

RETROFITTING SUBURBIA

by

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The present generation should hope to be looked back upon as the one that inherited a city-form experiment gone awry, thought better of it, and began the tough process of restoring order and common sense.

The city-form experiment gone awry is suburbia. There are at least three 'suburbias.' The first is found in sub-urban sprawl. The second is found where the old city is being changed into suburbia. The third is a sub-urban mentality that accepts and perpetuates the sprawl paradigm uncritically. All three need surgical, meticulous repair.

SUBURBIA # 1

YOU KNOW, OUT THERE

The perpetual, outward sprawl is at or beyond crisis point. On crude functional levels the postwar suburbs have failed. One can measure, for example, the miserable rise in vehicle-miles traveled, up *40 percent* in just the past decade, with all the associated problems of energy, pollution, time and stress. Or one can watch the annual budget scramble in which unsustainable municipalities attempt to provide services to far-flung citizens or to maintain an inefficient, non-compact infrastructure. Or one can measure the paving-over of agricultural land, an annual amount in the US equal to the area of several New England states.

On a less crude, human-nurturing level, sprawl does not measure up either. We are only beginning to discern the social entropy that results when 'sense of place' vanishes. Participating in self-government has become a low priority for many because they've lost the sense of belonging to a local culture. Trace this, at least in part, to the suppressing of mixed-use towns in favor of random buildings set far apart. Anti-social behavior, including crime, also worsens when physical community declines. As a fourth grader in a neighborhood school in Hickory Grove, North Carolina, I was very aware that my classroom teacher would be in Sunday school with my mother. Can the recent suburbs boast that kind of completeness or connectedness, or such built in inducement to good behavior?

To fix suburbia requires a commitment to compact neighborhoods that are functionally complete. But complete, compact neighborhoods are contrary to conventional zoning, which paradoxically sought to keep land uses apart and keep density unnaturally low. To fix suburbia also requires that each new building be an integral part of the whole fabric; such a fabric is nigh impossible to build in light of conventional zoning that emphasizes deep setbacks on all sides and is preoccupied with parking requirements.

The instrument of single-use 'zones' should be scrapped altogether. The zoning of land use should be replaced by the regulation of *the form of the public spaces and the durability of the architecture*. The focus of regulations on use is wrong-headed, for the use inside a building is far less permanent than the buildings' position on the street. The single-use zoning

approach has worked too well at producing countless strip 'centers,' office 'parks,' walled 'communities,' and the like. Detailed three-dimensional plans, which illustrate buildings, rather than two-dimensional diagrams of uses, are essential for making authentic neighborhoods.

The latest spectacular round of new towns being planned and developed on raw land offers models that are useful in shifting the paradigm away from conventional suburban thinking. On formerly undeveloped sites an idea may be demonstrated in a pure way, and a number of recent projects do so, but existing sprawl development can also be altered for the better, and this must be a national priority.

SUBURBIA #2

THE DISSOLVING CITY: THE REAL TOWNS ARE GETTING SUBURBANIZED

Older American cities were begun before the sprawl mentality took hold and therefore retain some of the qualities of traditional neighborhoods. For the last several decades, however, most cities have been progressively sub-urbanized in both concept and detail. Sprawl-type zoning has been overlaid on the historic mixed use centers forming 'central business districts' of segregated land use. These towns now have few if any residents living in them. Visit most of the Sunbelt downtowns and you will find half-empty highrises poking up from windswept parking lots, setbacks, and 'plazas.' Whole areas were razed under urban renewal, carving a living body into dying pieces. Neighborhoods were hacked up by new expressways designed to whisk commuters from suburb to city center or from suburb to suburb. This new infrastructure wreaked havoc on existing close-in communities, devaluing in-city land to create development value farther out. Roads were widened and re-widened, sidewalks slimmed, streetcar lines shut down, shade trees torn out of the way, and corners broadened for higher speed car turns. All means of travel other than the car were sacrificed in its name - no wonder they say, "Americans just won't walk anymore.

To fix suburbia therefore also means putting the old towns and cities back together.

SUBURBIA #3

THE SUB-URBAN EXPERT MINDSET

The third suburbia is not a place but a world view. It draws developers and investors who prefer comparatively unregulated projects. (Who can blame them?) It is a mind-set also shared by unquestioning bureaucrats, engineers, planners, and even architects. Most traffic engineers and government agencies continue to push wider roads as better roads. Most planners do not really plan: when they do draw it is usually bubble diagrams of segregated uses connected by roads. Many architects focus on the building as an object but don't worry about the public space as though the public spaces are not also their design responsibility.

One suspects that these specialists are out of sync with what people actually want. There is an obvious contradiction between the products being sold and the words and images, that are used in sales literature evoking community. The words and images are drawn from our popular culture. Real estate ads peddle "That Hometown Feeling," yet the actual thing being sold, with the experts and consultants as willful accomplices, isn't Hometown at all but another Stamped-Out Subdivision. Not long ago *TIME* devoted a cover story to "The Simple Life: Rejecting the Rat Race, Americans Get Back to Basics." That cover story is in concert with the back to basics ideas suggested by citizens at community design meetings we attend. They ask for walkable streets, for safe and convenient neighborhoods, and for identity. But, their mortgages and taxes are not being used to build what they say they want. Their money is being spent to build mean, anonymous dwellings and a car-oriented infrastructure. One presumes that a back to basics life is not lived in fear, not lived on a forgettable asphalt plain, and does not require being stuck in traffic several hours each day.

Today compelling images are being produced by designers working toward sustainable community form. The images that depict these communities tend to show traditional, time-tested building types. But these images have distracted those who see only the images and not the thinking behind them. They seek to classify by 'style' an emerging body of work that has scarcely anything to do with style. Diverted or inflamed by the imagery, these people tend to dismiss the work on sustainable communities as nostalgia or prettiness alone.

Town planner Geoffrey Ferrell has countered that the new urbanists are in fact "diehard, unreconstructed functionalists who have simply figured out that suburban sprawl doesn't work." He's right. One should add to his thought that hammering old towns and cities into suburban mush has not produced environments that 'work'. To fix all three suburbs will require conciliation of the less-than-urban experts with the rest of us.