6. **Buildings and Spaces of Human Scale**

To create livable urban areas, buildings and spaces should be attractive and inviting. The elements of building height, setback, yards, architecture, and spatial enclosure all contribute to the appearance and function of a place. When proportionate to the human body and considered in their context, buildings and spaces of human scale improve the quality of a place.

People like to be in places that are built on a “human scale.” In other words, the proportions relate to the size of the human body. A person can feel overwhelmed in a place of high-rise buildings where so much enclosure reduces light, air, and the ability to see to
Spatial enclosure is essential to creating such livable spaces. People tend to be most comfortable outdoors when the space is defined. Streets, like squares, plazas, and greens, are like outdoor rooms. This is why quaint European villages are such a joy to experience even when they are architecturally simple. American streets are typically wider than the buildings are tall. Street trees or other elements, however, can be used to help enclose the space and restore a comfortable human scale. In fact, much of the value added by the Neighborhood Model stems from such improvements to the character of streets and other spaces that the public enters.

Figure 2:19 (left) This street in Obidos, Portugal is lined with the simplest of whitewashed buildings. The charm of the street comes from its degree of enclosure, its gentle curvature, and a distant view of the city’s boundary wall beyond. While such narrow streets would not work in an American context, they offer a lesson on the importance of enclosure, careful building alignment, and on the concept of the space being more significant than any of the individual buildings along the street.

Figure 2:20 (far left) York Place on the Downtown Mall in Charlottesville has a residential density of 57 du/acre plus an additional commercial density of 1.0 FAR (Floor Area Ratio). While the combined FAR (commercial plus residential) of approximately 2.5 would be considered high by current Albemarle County standards, it is indeed this density, combined with the human scale and proportions of its detail, that enables it to contribute to the Mall’s sense of place. For a discussion of FAR see page 97.

Figure 2:21 The “Altamont” in downtown Charlottesville has a net density of 88 du/acre. Nevertheless, it sits comfortably at the end of a residential street of considerably less density providing an architectural focal point at the street’s terminus.