



Kentlands at thirty-five: a home for all seasons?

Charles Duff

May 2025



Foreword

Kentlands in Maryland, the first non-resort, new urban development in America, is 35 years old. It is the age at which Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Marilyn Monroe died and the 'danger zone' for many modish new developments. Fashion has evolved. The first generation of residents are moving into sheltered living or leaving or dying. Will a second generation evolve? Will people still want to live there when the walls are scuffed up and the paint is peeling?

That is the question that the hugely experienced and wise American developer and urban writer, Charles Duff, sets out to ask in this excellent essay. Charles has watched Kentlands evolve over the years and visited it again for this study with questions in mind. Is this a good place? Is it thriving? Do people still want to live there? What, with the precious benefit of hindsight, is working for residents and what is not? Do sales prices justify the effort? An early study in 2001 suggested a 15 per cent value premium. Does that still hold?

Charles then draws up a balance sheet of Kentland's assets and liabilities. Kentlands required the re-drafting of the City of Gaithersburg's codes to permit a less suburban, higher-density (but hardly high-density place). Was it worth it?

Charles's conclusions are broadly positive but there are by no means blanket approval. More, above all, might have been done with the shopping, the mixed-use and the 'middle' which perhaps does not come together enough. Kentlands is highly commendable but might have gone further in creating a real heart. More, as so often, would have been more. This would also have permitted residents to tread more lightly upon the planet.

But Kentlands is a good place to live and, as Charles reminds us, it was a first try. Kentlands' job, we now see, was to discover if middle-class Americans would buy houses in a New Urbanist neighbourhood. It showed that they would. They were not, in fact, addicted to deep suburbia. There was a reason they liked to visit traditional towns and cities in the US or in Europe. The love of real neighbourhoods can influence our home as well as our holidays.

We have learned much over the last generation. We face challenges of supply, affordability and durable development that were less pertinent 35 years ago. But Kentlands' success in making a place has made it to resolve the challenges that it only partially resolved. That is worth marking and celebrating.

Above all, thank heavens, Kentlands at 35 is set to continue, as are the many new urbanist developments from north to south and east and west which have followed in its wake. There are lessons to learn but much to praise. That is not a bad legacy to celebrate at 35 years of age.

Nicholas Boys Smith
Chair, Create Streets

Kentlands at thirty-five: a home for all seasons?

It was exactly 35 years ago, in the winter of 1990, that the first residents moved into Kentlands, America's first year-round New Urbanist development. Now, as those first residents age out, it is obvious that Kentlands has been a success and continues to be one. It is beautiful and desirable. Residents love it. Maintenance is on the order of Hampstead Garden Suburb. Best of all, from the perspective of people in that first Kentlands generation, houses sell quickly for good prices, and a second generation of children is filling the elementary school. Kentlands proved, and proves, that Americans will accept New Urbanist design.

There are 1,485 houses and condominium units and 35 accessory dwellings in the 142 hectares of Kentlands. The site plan by DPZ is brilliant. Streets are narrow and quiet, in a loose grid where the land is flat and following the curves of hills where this is possible.



Kentlands and Lakelands

Shopping is in the upper left, a large school in the lower right. Kentlands proper takes up the left side of the map. The right side is the sister development of Lakelands, which continues the Kentlands street pattern with considerable cheapening of architecture.

Good design and good construction are an important part of the neighbourhood's success. The residents I interviewed were not architectural fanatics, but they felt completely comfortable in Kentlands, and so did I. The architectural vocabulary is that of the Middle

Atlantic states in the so-called Federal Period, from about 1790 to about 1830. It looks like Georgetown in Washington, or New Castle in Delaware, or the beautiful small cities of Alexandria in Virginia and Frederick and Annapolis in Maryland. I wondered if Kentlands would look fake or twee, and it does not.



Firehouse Lane in Kentlands. The architectural vernacular of the Middle Atlantic states in the Federal period, 1790-1830

Even a three-hour walkabout was enough to show me that Kentlands's designers showed a level of concern for detail and fine spatial adjustment that I have never seen in post-war American suburbia.

An example: in one terraced block, four houses use the same door casing design in different ways. Each door casing has two ionic columns and an architrave, but the little structures have different projections on each house, and there are different door casings on houses that separate them.



A nicely adjusted pair of potentially identical door casings

In another block, where three identical double-fronted houses line up beside each other, the centre house is pulled back a few feet farther than the other two, and the distance between the first house and the second is significantly smaller than the distance between the second house and the third. The juggling of setbacks and side yards is unusual and very pleasing. (It is also worth mentioning that one of the houses is fronted in wood instead while the other two have facades of brick, but that kind of thing is common in American suburbia.)



Three identical houses that avoid monotony by varied placement on their lots

It is not surprising that DPZ maintains a Kentlands office to this day. Kentlands is a good advertisement for their work.

Before development, Kentlands was a gentleman's farm for fifty years, the summer retreat of a prosperous Washington lawyer, and the developers inherited a gracious house and a large barn, which are now used for various arts and the offices of arts organizations. They also inherited a quite dramatic network of artificial lakes, which they have maintained. No house in Kentlands is more than a five-minute's walk from some kind of lakefront. Many have water views. There are trails along the lakeshore, and more than a few people were walking them with me in the cold.



Lakefront

There is a great deal of common property in Kentlands. Apart from the lakes, there are parks and squares and playgrounds, three swimming pools, three tennis courts, and a fitness centre, not to mention the Arts Barn with an elaborate calendar of community activities. The responsibility for all this is divided between the City of Gaithersburg, of which Kentlands is a part, and the Kentlands Citizens Association.

The city owns and maintains the old house and the Arts Barn and maintains the lakes, the streets, the sidewalks (many of them high-maintenance brick,) and the street trees. It provides police and fire protection and ploughs snow when there is snow to plough. By common consent, it does a good job.



The Arts Barn



Sidewalks and streets

The Kentlands Citizens Association is a powerful example of what Americans call a Home Owners' Association, usually spoken of as HOAs. Each Kentlands homeowner, whether the owner of a detached house or a terraced house, has a vote in an annual election of officers and is required to pay a monthly fee of \$656.04, a very high rate that has been stable for the past several years. Owners of condominiums pay different amounts dependent on the size of their units.

In return for their monthly fees, the Citizens Association, working through a third-party management company, maintains most of the active recreation facilities and employs an Events Coordinator to do the things that similar people do on cruise ships and in nursing homes.

The Citizens Association also coordinates the enforcement of the neighbourhood's covenants for design and maintenance. Every property is inspected roughly once a year, and owners who need to make

repairs receive notices. The Citizens Association welcomes anonymous denunciations. All work must be approved by the Association, which maintains a list of materials and colours that it permits. The Association fines and occasionally sues property owners who do improper work, or go too long with no work.

The various Citizens Association processes are burdensome. An association staff person told me that people tend to move away as they age because they are required to do too much maintenance. Most American suburbs vest architectural control of some kind in their HOAs, but Kentland's Citizens Association may be unique in requiring each application for an approval of work to contain the signatures of at least two near neighbours. All review is conducted by volunteers, and time seems to hang heavy.

Kentlands was revolutionary 35 years ago and is very unusual even now. Back when it was being planned, almost all American local governments made it flat-out illegal to mix detached houses with terraced houses in the same block, or to build small accessory dwellings in the garden behind a house (35 Kentlands houses have them), or to require a 20-foot setback for one house and a 10-foot setback for the house next door. The feature that attracted the most attention when Kentlands was new was the provision of back alleys, innocuous as that may sound. I doubt if any developer anywhere in America built back alleys in the years between about 1960 and the opening of Kentlands. That is why American suburbia features cars and driveways in front of houses, and houses appear to front on parking lots.



A back alley in Kentlands. All alleys have garages



Conventional parking without alleys. This unpleasant development is next to Kentlands

At first glance, the many remarkable features of Kentlands do not appear to add market value. Based on my analysis of current prices, residential property sells for \$3-400 per square foot, with condominiums ranging from \$400,000-\$650,000 and houses ranging from \$650,000 to \$910,000. These prices are comparable to those in adjacent developments where design quality is uniformly lower. But allowance needs to be made for the required monthly fee to the Kentlands Citizens Association. The fee translates to a mortgage amount of about \$150,000. Since most competitive neighbourhoods have much lower fees or no fees at all, it is probably fair to say that Kentlands prices would be \$150,000 higher in the absence of the community facilities that the fee supports. A 2001 study found a 15 per cent price premium in Kentlands, and that premium may be higher today.¹

Nonetheless, developers in and around Kentlands seem to have realised that some of the Kentlands design features were not worth the money. Even within the Kentlands boundaries, the newer streets have concrete sidewalks rather than brick. And the adjacent neighbourhood of Lakelands, which continues the street pattern of Kentlands (including the alleys), uses "Colonial" architecture of a more ordinary suburban type without, alas, any loss of market value. The people who walked with me used the terms Kentlands and Lakelands interchangeably and saw no important differences between them.

Kentlands was America's first neo-traditional community built for year-round living, and it would be

unfair to expect Kentlands to address issues that have arisen since, mainly to do with climate and housing affordability, or to embody all the learning that New Urbanists have done in the last 35 years. Kentlands has many features that the New Urbanism has outgrown.

The most obvious has to do with shopping. If you look at a street plan of Kentlands, you might expect to find an American version of Welwyn Garden City. There is a shopping area called Kentlands Market Square at the entrance to the community, and streets fan out from it over about 180 degrees of arc. You might expect good, contextual design.



Kentlands Market Square

You would be disappointed. The shopping area of Kentlands is not like anything in the Parker & Unwin playbook. It is a mess, a typical American roadside shopping centre, with a giant parking lot and the untraditional architecture that big national retailers use to make themselves visible to high-speed motorists.



Main Street

¹ Tu C., Eppli M, (2001). 'An empirical examination of traditional neighborhood development', Real Estate Economics, 29(3), pp. 485-501. For a fuller discussion of new urban developments and value see Boys Smith, N et al (2017), Beyond Location, pp 99-107

There is a traditional shopping street, called Main Street, that acts as a buffer between the shopping mess and the residential areas. It is cute. It looks like an old neighbourhood commercial street in Baltimore or Washington, with small attached three-story buildings and shops on the ground floor. But it represents only a tiny percentage of the commercial space in Kentlands, and the ground floors are too small for the sale of tangible objects. It's all spas and wellness and coffee. If the US had charity shops, there would be some on Main Street.

Each building on Main Street is in separate ownership, and there is no one on hand to help owners find suitable retail tenants. Successful American main streets often have "Main Street Managers," whose job is to retrofit main streets with the benefits of centralised mall management: tenant selection, common promotions, common events. Kentlands' Main Street could use a manager but is too small to support one.

Aside from that, each building on Main Street is too small. No ground floor is big enough for a restaurant like the Potting Shed in Poundbury, or any restaurant at all. And the upstairs spaces, some of them offices and some apartments, have the normal drawbacks of small spaces above commercial uses.

Kentlands is a very nice place for walking, and you might expect it to be a good place to live without a car. Unfortunately, it seems to be as car-dependent as any other American suburb of its vintage. Although something like 25 per cent of Kentlands residents live within walking distance of the retail centre, the other 75 per cent do not, and there is no bus service within Kentlands. Worse, Kentlands is well beyond the reach of Washington's excellent Metro system, and employment in the outer suburbs of Washington is very deconcentrated. Practically everyone drives to work.



Detached houses on Kentlands' main boulevard

Nor is it easy to see how this could be remedied. With 1,520 houses and condominiums on 142.4 hectares (10.7 per hectare,) Kentlands is not dense enough, or, for that matter, big enough, to support robust public transport. Most of the houses in Kentlands, probably something like 75 per cent of them, are fully free-standing with relatively large lots of 5,000 to 9,000 square feet.

This came as a bit of a surprise to me. From what I had read about Kentlands, I expected to see a mixture of detached and terraced houses in every block, or at least in every few blocks. In fact, there are rather few terraced houses, and they are concentrated within about 1,000 feet of the retail area. The same is true for the condominiums, which are tasteful but by no means as carefully designed as the houses. (The condominium area does not have brick sidewalks).



Condominiums in Kentlands

Finally, Kentlands has not the faintest whiff of an economic mix. Not only is there no social housing, there is no rental housing of any kind – except on the upper floors of Main Street shops and in some of the 35 little accessory dwellings in the back gardens of homeowners.

And prices are high. In Montgomery County, Maryland, where Kentlands is located, the median income for a single person is \$60,000, while median family income is \$128,000. This means, on average, that the median individual can afford to pay about \$200,000 for a house, while the median family can pay about \$420,000. Factoring in the monthly fee of the Citizens Association reduces those numbers by a full \$150,000, so that the median individual could afford to pay only about \$50,000 for the privilege of living in Kentlands, while a median family could pay \$270,000. No Kentlands prices come close to these.

Here is a balance sheet on Kentlands:

Assets

1. *Superb design at every level*, from the plan of the streets to the siting of houses on their lots. The back alleys keep the streets uncluttered by cars. The brick sidewalks look just right.
2. *Excellent scale*. Street widths vary but are always narrow by American standards. The most common width is 30', enough for two travel lanes and one lane of parking. Traffic moves politely. Walking and cycling are safe.
3. *Attainable craftsmanship*. Most houses were built by ordinary suburban builders and were based on models that they were already using. There are no rare materials, and all windows, doors, etc were commonly available at the time. The slight modifications, presumably made by DPZ, make all the difference.
4. *Excellent maintenance*. The City of Gaithersburg is a hero of the Kentlands story.
5. *Large and beautiful lakes*. Kentlands would be beautiful without them, not to mention denser, but they are unquestionably an amenity.
6. *An impressive array of community facilities*. Though they are expensive.
7. *A well-organised, well-funded Home Owners Association*. It does architectural control very well and hires competent third-party operators to do the day-to-day work of collecting fees and running community facilities.
8. *Overall, Kentlands is an ideal environment for children and their families*. Walking and biking are easy and safe, neighbours are law-abiding, and everything from schools to pools is within walking or biking range.

Liabilities

1. *Kentlands is suburban sprawl*, albeit highly liveable suburban sprawl with excellent design and maintenance. Even if it were closer to a regional transit system, it would still not be dense enough to be a replicable model for living with a low carbon footprint.
2. *The shopping area is miserable*. Given that Kentlands and all adjacent neighbourhoods are completely car-dependent, a Kentlands shopping precinct would have had to have a lot of parking, but cars could have been hidden behind buildings or worked into structures.
3. *Main Street buildings are too small*. The decision to sell each Main Street building separately was a mistake. If spaces could be combined behind the current facades, there would be better apartments and offices upstairs and better shops and restaurants on the ground floor.
4. *The multi-family area could be better*. The four-story condominiums are poorly integrated into the neighbourhood fabric, and the buildings themselves are undistinguished in architecture and lot placement.
5. *There is no economic mix*. Even by the standards of Montgomery County, Maryland, one of the richest political subdivisions in the United States, every house and condominium unit in Kentlands is unaffordable to the vast majority of people.

6. *Kentlands is not big enough.* Whether you are walking or driving, you get out of it quickly and frequently, and the surrounding developments detract from it. Ironically, Kentlands winds up leaving an impression that people commonly, and regretfully, take with them when they leave the beautiful old Middle Atlantic towns on which Kentlands was modelled. Like many of our old towns, it is a small island of beauty in a sea of ordinary sprawl.



The historic centre of New Castle, Delaware



The outskirts of New Castle, Delaware

About the author

Charles Duff is a planner and property developer based in Baltimore in the United States. He has restored more than 300 historic buildings, built or restored a number of large buildings for affordable housing and the arts, and led the planning and development efforts that created stable housing markets in old city neighbourhoods with roughly 100,000 residents. His 2023 book *The North Atlantic Cities* argues that the UK, the Netherlands, and the East Coast of the US form an architectural and urbanistic region in which practitioners and government officials should learn from each other's successes and failures. He has degrees from Amherst and Harvard, spent a delightful year at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, and was for many years an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins. He has received Lifetime Achievement Awards from both Preservation organizations and the Urban Land Institute, the US trade association for property developers.



Kentlands at thirty-five: a home for all seasons?

Create Streets is a design practice, town-builder and think tank. We lead research, master-planning, design coding and community co-design to help develop and steward beautiful and popular 'gentle density' places which residents and neighbours can love for generations. For people, prosperity and planet.

contact@createstreets.com