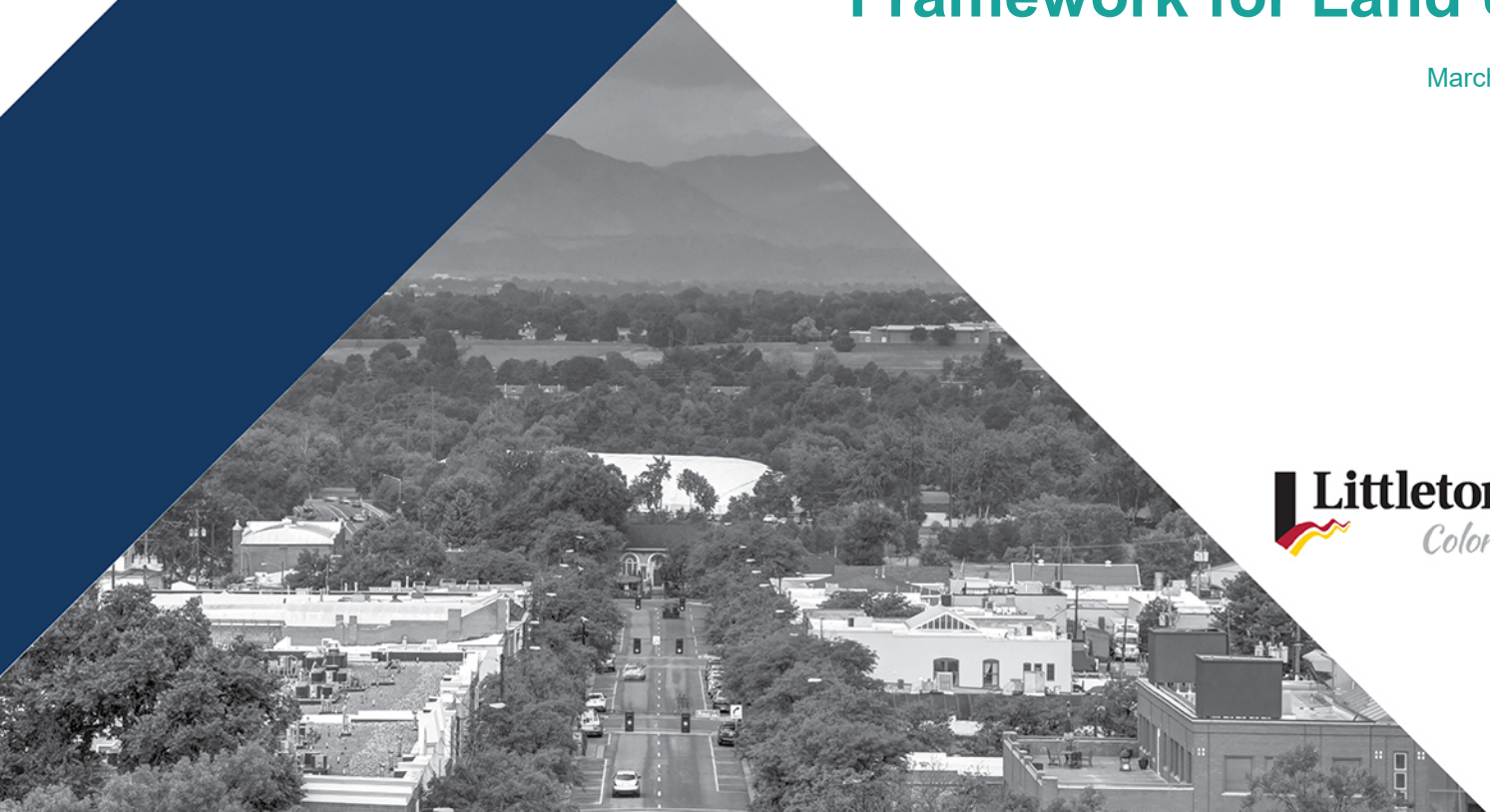




COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Community Character Framework for Land Use

March 7, 2019



COMMUNITY CHARACTER FOCUS

An essential activity in the Existing City phase was to complete an inventory of the current land use and development pattern in Littleton, focusing especially on the character of Littleton's built and open space areas as elaborated on below. Accompanying this paper is a large map titled, **Existing Land Use and Character in Littleton (As of Summer 2018)**, which displays the inventory results.

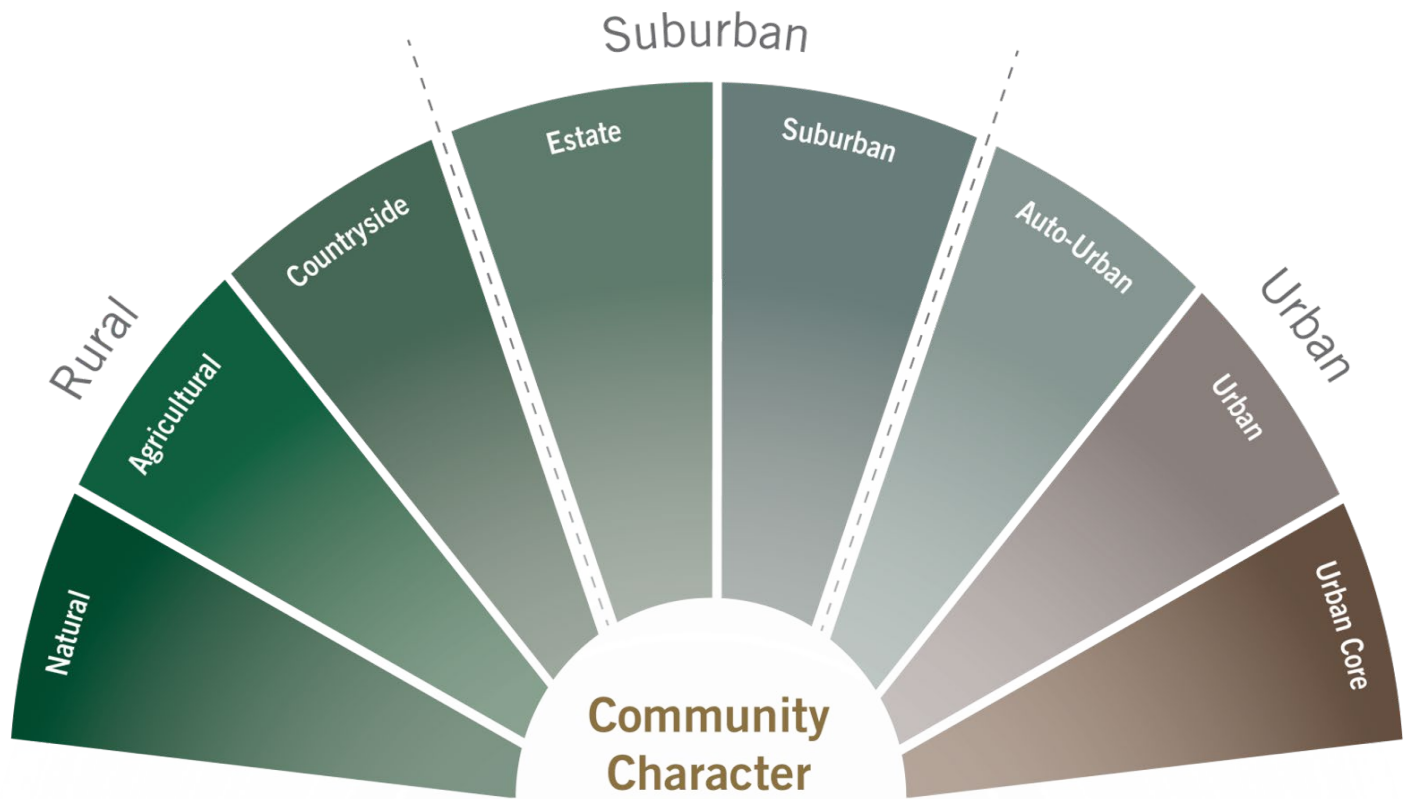
COMMUNITY CHARACTER FRAMEWORK FOR LAND USE PLANNING

The current update of the Littleton Comprehensive Plan will be centered on the concept of “**community character**” as a way to enhance Littleton's approach to land use planning, neighborhood conservation and open space preservation. Various land uses can occur in a range of settings within a community, from the most rural and suburban to the most urban, provided they are designed to match the character of the area. Community character accounts for the physical traits one can see in a neighborhood, on a roadway corridor, or along a greenway trail which contribute to its “look and feel” relative to areas with much different character.

Looking beyond land use alone, a character-based approach focuses on development intensity, which encompasses:

- The density and layout of residential development;
- The scale and form of non-residential development; and
- The amount of building and pavement coverage relative to the extent of open space and natural vegetation or landscaping.

How the automobile is accommodated is a key factor in distinguishing character types including how public streets are designed, how parking is provided, and how buildings and paved areas are arranged on sites. It is this combination of land use and the characteristics and context of the use that determines the real compatibility and quality of development, as well as the ongoing integrity of open space areas intended for minimal or no development. Aesthetic enhancements such as architectural design, landscaping and screening, signage standards, and site amenities also contribute to development appearance, but these factors can and should vary with the area character (e.g., landscaping shifting more to the public realm versus on private sites in a downtown area given minimal building setbacks and yard areas).



A character-based approach emphasizes the variation in physical conditions that is experienced along a spectrum from natural and rural landscapes at the edges of a community to the most urbanized environments, usually found in a core downtown area. Along with the type of land use, the community character system focuses on how intensively land is used – or used only minimally in the case of some public parks or not at all in preserved natural areas.

The community character approach can be applied to the typical series of land use types, and regardless of whether a site is in private ownership or owned and developed by a government agency for public purposes. Examples include:

- A single-family home situated on a relatively large lot, with many mature trees and substantial separation from neighboring homes (Suburban or Estate character), versus a single-family bungalow on a small, narrow lot with rear-alley access and minimal yard space or vegetation (Urban character). *For example, some neighborhoods in south Littleton relative to residential blocks close to Downtown Littleton.*
- Storefront shops and small cafes in a walkable, neighborhood commercial setting (Urban character) versus “big box” stores and associated pad-site restaurants and retailers in a large-scale shopping center with extensive surface parking and minimal landscaping (Auto Urban character). *For example, Littleton’s downtown commercial blocks relative to various large retail centers along Broadway.*
- A master-planned business park in a campus-like setting (Suburban character) versus an office building on a site dominated by surface parking (Auto Urban character) or a more vertical building in a downtown setting with ground-level retail uses and a nearby parking garage (Urban character). *For example, the business setting of the SouthPark area relative to the Wells Fargo Bank Building at Broadway and Powers Avenue in northeast Littleton, and relative to some multi-story buildings in Downtown Littleton (though without parking structures to date).*
- A public library, community center or neighborhood park that is designed to be compatible with the surrounding residential area (whether Suburban or Urban in character) versus a municipal public works maintenance and storage site or a wastewater treatment plant that is as intensive as most private industrial sites in a community. *For example, the Suburban character setting for the Bemis Public Library, Littleton Museum and Ketring Park relative to the City of Littleton street maintenance and public works facility adjacent to the BNSF rail corridor at Belleview Avenue.*

Maintaining and enhancing desired character is a central aim – and challenge – of implementing community plans amid constant change. A community character approach allows the formulation of standards within the City’s development regulations to achieve the desired character in newly developing areas, protect and enhance it in redevelopment and infill areas, and to ensure a rural or large-lot residential atmosphere is maintained in areas where these character types are deemed most appropriate for the long term. Character-focused categories on a city’s future land use plan and character-oriented districts on a subsequent zoning map better portray the intended outcomes of land use and development. This offers assurance to neighboring property owners, a smoother path to approvals for development applicants, and more beneficial outcomes for the entire community.

MAJOR CHARACTER TYPES

RURAL

This designation consists of lands that are sparsely developed, with mainly agricultural activity and very low-density residential as the primary uses along with more natural areas. This category provides its residents with the choice of relative seclusion within the countryside and away from a more developed setting. Some jurisdictions have limited rural character areas within their city limits, except in areas that have been annexed for eventual development or that are not suitable for future development. Other municipalities intentionally preserve rural character through the protections afforded by agricultural zoning. Floodplain areas may also retain their rural character over the long term given their unsuitability for any intensive land development.



Remnant rural character area in southwest Littleton between Santa Fe Drive and the South Platte River.

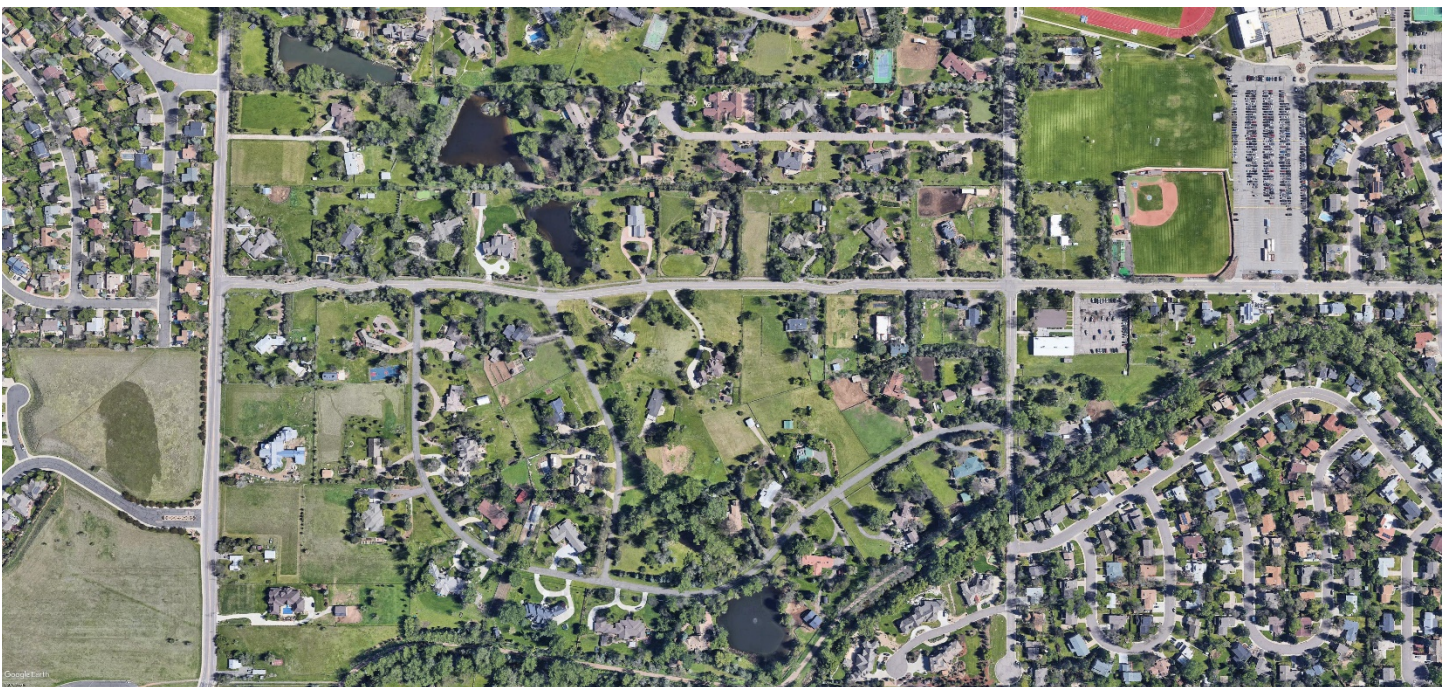
Characteristics

- Rural character from wide open landscapes, with minimal sense of enclosure and views to the horizon unbroken by buildings in most places.
- Scattered residential development on relatively large acreages, resulting in very high open space ratios and very low site coverage, and providing greater detachment from neighboring dwellings than in Estate Residential character areas.

- Typically no centralized water or sanitary sewer service available. Also much greater reliance on natural drainage systems, except where altered significantly by agricultural operations or regional storm water management projects and/or infrastructure.
- Potential for conservation developments that further concentrate the overall development footprint through cluster designs, with increased open space set-aside to maintain the overall rural character and buffer adjacent properties. This may also make alternative community wastewater treatment methods feasible to eliminate the need for individual on-site septic systems.

ESTATE

This designation is for areas that, due to public service limitations and/or prevailing rural character, should have limited development activity other than large-lot residential. Such areas provide a transition between a city's rural fringe and more urbanized in-city development patterns and intensities. Lots in this category typically range from one to three or more acres, which provides substantial openness and separation between individual dwellings.



Area of south Littleton, around Rangeview Drive, varying between estate and suburban residential character.

Characteristics

- Transition between rural and suburban character areas, with further progression along the character spectrum from rural environments where the landscape is visually dominant over structures.
- In the suburban range of the character spectrum but with larger lots (typically one acre or larger), especially where required by public health regulations to allow for both individual water wells and on-site septic systems on properties where centralized water and/or wastewater service may not be available or feasible.
- One-acre lots are usually adequate in wooded areas to achieve visual screening of homes from streets and adjacent dwellings. Three-to five-acre lots may be needed to achieve and maintain true estate character in more open areas with less vegetation and/or topographic changes.

SUBURBAN

This designation is for residential areas where suburban character is established and preserved by achieving a balance between buildings and other site improvements relative to the degree of open space maintained within the neighborhood. The openness may be found in relatively large yard areas on individual lots and between homes and/or in common green spaces or water features. This distinguishes suburban character areas from more auto-oriented residential areas where site coverage in the form of dwellings, driveways and other paved surfaces predominates relative to undeveloped space.

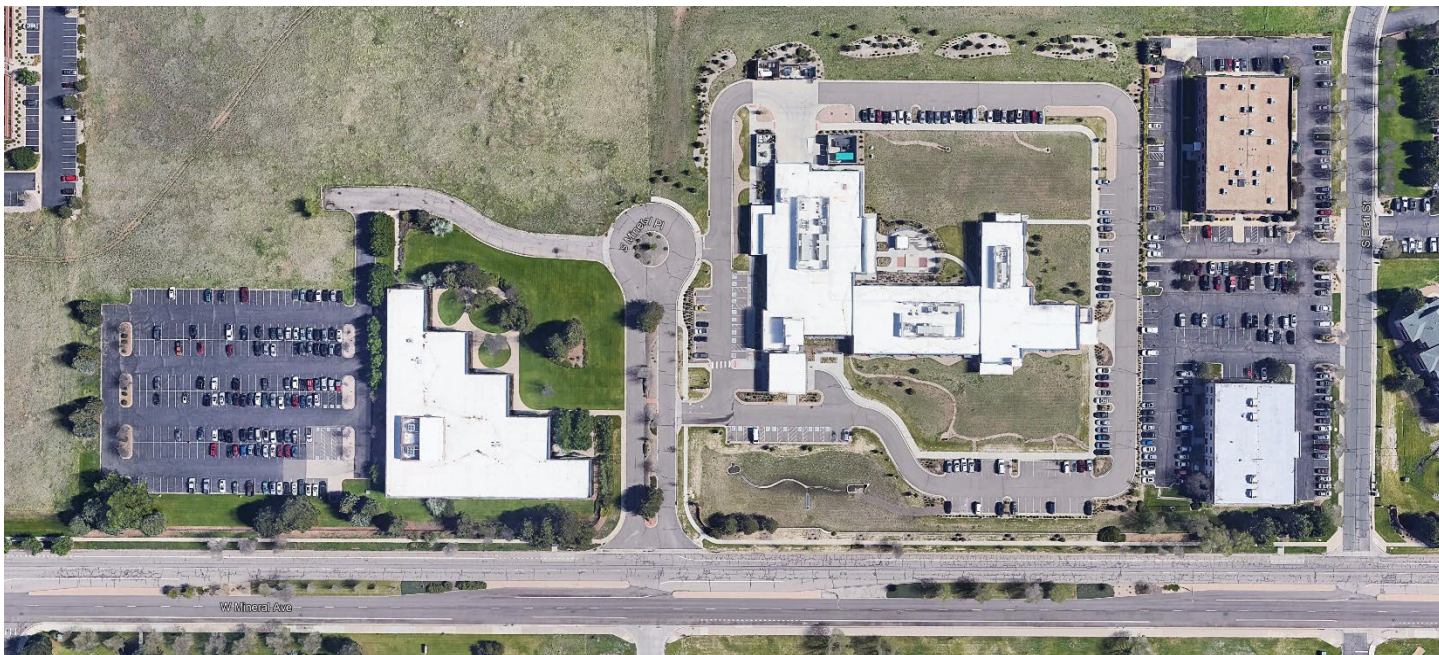
On the commercial side, this designation involves developments, whether at a neighborhood-focused or larger scale, that stand apart from most auto-oriented development by having less of the site covered with buildings and especially paved areas.



Suburban residential character between Mineral Avenue and Jackass Hill Park.

Characteristics

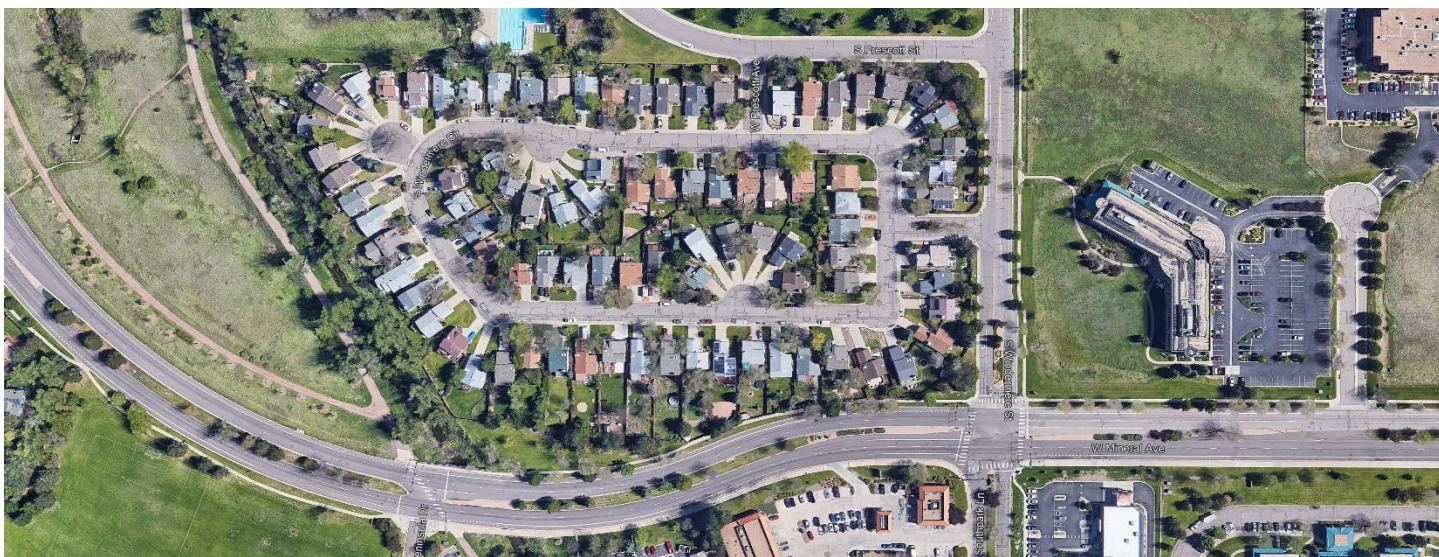
- Less noticeable accommodation of the automobile compared to more intensive auto-oriented areas, especially where residential driveways are on the side of homes rather than occupying a portion of the front yard space and where garages are situated to the side or rear of the dwelling.
- Preservation of trees or other natural site features, along with generous landscaping, can move a site into the suburban range of the community character spectrum relative to sites where “gray” spaces predominate over “green” and open spaces.
- More opportunity for natural and/or swale drainage (and storm water retention/absorption) relative to concentrated storm water conveyance in Auto Urban character areas.



Suburban commercial character along Mineral Avenue by maintaining on-site open space while accommodating parking.

AUTO URBAN

This designation covers areas with residential uses at typical in-city densities, often with limited open space set-asides and in “cookie cutter” subdivision layouts characterized by straight streets and uniform lot sizes and arrangement. On the commercial side, this designation often involves retail “strip” centers, office and service uses along major roadways, including “big box” commercial centers and smaller-scale uses located on high-profile “pad” sites along the roadway frontage. The extent of building and pavement coverage relative to green space pushes Auto Urban areas closer along the character spectrum toward the intensity of urban character areas, but still with a predominant automobile orientation versus the pedestrian orientation of a true urban setting.



Auto Urban residential character in neighborhood along Mineral Avenue at Windemere Street.

Characteristics

- Residential neighborhoods with less openness and separation between dwellings compared to Suburban Residential areas.
- Auto-oriented character where driveways and front-loading garages dominate the front yard and building facades of homes.
- Commercial areas with an auto-oriented character that have significant portions of development sites devoted to vehicular access drives, circulation routes, surface parking, and loading/delivery areas, making pavement the most prominent visual feature.
- Buildings typically set back toward rear of site to accommodate expansive parking areas in front, closest to passing traffic, resulting in less emphasis on architectural design in many cases.
- Development desire to maximize signage (number, size) to capitalize on site visibility to passing traffic.
- Often not conducive for access or on-site circulation by pedestrians or cyclists.



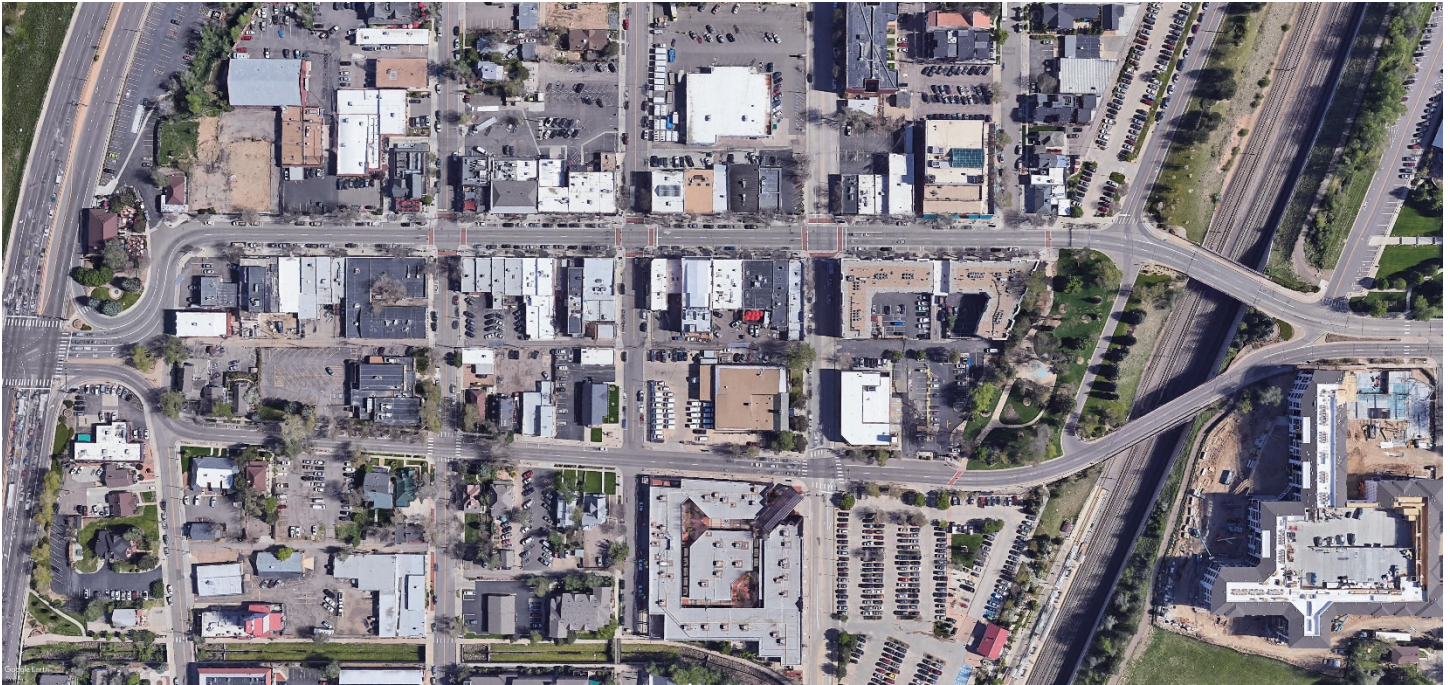
Auto Urban retail centers along Broadway at Mineral Avenue.

URBAN

This designation, in many cities, involves the most intensively developed area of the community in terms of the greatest coverage of sites with building footprints and the least amount of private development area devoted to off-street parking and landscaping. Instead, most parking is accommodated on-street and/or within public parking areas or structures. This enables most streets and other public spaces to be framed by buildings with zero or minimal front setbacks, creating “architectural enclosure” versus the progressively more open feel in other character areas (auto-oriented, suburban, etc.). All of these elements, along with a mixed-use orientation, makes these areas of a city the most conducive for pedestrian activity and interaction. Public plazas and pocket parks can provide green space amid the urban environment and a place to gather and host community events.

Characteristics

- Multi-story structures encouraged or required in some downtowns to bolster urban character, encourage vertical mixed use, promote retail viability, support transit ridership, etc.
- Mostly on-street parking and minimal off-street surface parking (until the urban character begins to give way to auto-oriented site design in transition areas around downtowns).
- Streetscape enhancements in public ways usually emphasized given limited area for private on-site landscaping relative to other character areas.
- Alleys and rear-access garages can reinforce urban character on blocks with attached or detached residential dwellings.
- Often the only place in a community where multi-level parking structures may make sense and be financially viable.



Urban character and mixed uses in and around Downtown Littleton.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- **Industrial Uses.** Typically Auto Urban character depending on the use intensity (i.e., “light” versus “heavy” industrial), although master-planned business or industrial park developments may feature a campus-style setting that achieves a Suburban character through reduced site coverage and increased open space; extensive landscaping of the development perimeter and special streetscaping and design treatments at entries, key intersections and internal focal points; and enhanced building design, signage and screening standards, all of which may be controlled by private covenants and restrictions that exceed City ordinances and development standards.

Certain intensive publicly-owned uses are best located within or near industrial areas (e.g., public works facilities, fleet maintenance, treatment plants, fire training, etc.).

- **Public Parks.** As with any public facility, park design, intensity of development, and planned uses/activities should match area character (e.g., public squares/plazas in urban downtowns relative to recreational play and sports-focused parks in suburban areas and nature-oriented parks for passive recreation in estate and rural areas).
- **Special Uses.** Some unique land uses and their vicinities warrant special consideration either to: (1) protect a major community asset or other highly-valued use; or (2) buffer and protect nearby properties from potential adverse effects depending on the nature and operational aspects of the special use. Examples include:
 - Major educational campuses or clusters of education facilities (public, private and parochial);
 - Major cultural venues and facilities (e.g., theaters, museums/galleries);
 - Large-scale cemeteries, whether publicly or privately owned;
 - Water and wastewater treatment facilities; and
 - Other intensive public works sites and facilities, especially with outdoor activity and/or storage.

As with all public/institutional uses, a special use developed and operated by a government entity should be designed to match the prevailing character of its vicinity, for compatibility with the character and quality expectations placed upon private properties and developments.

OBSERVATIONS FROM INVENTORY

The following observations will be elaborated on through workshop discussions and further use of visuals, especially as the focus turns to future land use planning during the Future City phase. In the meantime, all of these findings have implications for how Littleton may adjust its approach to regulating and setting standards for land development and redevelopment going forward to place more emphasis on desired character outcomes.

1. **Entire Character Spectrum.** Nearly all elements of the community character spectrum may be found in Littleton, which is part of what makes it a much more interesting experience than many suburban communities.
2. **More Auto Urban Out There Than You Might Expect.** As in many U.S. cities that developed largely in the post-World War II era of automobile-oriented metropolitan growth, various areas in Littleton have an Anytown USA “suburbia” look and feel, including entire blocks and large retail centers dominated by pavement with minimal green space. That is because these areas were planned, zoned and built mainly with an emphasis on basic compatibility of land uses and residential densities rather than with consistency of character in mind.



The large block in this view, to the west of Broadway (bottom) and north of Powers Avenue (left), exhibits a classic Auto Urban character, with substantial areas of surface parking and other paved areas and with minimal landscaping along street frontages or within the interior of the large parking areas. The individual site designs are very much about accommodation of the automobile rather than a pedestrian orientation as seen in Urban character areas.

Character is established much more by the elements of site design plus auto-centric street design. This starts with designing around natural site features (e.g., topography, water features, existing trees/vegetation, etc.) and then aspects such as building placement and orientation, location and visibility of surface parking, extent and nature of preserved open space, and the extent of perimeter and internal screening and buffering, among others. Sometimes shortcomings in site design are overcome by investment in the public realm (e.g., landscaped roadway corridors and other “streetscape” features such as use of decorative pavers at intersections and in crosswalks, unique street lighting standards, signage controls and/or consistent design, etc.). Such is the case along portions of Mineral Avenue, as one example.

3. **Muddled Character in Many Cases.** Also as in many U.S. cities, the character of existing development is often difficult to classify as it includes aspects of multiple character categories. For example, in many of Littleton’s residential neighborhoods that had the potential for suburban character, homes were built with garages as part of the front façade, which also means that a portion of the front yard is devoted to driveway. As a result, the first visual impression of a residential street can be the extent of cars in driveways, which sets an Auto Urban tone. In some older established neighborhoods, homes were also built closer to the street, so more vehicles are parked along the curb in an era of multi-car households. This factor also pulls many residential areas in Littleton toward the Auto Urban portion of the character spectrum. In other areas, the extent of mature tree cover that took hold

over time has helped to soften the Auto Urban environment and pull the neighborhood more toward the Suburban range of the character spectrum.

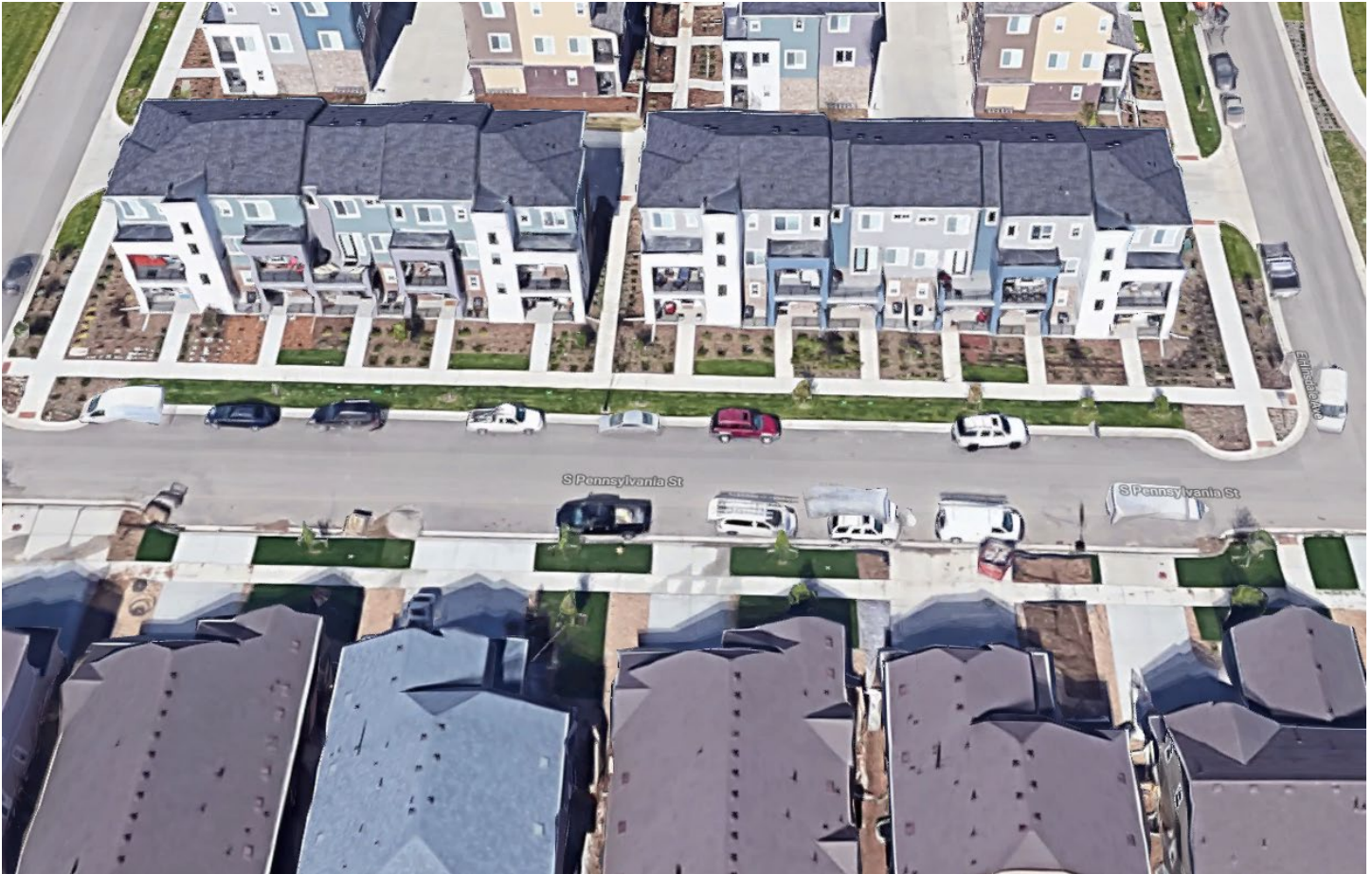
Auto Urban residential character somewhat softened by mature yard trees along Jamison Avenue in southwest Littleton.



Abundant park, trail and open space assets within Littleton also help to reinforce or move certain areas toward a suburban character. Some developments that on their own would almost immediately be classified as Auto Urban benefit from proximity to open space or significant water features (e.g., areas in south Littleton adjacent to McLellan Reservoir and South Platte Park).



This view of Downtown, looking east, shows Urban character along Main Street (right) and a portion of Prince Street (bottom), where building fronts are at the sidewalk. However, a substantial share of the overall block is allocated to very visible surface parking, which introduces Auto Urban character, as does the area along Rio Grande Street devoted to parking for light rail patrons. Along Sycamore Street, in between Rio Grande and Prince streets, is an eclectic mix of not only uses but also character, with some structures well away from the sidewalk with parking in front, some at the sidewalk and reliant on rear and/or on-street parking, and others in between, even with front and side yard lawn space.



A relatively recent local development, Littleton Village, includes a mix of housing types, but also a juxtaposition of varying character types. In this view looking west, one side of Pennsylvania Street has multi-story attached homes with an Urban Character, relatively close to the street and with resident parking accommodated at the rear via an alley, along with dedicated curb space for on-street parking. Directly across the street and also fronting along Pennsylvania are single-story detached homes, set back from the street and with definite Auto Urban character due to garages in the front façade of each home and driveways that take up half or more of each front yard.

4. **Not Only on Private Property.** Public and institutional sites in Littleton also exhibit a wide range of characters, with Auto Urban situations often related to the amount of public visitation they receive, which results in large areas of surface parking (e.g., the Arapahoe Community College campus near Littleton's urban downtown, sizable parking areas required for Littleton Adventist Hospital and larger places of worship, and even a portion of the Heritage High School site amid a largely suburban residential character area in south Littleton).

St. Mary's Catholic Church and School, between Santa Fe Drive and Prince Street, is one of many examples illustrating the amount of surface parking required for active institutional uses, bringing an Auto Urban look and feel into otherwise green and less intensively developed areas of Littleton.

