

**Sustainability of Today's Communities:
Examining "Smart Growth" as an Alternative to
Urban Sprawl**

By

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The typical layout of an American community built today includes residential subdivisions containing similar houses with commercial areas far away. Most Americans choose to live in suburbs that are separated from their work, school, and shopping places by miles of expressways. What this means, of course, is that Americans are overwhelmingly dependent on their automobiles (Wright 594). This pattern of settlement is known as urban sprawl. The term urban sprawl refers to the change in land use outside an urban center that results in a relatively dispersed form of residential or commercial development and causes the loss of open space, farmland, or wildlife resource. Urban sprawl results in high public costs for infrastructure, public facilities, and transportation and leads to disinvestment in older urban areas. Because of population increases, this sort of development has triggered environmental concerns, particularly regarding the large amounts of land consumed by such low-density settling and the dependence on automobiles that emit carbon dioxide. Alternative methods of development, such as "smart growth" techniques, have been employed in some areas to contain urban sprawl, but most Americans continue to live in the suburbs.

Urban sprawl began to occur on a wide scale with the end of World War II and the trend has since taken a great hold on American social norms. Decreases in services during the war aggravated problems of congestion, pollution, and inadequate sewage systems. These changes compelled many Americans to live in their own house on their own piece of land away from the city (the so-called "American Dream") (Wright 596). Americans had a pent-up demand for consumer goods at the end of the war and car production boomed. The Veterans Administration and the Federal Housing Administration aided the trend towards sprawl by making interest

payments on mortgages tax deductible. Suburbs have not spread simply because our population has expanded and Americans have needed new land on which to live; the expansion of suburbia has a great deal to do with our choices regarding community design. The Sierra Club, an environmental group, has researched urban sprawl and finds that population growth contributes to only about one third of the cause.

The environmental impacts of urban sprawl include the depletion of energy resources, air pollution, water pollution and degradation of water resources, loss of landscapes and wildlife, and loss of agricultural land. Current community designs that spread work and shopping far apart are forcing more and more drivers on the road. This is a concern for air quality as there are now more cars in the country than licensed drivers. The United States emits more greenhouse gases per person than any other country (more than double the amount produced by the United Kingdom). The single largest cause of American greenhouse emissions is our cars. America's car and truck operations produce more carbon dioxide, the main global warming pollutant, than all sources in Japan combined.

Loss of agricultural land and natural areas are two additional ways that urban sprawl adversely affects the environment. Low-density urban sprawl requires a great deal of land. Iowa loses 26,000 acres of farmland a year (Griffieon, Fallon). As the suburbs expand, developers are quick to buy out farmland, a situation that threatens the survival of small, family-owned farms. Many conflicts occur when subdivisions are developed near farms; people do not like hog farms as neighbors. As the population expands, urban sprawl also expands, as does the need for the agricultural land to produce enough food. Natural area lands have also been consumed by rapid urban sprawl. Today, Iowa has lost 99% of its native prairie and wetlands (Griffieon, Fallon).

This native landscape was useful for controlling excessive rains and its loss has resulted in flood control problems.

One way to limit urban sprawl is through “smart growth” techniques. The term smart growth refers to policies that first calculate the environmental, economic, and social costs of new growth and development and second, attempt to mitigate those effects in advance so as to avoid or reduce them. The main principles of smart growth include fostering mixed land use (so residential and commercial buildings are intermixed), providing a variety of transportation choices, and preserving open space (Getting to Smart Growth 4). A city or town may choose to place a boundary for growth around the community and its suburbs to preserve the agricultural and natural land outside of it, while promoting more dense settlement within. Smart growth calls for communities to be walkable so a citizen can walk to everyday destinations, as opposed to making a long commute because miles of expressways and parking lots separate residential and commercial areas. Public transportation is also encouraged. For example, one of the typical first steps in smart growth is the implementation of an efficient light rail system or another form of public transit. This reduces reliance on automobiles and encourages increased community interaction. The mix of residential buildings in one area increases the opportunity for a more diverse community population. In addition, increased interactions help foster understanding of differences and increase exposure to people outside one’s own social class.

One method of smart growth is New Urban design. New Urbanism applies features of urbanism including diversity, pedestrian scale development, public space, and a structure of bounded neighborhoods. These urban features can be applied throughout metropolitan areas regardless of location- in suburbs and new growth areas as well as within cities (Calthorpe xi). Current development patterns and local zoning laws segregate age groups, income groups, ethnic

groups, and family types. People and activities are isolated from each other in an inefficient network of congestion and pollution. New Urbanism seeks to join people together in diverse, bounded, and human-scaled communities (Calthorpe xii). For example, the New Urbanism town of Seaside, Florida follows the principle of the “five-minute walk,” which organizes all of one’s daily needs within the distance it takes most people to walk five minutes (Katz 4). The community then becomes more pedestrian-friendly and reduces the reliance on automobiles. A key benefit of the New Urbanism model is the casual interaction that results from the “five-minute walk” rule. The principles of New Urban design include walkability, connectivity, mixed-use structures, diversity, quality architecture, quality urban design, traditional neighborhood structure, increased density, smart transportation, sustainability, and quality of life. Public space is emphasized over private space and design takes natural areas into account. In theory, New Urban design is more sustainable than urban sprawl because there is minimal environmental impact of development, as its operations and the value of ecological systems are important considerations in the design process. The designs also consume less land, decreasing the need for vehicles. The pedestrian-friendly designs encourage greater use of bicycles, walking, and other foot traffic as means of daily transportation and buildings, residences, shops, and services are located in closer proximity.

While the concepts of New Urbanism and other smart growth techniques are gaining popularity, some believe that sustainability is not the problem environmentalists make it out to be. Some argue that supplies of natural resources are, in fact, increasing (Mitra 124). Such critics disagree with smart growth advocates who wish to devote more land to agriculture. Indeed, technological advancements have led to increased production per acre. The prices of nonrenewable resources are still quite low, which leads some to believe that they are not scarce

and do not merit concern (Mitra 130). These critics do not believe that natural resources are finite and thus their preservation in the name of sustainable development does not make sense.

Critics of smart growth and New Urbanism question whether such ventures are economically feasible. While many communities designed using smart growth and New Urbanism techniques have been successful, many other projects have been very risky and uncertain. New laws, complex agreements, incentives, personal sacrifice, and committed stakeholders must all be in agreement. There is greater risk associated with smart growth development than with single-use projects found within conventional development patterns (“Getting to Smart Growth”).

New Urban design promises more "livable" communities, but the definition of livable may vary for different people. There is concern that mixed-use zoning and lack of bureaucratic zoning laws might result in unfavorable proximity between residences and industries. Opponents of smart growth techniques and New Urbanism worry that people are too busy to fight off the building of a new factory next door to their home and that zoning is the only way to prevent this from occurring.

Urban sprawl is not necessary, but is instead a detriment to the growing American population. New Urbanism author James Kunstler claims that suburbia is not only undesirable, but that it simply cannot endure much longer because it is unsustainable at its current rate. The evidence points to a need for an alternative to suburban sprawl for many reasons. New Urban design is beneficial for the environment and the social fabric of our communities.

Although the United States does have significantly more land to settle than most countries, the current method of settling cannot continue forever considering our diminishing natural resources and projected population levels. Although critics of smart growth estimate that

these development projects will be significantly more expensive than is projected, these calculations do not take into account the environmental and health benefits of reduced reliance on automobiles.

In addition to the need to halt urban sprawl for environmental reasons, social considerations are also important. Suburban sprawl separates citizens by socioeconomic level and creates racial disunity. As rich citizens move out to the exclusionary suburbs, the tax base and social institutions of the inner city quickly diminish. Today's cities and suburbs tend to leave the poor, the disadvantaged, and children at various levels of social retardation- they are far away from the public life and have no access to others besides those like themselves. Inclusive societies in which citizens of all kinds can live, work, and play together without fear need not be a utopian dream. This possibility requires recognition of the faults of today's communities and efforts to physically redesign American neighborhoods.

New Urbanism and smart growth do in some ways contradict the "American Dream" that is so engrained in our society. A majority of Americans have come to know urban sprawl for many decades. The "American Dream" usually includes owning one's own home in a subdivision with a yard and a garage. A shift in public attitudes away from this "dream" is necessary before our habits of development can change on a wide scale. America's definition of the public good has changed over time. Traditionally, the public good is that which benefits society as a whole. However, a more modern definition, in an individualistic tradition, is identified by the sum of private benefits. The traditional public good encompasses sustainability, environmental preservation, and city planning that encourage people of all kinds to interact. The modern interpretation of public good disregards those considerations in favor of a favorable business market, one in which there is no room for preserving natural resources or recognizing

social and global sustainability concerns. Currently, preserving the environment and mixing different income levels is just not in the best interest of “the public good.” Now that we have reached this disturbing point, it is time to reconsider our definition of public good. For instance, the American obsession with automobiles will need to be curbed in favor of mass transit.

Urban sprawl is supported by many entities. Banks only make loans for types of development that can be grouped off and resold as commodities, “namely mortgages on suburban tract houses and strip malls,” according to Kunstler (Kunstler, ‘Remarks’). The construction industry enjoys a privileged, highly profitable position as a result of urban sprawl. The car industry is one of the most prominent groups profiting from suburbia. Federal mortgage policy-makers are also dependent on urban sprawl. With so many bureaucracies dependent on urban sprawl, the public sentiment for change must be strong and unified.

The way that U.S. communities are developing is more a perpetuating mistake of convenience rather than actual community design. Despite its ubiquity, urban sprawl is not necessary to the American way of life. Because the idea of “community” is rather vague and easily manipulated, many Americans have trouble finding the rhetorical tools and political power to combat the negative trends of haphazard development even though they experience them every day. Long commutes, ugly scenery, poor air quality, the disappearance of farmland, and many other social ills all have a common cause in urban sprawl. By modifying the traditional idea of community to compete with strong and imprudent sprawl-supporting entities, smart growth techniques such as New Urbanism are the only way to create vibrant, sustainable cities and towns.

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