constructed for a local bank, was rejected. At the review meeting, four commissioners believed the proposed design met the pattern book's spirit and requirements; four thought it didn't. The main point of disagreement was the roofline. Everyone involved appeared surprised that they didn't agree with one another, particularly because the architect had utilized the pattern book when designing the proposed structure.

Randy Campbell, who has been on the commission for 13 years and became chairman this year, say he voted to approve the plan, but respects the four commissioners who spoke out against the building because they truly believed it didn't meet the pattern book's guidelines.

"I thought the pattern book would make it more cut and dried, but it didn't," says Campbell. Still, he notes, "I'd much rather have it than not. Maybe over time you become clearer on the visualization of a project, and future applicants will have this as history."

Commissioner Jack Fletcher voted against the proposal, but also favors having a pattern book as a guide. "They always have to have a generic component to them, so there's always going to be some subjective interpretation," says Fletcher. But, he adds, the detailed drawings and text give builders a sense of direction, let them know what's expected. "It also ought to make it easier for the commission, or in any case it gives them something to fall back on, a sense of what fits and what doesn't fit." The alter-

native – evaluating a project without visual guidelines as reference – is much less desirable, Fletcher observes.

4. Cost/Benefit Analysis

According to Rob Robinson of UDA, it can take anywhere from six to nine months to complete a pattern book process, including gathering information and gaining public input. UDA's projects average \$150,000. Baltimore County's charrette and pattern book design process cost approximately \$90,000 and took nine months (six for the charrette process, and then three to complete the pattern book). The county chose not to publish a hard copy of the book, however, due to printing costs. Like many other recently developed pattern books, it exists on the county's web site as a .pdf.

The Mid-America Regional Council paid \$35,000 for architectural drawings and \$18,000 to print 5,000 copies. Project management and graphic design were done in-house, so those costs were not broken out. MARC sold the book for \$10 on their web site and in bookstores.

Norfolk's pattern book took approximately six months to complete. The book's first 9,000 copies have been distributed, and the city recently printed

another 5,000. Cost estimates were not available. In addition, the book is available on the web as a series of .pdf documents.

Ultimately, the decision to create a pattern book depends not upon money but upon need. "I think a pattern book makes sense when communities are getting construction that they don't think fits in or they're getting a hodgepodge of construction that doesn't connect very well with the community," explains Norfolk's Acquanetta Ellis. When a locality sees that occurring it gets them interested in doing something like a pattern book." Says UDA's Rob Robinson, "It's a journey for everybody to find better tools and to demand better information for negotiating and making decisions." ♦

Amy Souza is a writer and editor living in Arlington, Virginia. She has written on a variety of environmental topics, and is the author of two articles published in the Planning Commissioners Journal: Community Food Needs & Opportunities (PCJ #63, Summer 2006); and Planning for Dogs: Exercise vs. Restraint (PCJ #55, Summer 2004).



Resources



Books:

- *American Architects and Their Books, 1840-1915* (2007), Kenneth Hafertepe and James F. O'Gorman, Eds.
- *The Architectural Pattern Book: A Tool for Building Great Neighborhoods* (2004), Urban Design Associates
- *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (1977), Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein
- *The Urban Design Handbook: Techniques and Working Methods* (2003), Urban Design Associates

Available Online:

- First Suburbs Coalition Idea Book and Green Idea Book, Mid-America Regional Council, Kansas City, Missouri
www.marc.org/firstsuburbs/planbook.htm and
www.marc.org/firstsuburbs/greenideabook.htm
- A Pattern Book for Norfolk Neighborhoods, Norfolk, Virginia
www.norfolk.gov/Planning/comehome/Norfolk_Pattern_Book/
- Kingsley Park Pattern Book, Baltimore County, Maryland
www.baltimorecountymd.gov/Agencies/community/kingsleypark/index.html
- Mississippi's A Pattern Book for Gulf Coast Communities
www.mississippirenewal.com/documents/Rep_PatternBook.pdf

