

15 WAYS TO FIX THE SUBURBS

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Most of us actually know what we want in a neighborhood—we just don't know how to get it, because developers have been building the wrong thing for 50 years. Here's how to get our communities back on track.

For decades, Anton Neleson of Rutgers University has been using the tools of science to pursue that most elusive and subjective quality, happiness. When a developer comes into a community, humbly seeking permission to re-create ancient Pompeii on the site of an old Go Kart track, the town's planners commission Neleson to survey the populace and determine if that's what they'd actually like there. Using photographs, models and questionnaires, Neleson has surveyed people all over the country, and these are some of the things he's found:

1. "Everybody will call for a green open space in the middle—that's automatic. They will put the major community buildings around the plaza, then group the houses on relatively narrow streets. Ninety-nine percent don't want streets that are more than two lanes wide. At the edges of the village they leave open space."

2. "With two working spouses, [smaller lots] make a lot more sense. You don't want to mow that big lawn."

3. "People have a fundamental, psychological, spiritual response to nature. If you show them recently built multi-family housing or office parks, they go negative. A small, traditional neighborhood is what people want, They don't know how to get it."

Well, of course they don't: most of them haven't even seen a "small, traditional neighborhood" in years, if ever. But they instinctively choose it anyway. The premise of the new urbanism is that people can have the kinds of neighborhoods they say they like. Architects know how to design them, developers can build them, banks can make money on them. All it takes is a measure of political will to overcome the inertia of 50 years of doing things the wrong way . . . and the application of a few simple rules.

GIVE UP BIG LAWNS

1. One useful way to define a suburb is "a place that grows lawns." The great postwar disillusionment

began for many Americans when they left the city in search of a simpler life and discovered that watering, fertilizing, weeding and mowing the measliest yard takes more time over a year than the average New Yorker spends looking for parking. And the expanses of front lawn themselves serve no purpose but their owners' vanity except that most suburban communities require them, on the theory, that large setbacks help preserve the bucolic character of a community.

That may have been true in the 1920s, when suburbs were being settled 80 houses at a time. But when highways opened up huge areas of countryside after the war, large-lot zoning had the opposite effect: by spreading population over a larger area, it accelerated sprawl. If zoning boards weren't so fearful of "density," they could require developers to cluster houses and set aside land nearby for open space and recreation. This is also a more efficient way to build a community. Houses that are 100 feet apart, obviously, have 100 feet of unused road and utility lines between them. School buses have less distance to travel.

And the goal of making a walkable community is defeated when houses are spread out on huge lots. Even the depth of the front yard turns out to make a crucial psychological difference. When houses are set back behind 30 feet of lawn, the streetscape becomes oppressively desolate; your perspective changes so slowly you don't feel you're reaching a destination. Probably no single change would improve the quality of suburban life as much as shrinking the size of lots—and it would actually make houses cheaper.

BRING BACK THE CORNER STORE

2. The suburban condition, says architect Peter Calthorpe, "is a landscape of absolute segregation . . . not just in terms of income, age or ethnicity, but simple functional uses." This is so obvious that most people no longer see the absurdity of making a five-mile round trip for a loaf of bread. That is, as long as they have a car; for anyone not so blessed children, the elderly or handicapped, people who can't afford a car for every member of the family— it's nuts.

Again, this is a function of good intentions undone by the explosion of suburbia. What worked in a compact neighborhood in a city—a dry-cleaner, a drugstore. a

corner grocery--became grotesque when blown up a hundredfold and applied to whole counties. Shopping strips stretched for dozens of miles along the highways, while the curving streets of suburbia wormed their way ever deeper into the countryside

Obviously, malls and supermarkets, with their vast selections and economies of scale, will never be supplanted by neighborhood shopping streets and corner groceries. But it still should be possible to provide some of the necessities of life within walking distance of many people. Then you could send your kid out for that bread -- and a newspaper while he's at it.

MAKE THE STREETS SKINNY

3. Modern subdivisions are designed to be driven, not walked. Even little-used streets are 36 feet or 40 feet wide, with big sweeping curves at the corners. It's great for cars: traffic barely needs to slow down. But for those on foot, the distance is daunting. Narrow streets--as little as 26 feet wide - and tight, right-angled corners are a lot easier for walkers, and probably safer as well, because they force drivers to slow down. One objection: fire departments worry about getting trucks through. But that hasn't been a big problem in old nabes in cities like New York and Boston.

DROP THE CUL-DE-SAC

4. The cul-de-sac, a fancy term for "dead end," has emerged as the street plan of choice for modern suburbs. Its great advantage the elimination of through traffic is also its weakness, because it compels everyone in a given subdivision to use the same few roads, often at the same times. Anyone attempting to travel on foot or by bicycle will eventually wind up on the shoulder of a busy highway and probably give up. But streets don't have to be like that: they can follow predictable routes and interconnect. This gives motorists a choice of routes, so they don't all pile up every morning waiting to make a left turn at the same intersection.

DRAW BOUNDARIES

5. In an absolute sense, there is no real shortage of land in the United States; if the entire population lived on an acre of land per household, it would occupy less than 5 percent of the contiguous 48 states (plus all of Canada and Mexico for parking). But in the regions where Americans actually want to live, they are swarming into the countryside, covering whole counties with "edge cities" flung outward from the beltways as if by centrifugal force. New York City's suburbs reach across the whole state of New Jersey into eastern Pennsylvania, nearly 100 miles

from Times Square. To new urbanist theoreticians, this is the disastrous result of shortsighted government policies, such as the bias in the federal mortgage-guarantee program toward detached houses on large plots of land. To free-market economists, it represents the sum of millions of choices by informed individuals who have decided that, on balance, getting up before dawn in Bucks County beats a full night's sleep in Brooklyn.

But sprawl is not a necessary component of affluence. In Europe and Japan, governments have proclaimed "urban-growth boundaries," beyond which development is more or less prohibited. Even in a democratic country such as Holland, a businessman seeking to live on a farm and drive into the city to work would have to request permission from the government--and he might not get it. Try telling that to Lee Iacocca. Contrary to popular American political theory, these regulations haven't noticeably affected the prosperity of Western Europe--nor of the one major American city that has instituted its own urban-growth boundary: Portland, Ore

In Oregon, naturally, no one would prevent the hypothetical businessman from living on a farm; he just couldn't sell it off for a subdivision when he retired to Palm Springs. More than 20 years ago, planners for the Portland metropolitan area drew a line around 325 square miles--covering 24 municipalities and parts of three counties--and designated it to receive virtually all population growth. Along the way they have reduced the average lot size for detached houses from 13,000 square feet to an average of 8,500 square feet--roughly the difference between putting three and five units on an acre. The proposed future goal is an even mingier 6,600 square feet. Between now and the year 2040, Portland's planners expect the population to grow some 77 percent, but they are committed to an increase of residential land use of only 6 percent. Instead of planting more "edge cities" at the arbitrary points where freeways intersect, Portland has concentrated job growth in its downtown. The urban-growth boundary has been so successful that even a conservative property-rights group, Oregonians in Action, endorses the concept (although it argues with some details). Imagine how Los Angeles would look today if it had done this 20 years ago.

HIDE THE GARAGE

6. Most suburban houses give the appearance that they are first of all places to park, turning to the world the blank and desolate face of a garage door. Neighborhoods look more pleasant when garages are put behind the houses, accessible by side yards or by alleys.

MIX HOUSING TYPES

7. Of all the ways to improve the social and physical organization of the suburbs, none would be as subversive as breaking the monopoly of single-family detached homes: that endless alternation of "Crestwoods" and "Auroras" intended to foster the illusion of preference in buyers' choosing between four bedrooms and three bedrooms plus a den. Homogeneity is the very essence of the suburbs. Attached houses, rental units, shops or businesses--anything that might attract traffic and its attendant evil, a decline in property values--are banned.

This is a fairly new phenomenon in human history. For most of the last 9,000 years, most people inhabited villages, where by definition nothing was very far from anything else. As late as the 1940s, for that matter, Memphis, Tenn., developer Henry, Turley grew up in the End of haphazard city neighborhood that is the despair of sensible planners: a jumble of stores, shacks, flats, walk-ups and decaying mansions, all suffused with the vivid street life neighbors made for themselves in the era before air conditioning lured them indoors. It is, course, beyond the power of zoning to bring back those days, even if we wanted them back. But it may be possible to recapture some of the energy and spirit that characterized American civic life before television clamped its monopoly on public discourse and entertainment. So in 1987 when Turley bought a 135-acre vacant plot on an island in the Mississippi five minutes from downtown Memphis, he embarked on a radically different kind of development, which began not by asking "What will the county let me build?" or "What will the banks finance?" but "What kind of place do people want to live in?"

The result was Harbor Town, intended to be "a slice of the world--the more complete and varied the better." There are houses ranging in price from \$114,000 to \$425,000, which contrasts with a typical subdivision in Phoenix, Ariz., for example, where the seven basic models run the gamut from \$271,990 to \$316,990. There are town houses and apartments, and shops being planned. Developers had tried mixing housing types in the "planned communities" of the 1970s, but in those each use was isolated in its own thousand-acre quadrant; in Harbor Town they are all within a few blocks of each other. Turley seems to have decreed that instead of golf, the leading recreational activity would be chatting with neighbors while watching the sun set over the river, so he set the houses close together and built cozy village squares. The houses themselves are an eye-popping collection of styles, including Charlestown provincial, Cape Cod and Bauhaus modern, but they have an underlying unity based on materials (mostly

clapboard or wood siding) and the ubiquitous new-urbanist amenity, porches. Turley expects to make money on the project, when it's completed in 1997, but he also has a higher aim. "Democracy assumes--demands--that we know, Understand and respect our fellow citizens," he says. "How can we appreciate them if we never see them?"

PLANT TREES CURBSIDE

8. Nothing humanizes a street more than a row of trees shading the sidewalk. But they must be broad-leaved shade trees such as sycamores or chestnuts, not the dinky globular things like flowering pears that developers favor in parking lots. And they should be planted out at the curblin, where they will grow out to form a canopy over the roadway. Why don't more places have such an obvious amenity already? Because traffic engineers worry that people might drive into them.

PUT NEW LIFE INTO OLD MALLS

9. They've got fountains, hanging ferns and ice rinks, and if you stay in one long enough you may eventually hear "Wichita Lineman" rescored for 140 violins, but most shopping malls are, essentially, just vast sheds that consumers trudge through until, with nothing left to spend, they are spit out into the parking lot. No wonder people are so quick to desert them when a bigger one opens up down the road. Ghost malls are no longer a rare sight in America. Phoenix has at least two, including one right across the street from several of its largest office buildings. But the land they occupy can, with some ingenuity and a lot of money, become the nucleus of a real neighborhood, an architectural adornment rather than a hulking blight.

The process is happening first with strip shopping centers, which are usually older than enclosed malls and less complex architecturally. The first step is to transcend the definition of a "shopping center" as a grouping of unrelated stores in the middle of a parking lot. That pretty much described the New Seabury Shopping Center, a dreary 1960s-era strip mall on a busy highway in Cape Cod, Mass., about 70 miles from Boston. A decade ago, the owners decided to redevelop it on a radically different scheme, modeled on a New England town. New streets were hid out in what had been the parking lot: new shops were built in the neglected area behind the existing ones. A 25-year development plan was drawn up, envisioning a substantial community; offices, a library, a church and a senior-citizens' home have already been built

Parking was redistributed along the curbs of the new internal streets. This makes for some congestion and

inefficiency, but lessens the frustration of trudging down long aisles of parked cars toward a distant mall entrance. Developer Douglas Storrs says that shoppers find the strength to walk as much as half a mile down the sidewalks of what is now called Mashpee Commons, passing shop windows, benches and planters. The same people reach the threshold of exasperation when they have to park more than 400 feet from the door to an ordinary mall.

There are other examples, including Mizner Park, in Boca Raton, Fla., where a failing shopping center was replaced with a 28-acre mixed-use development organized around a new public park. To be sure, not all developers will be this ambitious with their properties. But as a first step, hiding the ugly collection of Dumpsters and loading docks on the backsides of strip malls could eliminate a lot of suburban blight.

PLAN FOR MASS TRANSIT

10. Is there any way to get Americans out of their cars and into buses and trains? In Los Angeles, not even an earthquake sufficed; only about 2 percent of drivers switched to mass transit after their freeways fell down last year, and most of them went right back to driving as soon as the roads were patched up

The problem is that transit seems to need a critical mass to work, and many metropolitan areas (Los Angeles among them) are just too spread out. Many commuters seem to think that if you have to drive to the train station anyway, you might as well just keep going to the office.

Hence Calthorpe's idea for the "pedestrian pocket": a relatively dense settlement within a quarter-mile walk of a transit stop. In Portland, Ore., they're building the transit line first-putting stops literally in the middle of empty fields--in the expectation that the development will follow

LINK WORK TO HOME

11. Suburbs are no longer just bedroom communities; the dispersal of employment out of the central cities has been going on for a generation. (As the writer William H. Whyte demonstrated two decades ago, big corporations leaving the city tend to relocate within a few miles of the chief executive's house.) But the result-the oxymoronic "office parks" consisting of indistinguishable glass cubes amid a token fuzz of grass and a giant parking lot-is just a higher class of sprawl than the gas stations and fried-chicken places that would have been built there instead.

If companies don't want to be downtown, they should at least attempt to integrate their offices-or factories, for that matter-into communities. Nobody wants to live next to a steel mill, naturally. But in Laguna West, outside Sacramento, people are happy to live within a quarter-mile of an Apple Computer plant, which provides 1,200 white-collar and assembly-line jobs. Apple agreed to locate there after the community was already planned: developer Phil Angelides says the company liked the idea that executives and workers could afford to live in the same community. Playa Vista, a new-urbanist community being planned for Los Angeles, has been mentioned as a possible home for the DreamWorks SKG multimedia company. It could be an updated-and very, upscale-version of the company town, which in this case will comprise 13,000 houses and apartments, shops, a park, promenades and jogging trails along the last tidal marsh in the city.

Calthorpe believes that more businesses will move to new-urbanist projects as they grow disillusioned with the traffic and isolation of their office parks. "The idea is not necessarily to live in the same development you work in," he says; "there are a lot of criteria for where you choose your house. But if people can walk to a park, to midday shopping, restaurants and day care, it's better for the people working there."

MAKE A TOWN CENTER

12. Every town needs a center: a plaza, square or green that is a geographical reference point and a focus of civic life--even if that just means a place to push a stroller or throw a Frisbee. Shopping malls are a poor substitute; the area they serve is too diffuse, and in any case their civic function is incidental to their real purpose making money. Developers often provide some parkland in their subdivisions, but it's usually on leftover parcels that wouldn't be built on anyway, by the edge of the highway or adjoining another subdivision.

SHRINK PARKING LOTS

13. Parking is one of Suburbia's highest achievements. Only in the United States does the humblest copy-shop or pizzeria boast as much space for cars as the average city hall. But it is also a curse; the vast acreage given over to asphalt is useless for any other purpose, and goes unused more than half the time anyway. Most planners regard parking as a prerequisite for economic growth, like water. But downtown Portland, Ore., which strictly regulates parking, has been thriving with essentially the same space for cars as it had 20 years ago. Developers often build more parking than they actually need; a half-empty lot is presumed to reassure prospective

tenants that they'll never run out of space for their cars. Yet a bank, a movie theater and a church are all full at different times. One simple improvement towns can make is to look for ways to share and pool parking space among different users.

The ideal-although expensive- solution to the parking problem is for cars to vanish underground when they get where they're going. A shopping center surrounded by acres of striped asphalt, whether it's empty or full, might as well put up a moat against pedestrians. Large parking lots should be situated behind buildings whenever possible--something most suburban zoning codes don't currently allow-and divided by streets, sidewalks or structures into smaller segments of around three acres or less. On-street parking in residential neighborhoods is controversial. Some planners favor it, because it creates a "buffer" between pedestrians and traffic, but others consider it a danger to children running out between the cars.

TURN DOWN THE LIGHTS

14. It is probably true that illuminating a suburban street to the level of the infield at Comiskey Park reduces accidents, especially for people who leave their regular glasses at home and have to drive in sunglasses. For everyone else, though, towering, garish sodium-vapor street lamps intrude on the peacefulness of the night with the insistence of a stuck horn. Where safety is not a big issue, why not use several smaller lamps that cast a gentler glow and let you see the stars?

THINK GREEN

15. Out beyond the beltway, where the roads are narrow and blacktop, past the point at which the dwindling traffic is too sparse to warrant plucking by even the mingiest motor court, there's a beautiful land. There are pale green corn plants poking through the brown soft, lakes glimpsed through trees, cholla cactus among the tumbled red rocks. It's not wilderness, but countryside, the unfinished canvas of

America. It tells us where we are-in Illinois, Maine or Texas--and it locates us in time: summer, fall, winter, spring. There's nothing to buy there, nowhere to park; it doesn't lure us with golden arches or free coffee mugs with a fill-up. It's just there.

And by the same token, it isn't making anyone rich, yet. There is a gradient of value that runs from the city to the country, and it keeps moving outward; pick any spot and it's just a matter of time before it makes the magical transition from "countryside" to "real estate." The process seems inevitable, but it isn't, really. It's the product of concrete decisions made in an age when roads were still viewed as the harbingers of civilization rather than discount muffler outlets. And as surely as our society made those decisions, it can change them, before lawn meets lawn and asphalt meets asphalt, covering the land in a seamless carpet of sprawl.

Leading new urbanist

Nothing irks Peter Calthorpe more than "naysayers who say that Americans don't want to live in high-density cities--they want suburbs, as though there were only two choices!" According to the San Francisco architect, "The answer is to understand there are a huge number of people with different lifestyles. There are different densities in new urbanism, some low, some high. Neighborhoods that have diversity--cafes, recreation, casual social encounters--will be increasingly important. Suburbs aren't just about bedrooms anymore."

A different approach

Mixing income levels in a neighborhood is a new-urbanist credo, and nobody does that better than planner Oscar Newman. His scattered-site low-income housing for Yonkers, N.Y., is a model of its kind. But Newman is no fan of the new urbanists. "Instead of saying, 'This is what's wrong [with suburbs],' they should ask, 'Why do people feel it's worth it to live there?'"