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GS 190

20 May 2011

Looking Towards a Smarter Future

When one walks down the streets of Manhattan, it is enough for the senses simply to marvel at the intimidating size of the skyscrapers, feel the lack of personal space on a sidewalk and be visually overwhelmed by the flashing advertisements of Time Square. For a drastic contrast, one can go to a suburb neighborhood in any Long Island town and feel the sense of complacency, routine and defined territory. Many of us live our lives within our communities without really thinking much about how they came to be, and how the way we build our communities can essentially shape who we are. The suburban sprawl which took place in America in the years following World War II has come to shape the country socially, economically and environmentally. Urban development has been gaining more attention in recent years within the United States, as more urban planners and real estate developers are examining suburban development and ways to enhance the life of communities across the country. Within his book, "The Option of Urbanism", Christopher Leinberger sets out to define a new trend among urban planners called "walkable urbanism", also known as "the New Urbanism". He highlights the societal shift from the former American Dream of the low-density, drivable sub-urbanism to the new American Dream of "walkable urbanism", which has taken place. The way that communities develop affects standard of living, economic growth, the environment, taxes, quality of education, the creation of opportunity and the quality of life. Local lifestyles can have a profound global impact politically, economically and environmentally.

The term Smart Growth emerged as an umbrella term for several different initiatives

which were independently launched, such as New Urbanism, agricultural reform, the Climate Project, and green building. Smart Growth is comprised of several principles, including compact building design, mixed income housing, providing a variety of transportation choices, and creating walkable neighborhoods while preserving open spaces and protecting important environmental areas. The ultimate goal of Smart Growth is to “foster design that encourages social, civic and economic activity” (Smartgrowth.org).

Human civilization seems to be inherently destructive, even without intending to be. Wherever humans migrate to, they leave their mark. They find food, build shelter, burn whatever can be burned, and afterwards either leave or spread out. At the core of the modern environmental movement is a need to somehow prevent this type of human impact,

“Modern interest in environmentalism is driven by a yearning to protect what we haven’t ruined already, to conserve what we haven’t used up, to restore as much as possible of what we’ve destroyed, and to devise ways of reconfiguring our lives so that civilization as we know it can be sustained through our children’s lifetimes and beyond” (Owen 7).

It is therefore no surprise that according to this philosophy, densely populated cities are seen as doomsday scenario to modern day environmentalists. For many environmentalists, cities embody all the bad aspects of human civilization-- overcrowding, disease, pollution, crime. In particular, American environmentalists view the rapid compact development of New York City as an ecological loss. They like to cite Manhattan’s significant negative impact on the environment, and that it “generates more greenhouse gases, uses more energy, and produces more solid waste than any other American region of comparable size” (Owen 7). Many environmentalists have proposed ways to make New York City more “green”, such as increasing

the amount of open space around structures and implementing more parks in congested urban areas. This gives rise to the inherent paradox within the American environmentalist movement,

“The environmental movement is deeply stained with a sort of Malthusian current.

It’s anti-urban, anti-industrial, agrarian, primitivist. Manhattan seems to be a supremely un-natural place because of all the concrete and glass and steel, but the paradox is that it’s actually more harmonious and more benign, in terms of nature, than ostensibly greener human environments, which depend on huge energy inputs, mainly in the form of fossil fuels. In order to surround ourselves with nature, we get in cars and drive long distances, and then build silly pseudo-green houses in the middle of the woods—which are actually extremely disruptive and very, very wasteful” (Owen 20)

On an individual basis, New Yorkers pollute less than people in more rural areas. This means that the criticism coming from environmentalists tends to be biased. While the collective amount of pollution coming from Manhattan is larger than other areas of comparable size, New Yorkers on an individual basis have a significantly smaller carbon footprint than average residents of surrounding suburbs, small towns and farms. Due to the tighter spaces where New Yorkers live, they are obliged to live more efficiently and reduce the amount of wasteful consumption (Owen 8). The reason for New Yorkers’ lifestyles is not necessarily that they are more environmentally conscious than suburbanites. Most New Yorkers live the way they do out of common sense and necessity.

The anti-urban sentiment has its roots in American environmentalism since the beginning of the movement in the nineteenth century. Henry David Thoreau established himself as one of the first American environmentalists between the years of 1845 and 1847 by living in a

cabin in the woods near Concord, Massachusetts. He was able to create an image of himself as a sensitive philosopher who lived in harmony with the environment, away from the toxins of urban life. The reality of the situation was that he was not in fact that fond of the outdoors, and his cabin was closer to Concord than many realized, but regardless of this, he became an American icon of literature and philosophy. After Thoreau's time, many precedents were set in American history which followed in the footsteps of Thoreau's ideal lifestyle. John Muir, who founded the Sierra Club in 1892, found urban life to be "toxic to both body and soul" (Owen 18). The National Park Service was established by Congress in 1916 as a means of transitioning away from urban life. American environmentalism is defined by some as a, "rural, agrarian ideology. It seeks to integrate man into nature in a very direct, simplistic way—scattering people along the squirrels and the trees and the deer" (Owen 19). It is inherently antagonistic towards urban life, and this attitude in combination with the prosperity of the United States following the conclusion of World War II facilitated the early beginnings of suburban development.

There are many benefits which are associated with suburban life that pro-urbanism advocates sometimes conveniently forget to acknowledge. Suburban communities often offer better quality public schools. Real estate costs are lower, because construction is cheaper and rural land values are lower than urban land values. This is why life in the suburbs is cheaper, and also why community taxes are almost always lower. With cheaper land values comes cheaper parking as well, since parking is one of the first factors to be planned when beginning development on a suburban building. However, the most important benefits are the psychological perceptions of living in this type of community. With the suburbs comes a perceived sense of safety and personal freedom (Leinberger 67). With a front and backyard, one has a piece of land to call one's own, and with this defined territory comes a sense of privacy.

Privacy is probably the most significant unintended positive consequence of suburban development, and from a historical perspective, the level of privacy which is achieved in suburban development is unprecedented in human history. In the eighteenth century, some US states passed laws which banned women from living alone, and most middle- and working- class people lived in cramped quarters in the pre-WWII era (Leinberger 66). Now, instead of living in small apartments with acquaintance roommates, a suburbanite most often lives with family or alone in a house. The automobile has taken the concept of privacy to a new level as well. It has essentially become a non-place, where one travels in isolation while listening to music, audiobooks, talking on the phone, etc. Cars have enabled us to increase social distance and expand further as a society than previously possible.

The goal of anti-urbanists was to move away from an artificial, man-made atmosphere and live in harmony with the environment. Henry Ford, a vehement anti-urbanist and the designer of the original Ford automobile, once said,

“We shall solve the City Problem by leaving the City. Get the people into the country, get them into communities where a man knows his neighbor, where there is a commonality of interest, where life is not artificial, and you have solved the City Problem. You have solved it by eliminating the City. City life was always artificial and cannot be made anything else. An artificial form of life breeds its own disorders, and these cannot be ‘solved’. There is nothing to do but abandon the course that gives rise to them” (Owen 105).

To him, cities are plagued with the curse of population density, and dispersing these populations in the country with greater space between each other will resolve all ails which plague human society. However, the political situation in Henry Ford’s time was much different from what it is

today. The advent of the automobile served as a catalyst for the oil industry in the twentieth century. The oil industry has in turn spurred what Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* calls, “petrolism—or petroleum-based politics” (Leinberger 82). America’s addiction to oil has been fueled by America’s overwhelming dependence on the automobile as a means of transportation. Currently, the United States holds 2% of the world’s oil reserves, produces only 8% of the world’s oil reserves on an annual basis, has 5% of the world’s population, but consumes 25% of the world’s annual oil production (Leinberger 81). According to Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, the estimate is that 25% of the defense budget in the 2006 fiscal year was spent on, “the war in Iraq, protecting foreign governments’ oil infrastructure, defending Israel, and patrolling oil shipping lanes” (Leinberger 82). This dependence on foreign oil is severely undermining U.S. foreign policy and the “War on Terror” by funding authoritarian regimes in volatile parts of the world. With India and China becoming more developed societies, the demand from these two BRIC countries will only increase the pressure on oil-supplying nations. China has surpassed Japan as the world’s second largest oil consumer and is expected to pass the United States as the world’s top oil consumer in two decades. This could, however, be what in turn changes the behavior and mentality of normal citizens and real estate developers who refuse to acknowledge this dependence or deny that it is problematic. Currently, two thirds of oil imported into the United States is used for transportation (Leinberger 81) and for the time being, there is no realistic energy substitute which could replace it.

Fossil fuels have revolutionized the way the world works and has changed the mentality of human civilization. Fossil fuels are the remains of dead plants and other organisms, which have been manifesting at the bottoms of swamps and oceans for hundreds of millions of years, and eventually become transformed into fossil fuels under an enormous amount of heat and

pressure (Owen 68). There are several reasons why change is so slow when it comes to reducing American dependence on fossil fuels, and it ultimately comes down to the convenience of coal, oil and natural gas. People will not be motivated to change their habits until they feel that there is a sense of urgency. The sharp increase in high gas prices during the summer of 2008 caused a noticeable change in behavior for many. More people began using public transportation and there was a renewed interest in renewable energy technologies. Overall, people became more conscious of reducing wasteful consumption and were forced to downsize in many ways, including the size of the car one chose to drive. The increase in oil prices became a hardship for many car-dependent commuters. This in turn caused an increase in the prices of food, clothing, medical care, and other modes of travel. Business closures and job layoffs also increased (Owen 58). The steadily increasing price of oil was one of the factors that triggered the global credit crisis. Politically and economically, fossil fuels dominate the world scene. During the summer of 2008, when anger over gas prices was at its highest from the past couple decades, the internet was the source of various rumors and attempts at civil disobedience, including the boycott of gasoline purchase from ExxonMobil, the largest oil company in the world. Rumor of this boycott was spread via e-mail, social-networking sites, and word-of-mouth, in hopes that oil companies would lower gas prices if enough people participated in the protest. Ultimately, of course, this boycott was unsuccessful at creating the change many hoped for, but motivated many people to pay attention and become active. There was a certain sense of urgency during the summer of 2008, and this caused a sort of tidal wave, “You feel that you are being swept along by forces beyond your influence, and you urgently want to do something [...] later, usually, the sense of crisis gradually dissipates, and old habits reassert themselves” (Owen 53). After oil prices declined following summer 2008, rates of oil consumption returned to what they

had been. What is critical for people to realize is that the dependence on fossil fuels is politically, economically and environmentally dangerous. To an extent, driveable suburbanism is a contributor to America's fossil fuel "addiction", and implementing more Smart Growth initiatives in these areas would alleviate this situation.

In a January 1957 episode of *I Love Lucy*, Lucy and Ricky Ricardo make the move from the New York City metropolis to the Connecticut suburbs. It highlighted the suburban development movement which was spreading across the United States following the conclusion of World War II. In the mid-1990s, when the revitalization efforts of transforming US downtowns into walkable urban areas started to be on the rise, *Seinfeld* was able to highlight the lifestyle which can be found in these areas. While sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* were able to depict the comfort and personal space that suburban life can provide, the adventures of Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer in *Seinfeld* illustrated a vastly different, fast-paced lifestyle full of choices and serendipity. He highlights the premise that with walkable urbanism, more is better, "In walkable urban places, when more development and activities are added to the stew, more people are attracted to the street, thereby providing safety in numbers. The restaurants are more crowded, encouraging more restaurants and other retail, increasing rents, making buildings more valuable, raising property taxes, and on and on and on" (Leinberger 132). With the more-is-better premise, one of the most important benefits of the principle is the diversity of activities which take place in a walkable urban place. Walkable areas often are catalysts for cultural unity. Each street can have its own function and personality. While one street can be quiet and domestic, another can be designated as cultural and educational, while another can be full of urban entertainment and neon lights until the early morning hours. Washington, D.C. is a great example of this phenomenon:

“In downtown Washington, there is the grandeur of the Mall and Pennsylvania Avenue with the monuments, the Smithsonian museums, the U.S. Capitol, and the White House adjacent to the revitalized urban entertainment streets with the new arena, restaurants, and nightlife adjacent to the solid downtown office buildings for lawyers, banks and lobbyists” (Leinberger 134).

Washington, D.C. is perhaps the best model for the future of metropolitan growth for American cities because there has been significant development completed not only in downtown Washington D.C. but also in some of the surrounding suburbs and communities in Virginia and Maryland. One of the ways that D.C. has been transformed is through the construction of its Metro system. The D.C. Metro system had been in construction since the 1970s. Even during its construction, it became evident that the Metro would revolutionize the city. Since its completion, it has been seen as a greater success than initially anticipated. This is because of several reasons. The stations, which were built with elegant architecture, and metro cars are generally kept very clean. It is a safe mode of transportation, and therefore the general public feels quite comfortable in making use of it. It has made great use of the “high-density walkable development potential” in the city (Leinberger 135), and made it easier for people living in suburban communities in Maryland and Virginia to commute into the city. Because of the Metro, Downtown Washington D.C. has become the second most compact and efficient office space, behind Midtown Manhattan, and has reversed a sixty-year downward trend (Leinberger 136). With what has taken place in Washington D.C., a city which was notorious for various problems, the same type of progress is possible for Detroit, where development activity has taken place in downtown, and is one of the most important steps in helping the city restructure its economy. “If the Detroit metro area, which also has about 5 million residents, has only four

walkable urban places, there may be a market for around thirteen to fifteen more. This market pressure is one of the reasons that downtown Detroit is reviving, despite having the worst image of any big city downtown and an economy that is going through a fundamental restructuring.” (Leinberger 137). This same type of market pressure, in addition to public pressure, could produce remarkable changes in other cities across the United States as well. Sometimes, however, the trouble comes with acquiring the public pressure.

In suburbia, the more prosperous a neighborhood, the more resistant and suspicious the residents are to any type of change. They tend to lean pro-capitalist, and are skeptical of both private and government-funded efforts to change their communities. Anything associated with urbanism is seen as an antithesis to economic growth. However, walkable urbanism can also benefit the private sector, taking the burden off of local governments and the federal government. Adding more density makes land property more valuable, thereby benefiting government tax rolls. Leinberger cites the ‘more-is better’ premise as being responsible for many positive societal developments. It has been the basis for bringing together property owners and local government to make the walkable urban place a success. It has given private investors a reason to work towards improvements in cleanliness, safety, homeless services, event sponsorship, and other community enhancers. It can be seen as the revival of the federal government’s finances at the turn of the twenty-first century. By the mid-1990s, Washington D.C.’s district government was bankrupt and, as a result, was taken over by the federal government. A few years later, downtown D.C. and adjacent downtown areas began to experience revitalizations which provided an amazing turn around for the city. After the federal government stopped controlling D.C.’s district government in 2001, government finances began running a surplus. Between 2000 and 2006, the district government’s tax revenues increased more than thirteen percent

(Leinberger 132). There are even a few examples in which private corporations and real estate investors have coordinated reform for public school systems, something that local governments often struggle with. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, for instance, the private sector financed and built two new magnet elementary schools located in downtown neighborhoods, which simultaneously enhanced downtown development and successfully integrated mixed-income and multi-racial children, reversing the self-segregation side effect that urban and suburban development often creates. Similar efforts have been seen in Philadelphia. The Center City Academic Region is an effort on the part of the private sector which funds special programs in 23 public and charter schools, and encourages younger families with children to stay in downtown areas (Leinberger 133).

There are, however, the unintended consequences of walkable urbanism which need to be considered, including the lack of affordable housing, surplus of large-lot, single-family houses on the fringe and the impact on independent stores when national chain retailers often take over urban walkable areas. Perhaps the most significant unintended consequence of walkable urbanism is lack of affordable housing and rapidly increasing gentrification of urban areas. While gentrification can increase the tax base, thereby improving public services, physical structures and amenities, it results in unaffordable housing for middle class and lower income residents. In many cases, this is one of the primary factors that drives families out of city centers and into the suburbs. Many jobs tend to be located closer to urban city centers, thus the further out one drives, the more the real estate prices decline. Affordable suburban development became more widely available in the 1950s, when lower income families were able to live in older housing left behind after it became obsolete from a market perspective. Today, housing prices tend to be the most expensive within metropolitan areas and near transit areas, simply because

land is more limited in cities. This is becoming a bigger concern for residents of middle- and low- income communities such as Silver Spring and Takoma Park, Maryland, Venice Beach in Los Angeles, California, Harlem in Manhattan, and several university towns such as Boulder, Colorado and Ann Arbor, Michigan (Leinberger 139). Many developers argue that expanding walkable urbanism across the United States cannot strictly be left to the private sector.

Leinberger argues that in order to properly address the issue of affordable housing, new housing production must be at least partially subsidized. Because of an increase in demand from India and China on construction materials, in addition to the dramatic increase in land prices driven by the demand for smart growth development, developers are being faced with higher construction costs than in the past. If real estate developers are not given incentives or regulations which they need to abide by, they will not be able or willing to provide more affordable housing in metropolitan areas. (Leinberger 141).

Another concern when areas are becoming more urban is the impact that it will have on small businesses. In an increasingly globalized economy, what often ends up happening when revitalizing walkable urban areas is that national and international retailers end up coming in and monopolizing business in downtowns and downtown-adjacent areas. This happens frequently in strip malls within suburban areas as well, but wealthy corporations are also more likely able to afford the higher rents of downtown buildings than smaller private businesses. The ones who lead the revitalization efforts are oftentimes local businesses, who often strive to preserve the area's unique and "funky" character (Leinberger 146). Eventually, however, it becomes inevitable that larger chains make attempts to move into the newly revitalized area for business. This is exactly what happened to Georgetown in the 1980s. At the time, Georgetown was one of the few walkable areas in the region of Washington, D.C. and local businesses

dominated the area. Some examples of this include clothing stores like Commander Salamander and local food stores like Marvelous Market (Leinberger 147). Since then, many national and international chain stores have moved into the area and now populate about fifty percent of business space in the region. This is representative of a global trend, where large chains control the majority of retail in this era. This is not always the case though. For instance, in downtown Santa Fe, New Mexico, due to the large number of tourists it attracts, there are 650 stores within Santa Fe's compact downtown. Only 10 retailers are chain stores, while the rest of the locally owned stores include 200 art galleries, 150 restaurants, and a copious amount of jewelry stores (Leinberger 148).

Another unintended consequence, which can result in urban areas, is the so-called "border vacuum" (Owen 168). In her book, "The Death and Life of Great American Cities", Jane Jacobs defines a border as "the perimeter of a single massive or stretched-out use of territory" (Owen 168). As a city develops, unintentional dead zones can sometimes result. One classic example of a border which can create this is railroad tracks. Often, railroad tracks can divide urban areas into isolated regions, including the "wrong side of the tracks". Other unintentional borders can include "over-sized single use buildings, wide streets, big parking lots, and leafy spacious parks" (Owen 169). These types of borders can disrupt the connectedness of urban life and create an unintended segregation of cultures or people of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Short distances suddenly begin to appear more daunting than they actually are, discouraging pedestrianism. This phenomenon can be observed in both suburban and urban settings. In Manhattan's case, Central Park presents an especially interesting situation of being an unintentional barrier. Central Park spans 843 acres in northern Manhattan. It is an invaluable asset, as it provides the green space which many seek out as a temporary sanctuary from

Manhattan's concrete jungle. However, many people do not consciously pay attention to the vacuum effect that Central Park creates. While the lush green space within the park can provide great mental health benefits to Manhattan city dwellers, the perimeter of the park creates a type of vacuum effect. All activities are deep within Central Park and can only be used during the day. Once nightfall comes, many tend to stay away from the park simply out of natural instinct, but regardless of the time of day, the vast open space and winding paths creates the illusion that the distance is larger than it actually is, and thus inhibits pedestrians from crossing through the park. Vast open areas like Central Park are able to trick one's perception much more than one can realize. For instance, many New Yorkers would feel no hesitation walking three quarters of a mile west on Forty-second Street from Lexington Avenue to Times Square, but many would hesitate walking from Fifth Avenue (on the east side of Central Park) to Lincoln Center (which is on the west side of Central Park). The two routes are the same in length, but the first route is a straight path along busy streets in Midtown Manhattan, whereas the second route crosses through Central Park (Owen 168). Some argue that Central Park would serve Manhattan more efficiently if it weren't placed in the middle of the island and if it had more artificial attractions built into the park, such as restaurants, sports facilities, museums, and theatres. Although, environmentalists and other anti-urban critics would argue that this would defeat the very purpose of the park in the first place. Central Park serves as a recreational area but also acts as a divide between the eastern and western halves of upper Manhattan, resulting in the cultural enclaves of the Upper East and Upper West sides. While such border vacuums can lead to isolated zones, they can also preserve or create cultures.

To study a particular place is like conducting a social engineering experiment. Every city, town, village and community has its own unique character. This is shaped by its history, its

geography, its layout and its inhabitants. Currently in the United States, the two prominent development options for communities are low-density, drivable sub-urbanism and high density walkable urbanism. There are advantages and disadvantages to each type of development planning option. The suburbs are more appealing to those looking for a quiet lifestyle. There is a perceived sense of safety and personal space which sometimes is lacking in a more urban area. Walkable urbanism, on the other hand, appeals to those who dislike driving and are looking for a more vibrant lifestyle. Some people are satisfied with a suburban lifestyle for their entire lives, while others could not conceive the idea of living outside of a city. Others may want to live in a variety of places, depending on the stage of life they are in. For the future of American communities, it is imperative that people are offered as much or more opportunities for where they can live. In today's economy, this range of choice is not only possible, it is essential. Local and federal government institutions should also play a role by aiding and financing smart growth development, and not just subsidize suburban development and utilities. While the environmental movement in the United States has always been antagonistic towards city life, in recent years environmentalists have widely admitted that some aspects of suburban life are environmentally, economically and politically problematic at a global level. What is most important to note is that many American cities and communities are making conscious efforts towards smarter development, which will in turn establish smarter lifestyles.

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