

5.0 Community Character

A city evolves over time and the neighborhoods of a city are a reflection of its history, culture and social structure. The City of Monroe is a product of a dynamic and exciting past and embodies the identity of the region. Monroe has a unique Louisiana character and diverse neighborhoods.

A city is defined by its character or identity. The people, their beliefs, ideas, culture, ethnicity, passion and wealth are reflected in the built form of the community including land use, circulation, economy, monuments, signatures and urban design. Neighborhoods: residential, commercial and industrial each have their own character and make up the identity of the City.

The purpose in defining Character Areas within the City is to better understand the evolution of the City and to preserve and enhance the positive aspects of its overall character. Analyzing the components that define local neighborhoods will help to preserve the character of the neighborhoods through zoning and design standards.

The City is identified by a variety of residential neighborhoods from the Garden District to traditional workforce housing. It was once dominated by a government district and historic downtown that has declined over the past years. A waterfront of both river and bayou winds a spine through the City and acts as a unifying element in its overall organization. Its role as a seat of government and retail center are reflected in its older government districts and its more recent suburban style commercial and retail areas.

For the purpose of this section, Character Areas are defined by the general characteristics of an area, as reflected in accompanying photographs and are outlined on a map. Map boundaries designate areas that share a broad array of qualities.

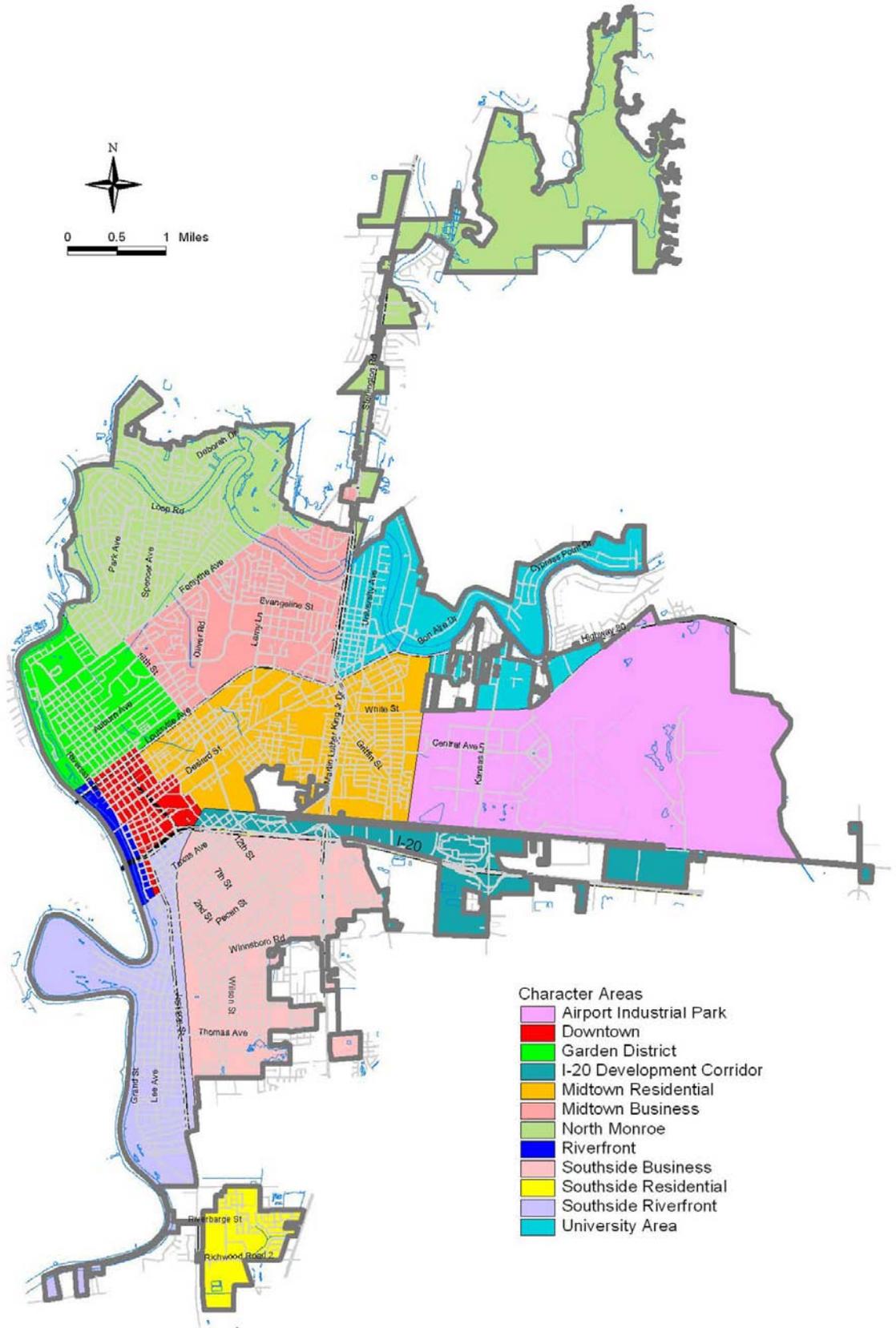
5.1 Methodology

Character areas were defined previously by the City. Those designations were confirmed through a review of the zoning, land use plan, aerial photography and field observations. A downtown waterfront district has been added because it is unique and has a significant revitalization potential.

Homogeneous areas within the City were defined and mapped and common characteristics were defined in the field. Contextual evaluations were completed for each character area. Buildings, yard, street and area context were all evaluated. In general, buildings were assessed based on era, style, form, roofline, size, materials, type, density, number of floors and architectural features. Yards were evaluated in terms of fences, trees, quality, and parking. Streets were evaluated based on sidewalks, sidewalk width, curbs/swales, lighting, parking, trees and block patterns. The area context section assessed general conditions including overall quality, open space and further description. The figure that follows illustrates the geographic distribution of the character areas of the City of Monroe.



Figure 5-1 City of Monroe Community Character Areas





5.2 Summary of Character Areas

5.2.1 Downtown

The downtown area primarily consists of commercial office and retail, government and institutional structures (including federal, state, parish and city buildings). The core is dominated by hospital and government buildings and a park, which are reinforced by the waterfront open space area. This area was mainly developed post World War II, between 1947 and 1953. Some buildings date to the 1920's.



There are numerous buildings in the downtown core that have architectural merit and are worth preserving. Most buildings have flat roofs and brick construction with first floor retail and multi-floor office or residential. The skyline generally reflects buildings of two to ten floors. Most retail space and upper floors are vacant. Both front and side yard setbacks are minimal.

Sidewalks are of an adequate width. Mature street trees are minimal but there are smaller trees present. There are a number of at-grade parking lots; some of which are well landscaped. Street parking is prevalent. All streets are lighted.

There remains only the vestige of the original planned organization of the downtown. It retains however, a comfortable urban scale and attractive older buildings. The presence of the riverfront is an asset to be capitalized on. Unfortunately the downtown is underutilized and suffering from neglect.

5.2.2 North Monroe

North Monroe consists of a range of single-family residences, approximately 1,000 to 2,000 square feet, which were built between 1967 and 1985. Many of the homes in River Oaks and Frenchman's Bend subdivisions were built in the 1990s and 2000s. Homes are constructed of a mixture of wood, brick and shingle and are one and two stories in height. Densities range between three and five units per acre. There are also a number of two story apartment buildings. Some suburban style commercial development exists along major corridors; especially along US Highway 165.



Distance from the street ranges from 10 feet in older areas to 25 feet in newer suburban areas. Yards are well landscaped and have mature trees. There is no on-street parking. Parking is provided in private driveways. Streets are paved and of adequate width. Sidewalks are located on one side of the street. There is a mixture of swales and curbs. Streets are lit.



North Monroe is a very comfortable and attractive residential area offering a mixture of residential development styles.



5.2.3 Interstate Corridor

Open fields, big box retail, highway commercial and some office and warehouse developments typify the corridor adjacent to I-20. Buildings are generally single story, flat roofed and constructed of stucco, brick, masonry, concrete and metal. Most development has occurred since the 1970's.



Distance from the street varies but is usually large with perimeter parking and minimal landscaping. Fences are usually situated to provide security or screening of storage areas. There are no sidewalks and street trees are not prevalent.

The corridor area has potential for development to service the regional market but lacks organization and character.

5.2.4 Midtown Business

The midtown business area primarily consists of strip commercial development that has been in existence since 1970. The area's single and multi-family residences were developed between 1967 and 1978. Commercial uses include modern high-rise office as well as strip retail. There is also a mix of industrial and warehousing. Building materials include: brick, stone, wood and stucco.

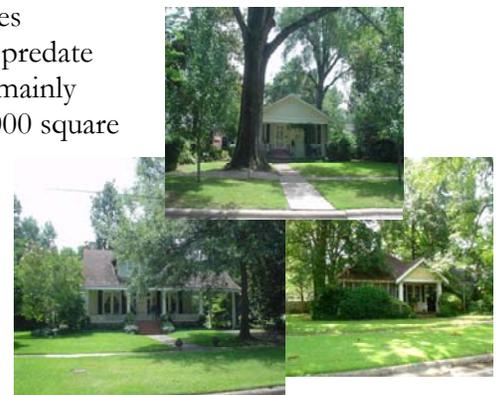


The area could be characterized as medium density with houses situated away from the street, often to accommodate parking. There are few site trees or street trees. Sidewalks are located on the main corridors. Streets are adequate and lit. The road pattern does not relate to the traditional grid.

Development quality is low in most of the commercial development except for the newer areas which is fairly high quality. The district has an eclectic flavor although it is primarily suburban.

5.2.5 Garden District

The Garden District consists of primarily older, single-family residences developed from approximately 1930 to 1950. However, some houses predate those time periods. Homes have low-pitched rooflines and consist of mainly wood lapboard with some brick. Homes range in size from 800 to 2,000 square feet. Densities range from three to four units per acre.



This very attractive area is heavily landscaped and has mature vegetation and trees. Distance to the street ranges from 10 to 20 feet. Many houses have porches either screened or open. There are no front yard fences. Roads are paved and are of adequate width with curbs and sidewalks. There is a defined urban style grid.



The area offers a unique southern style and flavor and it is enhanced by its relationship to Forsythe Park and the riverfront.

5.2.6 Southside Riverfront

This area was developed as single family and duplex residential in the late 1950's and 1960's. These primarily bungalow-type homes are between 600 and 2,000 square feet in size. Construction materials include brick and wood siding. Densities are medium from five to six units per acre. Trees and landscaping are mature.



Structures are approximately 20 feet from the street and there are few sidewalks. Roads are curbed, paved and of adequate width. The block layout is in a grid form.

This is a generally well maintained, lower to middle-income, residential area that is supported by its proximity to the river. Some areas are impacted by substandard and poorly maintained homes

5.2.7 University Area

This area is dominated by the presence of the university buildings. However, it also includes quality, single-family residences along the north side of the bayou, residential development and apartments near the university and strip commercial along the major corridors. The area developed during the 1960's and 1970's and includes primarily brick buildings ranging from 1,000 to 1,500 square feet. Densities range from three to four units per acre.



The distance between structures and the street are large and include front yard parking. Lot trees and landscaping are dominant and are relatively mature in residential areas. There are few sidewalks. Commercial areas have minimal landscaping but some areas have sidewalks.

Generally the commercial area is low in quality while the residential areas could be characterized as comfortable middle class neighborhoods.

5.2.8 Southside Business

Land uses are primarily residential and commercial development. A mixture of development has occurred since the 1960's with pockets dating back to the 1940's and 1950's. Primary building materials are brick and wood siding. Home sizes range from 600 to 1,000 square feet. Densities range from five to seven units per acre. Houses are situated from the street in the 20-foot range. Yards are fenced and landscaped and trees are mature.



Streets are in a grid form, vary from narrow to adequate; they have swales and are laid out in a grid pattern. There are no sidewalks.



Development in the area is of low to medium quality. There is a broad mix of uses but the area lacks organization.

5.2.9 Southside Residential

The south side residential area is primarily single-family residential development with larger front yards, which have a somewhat suburban character. Homes were built in the 1960's to 1970's and are 800 square feet and larger. There is also a strong presence of suburban style housing. Densities range from five to seven units per acre.



There are some mature trees but no consistency in the planting patterns. There are no sidewalks and roads are narrow with swales.

The south side residential district generally consists of low to medium quality, workforce housing.

5.2.10 Midtown Residential

This area consists of primarily single-family residences, which were constructed in the 1930's to 1950's. Most houses are one-story bungalow style with floor plates ranging from 800 to 1500 square feet. Densities range from six to eight units per acre. Many of these homes have porches but there are no other prominent architectural features. Façade materials include brick, lapboard wood siding and wood or asbestos shingle.



Structures are close to the street, generally less than 20 feet, creating a strong neighborhood relationship with the street. Fences are predominantly located in the rear yard. Trees tend to be mature and residential landscapes are mostly lawns. There is no consistency or predominance of street trees.

There are no sidewalks. Streets are lit. There is no on-street parking due to the narrow streets that have swales. Parking is located in the front yard. The asphalt condition is adequate and there are numerous one-way streets. Generally, the area has a strong rural feel. There are numerous non-conforming land uses.

5.2.11 Airport Industrial

The airport industrial district centers on the airport terminal and buildings. The surrounding area consists of office, industrial and warehouse. Two high quality office buildings are located in the area along with a variety of lower quality buildings and industrial uses. Façade materials include: brick, masonry, metal and aluminum. Many of the buildings are pre-fabricated. Offices are two to four stories in height with most buildings exceeding 10,000 square feet. There are few design details except in the office buildings.





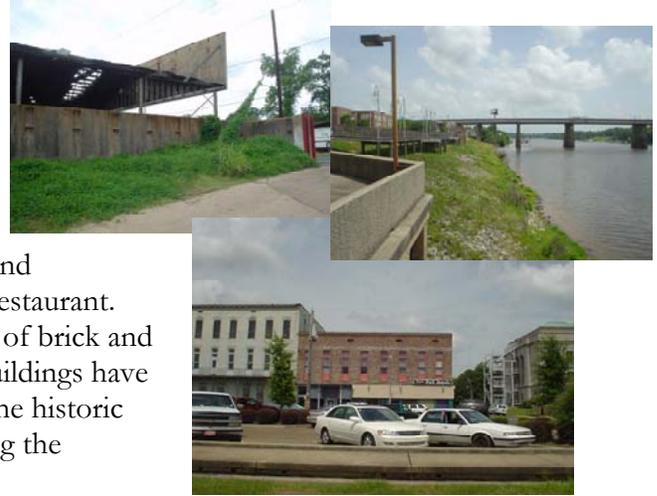
The density of development is low and the distances to the street tend to be large, which gives a broader spatial quality to the district. Sites are generally fenced for outdoor storage and security. Tree planting and landscaping are minimal; parking areas are large and undefined.

There are no sidewalks and streetlights are located on wooden poles. Roads are wide and there is no on-street parking. Primary roads have four lanes and curbs while other roads have open swales. The road layout is generally a grid pattern. There is a wide range of character in the area from quality office to temporary metal storage. There is a lack of organization in the relationship between various uses and structures and the street grid and landscape are not contiguous to the City.

5.2.12 Downtown Waterfront

The downtown waterfront has been added as a separate district because it has a unique development opportunity and a character that is different from the surrounding districts.

Open space, the river and the floodwall barrier dominate the area. Land uses include office, retail, and industrial development, a children’s museum and a restaurant. Buildings are two-stories or less and are constructed of brick and masonry. Most buildings are vacant. Many of the buildings have a unique historical character. Redevelopment of some historic downtown buildings was underway in 2008, including the signature Penn Hotel building.



Pedestrian circulation along the river is confined to the boardwalk. Streets have sidewalks that are adequate in width but there are no street trees. Rear access is adequate for pedestrian circulation.

The waterfront area is underutilized and has a unique historical and waterfront character. In addition to historic building facades, long vistas and green open spaces dominate the environment.

5.2.13 Conclusions

The character of Monroe is defined by its past as an agricultural and waterfront community. This cultural and economic history, as it is reflected in its built forms, should be preserved and enhanced as the City looks to the future.

The City was originally laid out with a focus on its waterfront and water transportation. This is evident in the orientation of streets, parks, blocks and signatures towards the river. Vistas and sightlines were preserved and accented. Bayous, wetlands, creeks and open spaces were employed to enhance the urban experience and to connect the various elements of the City. As the City grew, it encompassed neighboring agricultural communities and farm worker housing. Over time, less consideration was given to its physical layout. This phenomenon occurred within the City Planning field in general, in which there was a shift in focus away from controlling the urban form to controlling land uses. As a result the urban form became less understood, less organized and less enjoyed.



Monroe is at a juncture in its history where urban design can direct growth and revitalize the downtown area, neighborhoods and commercial areas as well as preserve existing built form and open spaces. Monroe is fortunate to have retained historic characteristics such as its waterfront focus and its downtown even though its primary functions have moved east along Interstate 20. In the future, issues of urban form should be address through urban design and design standards.

City wide issues such as the of location of new streets; the realignment of existing streets; the location of new parks, trails and signatures elements and the refocusing of commercial areas to benefit the entire city should be addressed through the use of urban design. Additionally, natural areas could be integrated and enhanced to accent the waterfront identity and the unique Bayou areas that Monroe enjoys.

Design standards should be used to create relationship among built forms at the street, block and site levels. Historical detail in buildings should be preserved and design standards should be used to control elements such as setback, material, colors, transparency, orientation, form, rooflines, appurtenances and signage on new buildings. In this way new neighborhoods will combine with historic neighborhoods to enhance the Monroe experience.

Monroe has an opportunity to build upon its existing character and composition as it redesigns itself to offer an organized, functional and attractive urban form. Enhancing the experience and identity of the City through design will improve economic opportunities, social interaction and quality of life for residents in the community.

5.3 Community Character Findings

- The downtown area has numerous historic buildings; however the area is underutilized and suffers from neglect.
- Design standards should be used to preserve and enhance Monroe's historic areas such as downtown and its newer neighborhoods; historic district standards are currently in place
- North Monroe is a very comfortable and attractive residential area offering a mixture of residential development styles.
- The interstate corridor area has development potential but lacks organization and character.
- The Garden District offers a southern style and flavor, which is enhanced by its proximity to Forsythe Park and the riverfront.
- The university area could be enhanced as a community focus with streetscape improvements and design standards.
- The airport industrial area lacks organization and connectivity to the community.
- Most neighborhoods lack sidewalks and safe pedestrian circulation.
- Historic elements of quality neighborhoods should be employed to develop design standards to maintain the unique character of Monroe.
- Older commercial districts need streetscape improvements and design standards.