



Back to Urbanism

Volume I, Issue I

Newsletter Date

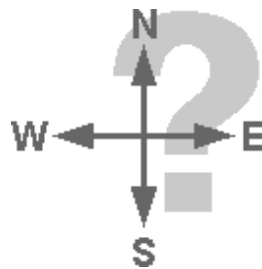
Special points of interest:

- What is sprawl?
- New Urbanism
- Walkable streets
- Sense of place
- Design and quality of life
- Smart growth

“The world we have created today as a result of our thinking thus far has problems which cannot be solved by thinking the way we thought when we created them.” – Albert Einstein

Re-envisioning the Past to Sustain Our Future

The ideal suburban utopia envisioned the concept that the homeowner could enjoy “open space” on their private lot in lieu of parks serving the public realm. In the United States, this notion has been made possible by what we have come to know as suburban low density single use zoning, or suburban sprawl. Specifically in residential subdivisions, “open space” manifested itself in perfectly manicured lawns or right of ways and easements that require expensive irrigation systems, herbicides, pesticides, and the consumption of vast amounts of water resources. Open space conjures up a different image in dense urban environments, and evidence of this takes place in many forms in the public realm. Raised in New York City on the upper west side of Manhattan, I



got around the city by subway, buses, biking, and walking as was the norm. Open space was found everywhere, from Riverside Park, Central Park, the local school playgrounds, and the many street parks along Broadway.

Green-acre Park served as an oasis in midtown Manhattan adding a sense of enchantment as a place

of refuge in an otherwise concrete jungle. In contrast, living in suburban Florida there is virtually few places that you could walk to and enjoy a similar experience. In cases where local parks do exist, they rarely get any use at all. In fact many residential subdivisions or general suburban areas lack basic sidewalks that are needed for people to simply walk safely. In my own subdivision, residents typically walk or jog in the middle of road.



Photo Credit: Google Earth
Placeless suburban subdivisions.

Suburban Sprawl

Un-walkable places and streets

The main idea of New Urbanism’s be characterized in its endeavor of making town, neighborhoods, and streets livable places and walkable.

Sprawl has come to be defined as the strict separation of single land uses (zoning) —(single family homes, multi-family hous-

ing, shopping centers, schools, business centers) typically composed in low density pods.

The main theme of suburban sprawl pattern is its automobile dependency. In a typical suburban layout short trips are directed to arterial roads, creating traffic congestion. Longer and more frequent trips are required as a result of sprawl

growth. Suburban layouts creates the worst possible environment for walking as access between homes and other destinations usually requires travel through hostile environments such as major arterial streets or parking lots. The act of walking is made impossible if not difficult where sidewalks are not provided, making it a risky proposition.



Greenacre park in midtown Manhattan Serves the public as an urban oasis.

“Streets designed for pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers also encourage the casual meetings among neighbors that help form the bonds of community.”
Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk



Greenacre Park. A waterfall adds visual interest and drama.

Back to Urbanism

Another downside to suburban lifestyle is automobile dependency and the lack of alternative modes of transit. The availability of local transit via buses or rail in suburban areas is virtually non-existent, with the exception of community vans that make their rounds to drive mature residents whom otherwise cannot drive where they need to go on their own. In contrast, the neighborhood I grew up in upper Manhattan one can conceivably live one’s whole entire life without having to walk more than half a mile to attain all the necessities of daily life.

In stark contrast living in a suburban subdivision, it is not uncommon to not come in contact with another human being let alone know who your neighbors are as there is little or no social interaction. From my own experience, it has become a rare thing to see a neighbor or have a simple conversation even with those next door. Yet one of the most glorified attributes about the virtues of suburban living is the perception of having a better quality of life and the “sense of community” that realtors pitch. In comparison other stark difference from living in New

York came as a surprise when I learned Orlando Central Park was not actually a “park” of the sort I was used to; and John Young Parkway did not resemble anything of the sort of “parkway” that comes to mind when we think about open park spaces along free flowing traffic – because when it comes to suburban sprawl it really is just about free flowing unimpeded high speed traffic. For the better part of the last century in the United States the automobile and oil have been key elements in perpetuating growth and development along with the thousands of miles of roads and highways that continuously serve them and expand ever more into the sprawl. For myself, A “short” trip to the post office requires a 5 to 10 mile round trip; a trip to the grocery store for milk or dog food will require no less than 5 to 10 miles round trip; and a trip to the bank 5 to 17 miles round trip; all made possible by the elements of sprawl—the arterial roads. Living in a suburban environment has as much to do with personal choice and lifestyle as with social mobility. People have come to live in the suburbs for many reasons but historically to get out of the denser cities. Nevertheless perhaps overtime people have sufficiently adapted so that being car dependent and requiring numerous and longer trips are traded off for what may be considered favorable advantages to living near more natural environments and “open spaces”, cleaner air, better schools, and the perception of security and comfort of living in quiet neighborhoods.



New York City: Upper West Side “The Old Neighborhood”

The radius encompasses about 1/4 mile.

Access to places of worship, community centers, all levels of schools and universities, hospitals, places to eat and shop, grocery stores and butchers, drugstores, transit (subway and trains), parks, and even funeral parlors made up the fabric of urban life – the very core of daily existence within walkable reach. In this neighborhood – a microcosm of the New York City region, conceivably you could be born, gone to school, lived, perhaps worked, shopped, gotten married, had children or not, enjoyed the parks and recreation, be active member of your community, known your neighbors, lived in a nursing home, and died all within about half a mile of your home.

Back to Urbanism

By now Americans have fully adapted to the car-dependent lifestyle; the virtues of enjoying the “American” way of life and the notion of personal freedom it exuberates. Some might even argue that going against the status quo (sprawl) may be contrived as “un-American”; some may argue that going against “big-oil” and cars (the American Automobile industry) may be conceived as “anti-business”. Promoters of Urbanism are not against cars, but more inclined to want people to drive less and have more transit options.

Others may go as far as saying that mixed use land development and integrating diverse incomes, land uses and building types will result in lowering of property values, or somehow reduce quality of life and security. This view is often debated and a source for political drama which only doesn't solve the problems of social inequity and the disparity that has been characterized in American society in recent years. New Urbanism seeks to provide solutions to these problems but are wise to admit that physical solutions are not the only way. Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) or in the least the first “model communities” I have seen are excellent showcases of the merits and attributes pronounced in New Urbanism principles.

Everyone may have their own opinions and judgments and speaking from my own experience growing up in New York City – I would characterize places like Baldwin park in Orlando and Celebration, Florida as well designed walkable mixed use communities and desirable places to live yet in

my view they seem antiseptic, sterile, and overly “picture perfect” in the sense that they seem surrealistic.

Of course the price for admission to live in these places is also very high, and somewhat out of reach to most including young professionals as myself. These highly controlled environments are well thought out and aesthetically pleasing but to a certain extent they fall short of leaving some space for the odd, quirky, ad-hoc, or bohemian sensibilities of the creative unpredictable nature of the human spirit. Surely these characteristics have a purpose and should play a role somewhere in the collective mind of the planners, and designers but I understand the reasons and the purpose of why places came into existence. Indeed these new urban mixed use communities offer people better choices to meet their lifestyle and an alternative to contemporary sprawl developments, if one could afford them.

Commercial Fabric Corporations, store chains, and franchises of every kind embellish their own brand of “urban place” in the form of retail establishments that basically all follow the “cookie cutter” mechanism that deliver sameness and predictability to the urban centers, towns, and suburbs whether it be the ubiquitous coffee house or the big box retailer. Naturally corporations have an identity to uphold in order to insure their customers recognize them for

their product any place, and everywhere across the nation. New urbanists and designers may have something to say about this trend if it should have any influence to discourage monotony, especially when it comes to the building structures that sprout up across our cities and towns. Some architectural designers have tried to convince franchises of the concept of “mass-customization” whereby the design elements and building standards offer a mix of slightly different and interchangeable “kit of

parts” (options) resulting in a product that communicates the same corporate image and message yet in a variety of ways that are less intrusive and more adaptable to unique urban places and form. One example is the ubiquitous mansard style roof adopted by fast food restaurant chains since

the 1950's. Not all KFC's, corner convenience stores, absolutely *have* to look identical to be recognized as the successful enterprises that they are. Most corporate retail chains and brand names have already established and proven their success and identity. In one case, it is not necessary to have a street sign right in front of the building which already has large signage on its façade – overkill seems the best way to characterize this.

Photo above:
Historical architectural Signage.
1964



Street smarts. Scaling back building signage, and adding windows, creates a more sensitive approach when considering streets designed on a more human scale.

**“Think of a city
and what comes**

to mind?”

Its streets.

Jane Jacobs



Corporate branding dominating the street is common place. Building signage and street signage both designed for cars, but not scaled for people.
2010

Back to Urbanism

Disparaging Reminders

In re-developing urban neighborhoods, developers, builders, and leasing agents should make a concerted effort in making decisions about the best kind of retail offerings available to local residents in terms of a goods and services. Instead of what we see today, the stereotypical businesses that prey upon and exploit the urban low income groups including minorities such as 24 hours check cashing stores, pawn shops, or rent to own businesses to name a few. Realtors have done their demographic re-search well enough to make certain assumption and make biased conclusions with biased stereotypical results.

The distinctions I am referring to are sometimes more subtly engrained that most people will not notice. Curiously enough, I was looking for a gas station on a major arterial road

in one of Orlando's "wee-to-finally came upon a small ground mounted 7-11 sign. do" residential neighborhoods and At first glance I could not identify the "gas station" as I normally would have expected – rather the gas station was deeply setback on the site enclosed within a non-descript building within a carport. The architecture used simple traditional materials resembling more of a small office building on a residential scale. Why aren't all neighborhood gas stations designed this way? Conversely, everywhere else



one will encounter the typical gas station, open air canopy structure and its retail counter-part behind or tucked underneath. What is desired for an upper income neighborhood is not good enough for a low income neighborhood? The same policies of zoning ordinances are at work in both locations yet a concerted effort was made for the Windemere gas station to make the necessary distinctions. The choice was clear, not making a standard gas station was a top priority perhaps with the intention

of maintaining or hiding away some of the "ugly" aspects of gas stations and convenience stores and making the experience as pleasant as possible for the local clientele. These efforts relate back to quality of life. Surely cost should not be a factor in the decision making process where the community had a say in the matter.

Do low income groups deserve less "fine grained" design and less sensitivity? People of all income levels, pay about the same price for the same gas, milk or cigarettes; therefore should they not receive the same level of experience. I believe the challenge and ultimately the legacy for new urbanists, city planners, municipalities, and corporations (that place their imprint on our neighborhoods) is to get people to think more along the same sensibilities when designing neighborhoods when the same intention in mind is to create a better environment

and quality of life for all [the likely outcome which is presumed to be for the betterment of society].

As people have grown all too familiar with and comfortable with conventional planning, land use development, and everything that comes with it like sprawl – it will take a slow process to "re-wire" how Americans can view their shared sense of place. Perhaps in the future, if people should ever visit Walt Disney World – "Main Street USA", Americans will already know that they have seen this already back in their home town centers and suburban villages and need not have to pay to see a fake version of it in a theme park.

New Urbanism may not have all the answers but as sure as it has gained acceptance and momentum in its implementation it still remains a fundamental universal methodology that has existed for centuries, and being nothing "new" it may well continue for centuries to come making it the "new" status quo or at least offer a choice to our communities. If we could go back in time, as the character Marty McFly did in the 1985 movie Back to the Future, how would we change things in a more benevolent way that would make today's future better? Unfortunately we cannot, but collectively as urban planners, designers, policy makers, developers, builders, and stakeholders - with the right approach and tools can make better choices about designing our cities, towns, and neighborhoods one place at a time.

Center image:

Main Street USA,
Walt Disney World



The automobile was central to the story in 1955 as in 1985.

Photo credit:
Back to the Future.
Universal Pictures.
1985

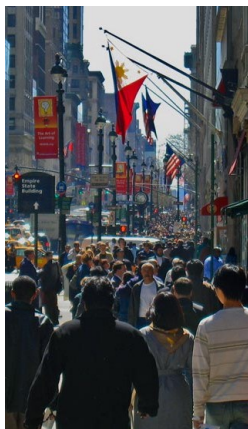
"Many activities of daily living should occur within walking distance, allowing independence to those who do not drive, especially the elderly and the young."

Walter Kulash



**New York City 1950s
125th Street**
A lively street that has adapted over decades to become one of New York's most famous.

“Some of my best friends are those I met when I watched over my sons’ play in sandboxes of Riverside Drive in New York City.”
Amitai Etzioni



**New York City. 2010
5th avenue. Most recognized as America’s most walkable city.**

Back to Urbanism



Opportunity lost—Opportunity costs.

Mega strip centers: business as usual in suburban retail development

Clermont, Florida (2008). An “off the shelf” strip shopping mall that proves that suburban sprawl is alive and well in the hilly landscapes of central Florida. Located along the main artery highway 27 which passes the nearby historic downtown district – the strip shopping mall contains an anchor store, typical shops, and a multi-plex theatre.

Adjacent to the site to the south is a stand-alone big box retailer and further south a Walmart supercenter. To no surprise, no one had a vision to link the three sites into one cohesive shopping district – in fact all three site are separated by newly constructed wide roads that divide them. The result is that a shopper is forced to park and drive back on the arterial highway 27 three times should they want to shop at each location. We know that sprawl celebrates single use zoning but there seems to be no logical reason to separate three major retail

centers on a major commercial artery. This development represents a total lack of vision and an opportunity lost in creating a special place on top of a hill that offers the best views in Clermont – instead favoring parking lots placed in front of the buildings fronting the street and secondary outparcels.

Conventional zoning loves big open parking lots with more than enough parking spaces and acres of asphalt pavement that come with them.



Photo Credit: Javier De Juan
Steve’s Road

Over paved, over designed and under-used since it came into existence in 2008.

They have become a proud testament and legacy of highway planners and engineers of the past 60 years. This parking lot serving a single big box retailer awaits “black Friday” although in actuality the lot gets the same use same all year round (about 50% sits empty). The site is located at the top of a hill overlooking a nearby strip shopping center and the scenic landscape of hills and valleys of Clermont, Florida. Here lies the potential to have optimized the value of this site to create a sense of place, instead the prime location is squandered on a parking lot thanks to contemporary zoning policy, developers and corporations without vision.



Photo Credit: Javier De Juan
Steve’s Road

A four lane divided road that requires saying a Hail Mary to traverse.

Back to Urbanism



**Convenience store and gas station
In Windermere, Orlando.**

Can you see the gas station? If not for the small road sign indicating there was a 7-11 out front, you might pass by without ever finding it. The gas station is seamlessly integrated with the surrounding commercial building which provides retail establishments and offices. The actual entrance to the convenience store is tucked neatly around the corner underneath the carport.



**Convenience store and gas station
in (everywhere else) Orlando.**

The gas station for everyone else. This is the predominant form of gas station seen on most arterials, roads and streets. This location is surrounded by a single family homes and multi-family housing; not surprisingly this gas station is also in the same county.

The question one should ask is why is one type of gas station good enough for an upper income neighborhood but not good enough for a lower to middle income neighborhood. This should point to evidence as to how local zoning policies and ordinances are carefully manipulated to achieve a desired outcome – better design that translates to better quality of life or the opposite result however unintentional.

The image on the right, shows A typical parking lot waiting for “black Friday” - the most anticipated shopping day of the year. The direct result of the conventional suburban development (CSD). This example demonstrates



the rigidity to which municipal governments like Lake County Florida adhere to the status quo.

In fact, all recent development in the Clermont area since late 1990’s has followed the typical suburban sprawl pattern.

While over the last 25 years, traditional neighborhood developments have gained momentum and seen unprecedented expansion all across the U.S. The use of Traditional Neighborhood development (TND) mixes different types of housing, retail, or businesses within an interconnected network of streets and blocks to create walkable places.

According to Walter Kulash – CNU “in typical suburban layouts, people drive to each destination and attempt to

park there. Driving to additional destinations requires repeating the process, each time turning out onto a major arterial road.”

In the case of the Clermont shopping center, no less than three separate and distinct retail locations are separated by newly constructed roads that divide them but also require the shopper to park and drive three separate times. Additionally the movie theatre is set back in the road on the property to such an extent that

it would require most shoppers to use their car to park closer to the theatre rather than walk from the shops nearby on the same property. In the design of this “plaza” in which the center consists of

an expansive parking lot, the two anchors (the theatre and the department store) are far enough away from each other to create this condition. There is no localized “center” to this site since parking spaces make up the “space” between buildings.

According to the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) urban retail centers should effectively be places with plazas that form outdoor rooms with the intention creating an a human scale conducive to walking and minimizing the use of cars. Examples of contemporary TND designs suggest that in order for places to work towards a more beneficial outcome—better design can translate to better environments and quality of life.

URBANISM

5401 South Kirkman Road
Suite 310
Orlando, Florida
32819

Phone: 407-926-5783
Fax: 407-926-4117
E-mail: marketing@sol-architecture.com



S.A.P.
SOL ARCHITECTURE
& PARTNERS, LLC

Sol Architecture + Partners LLC

Javier F. De Juan

Founder and principal of Sol Architecture & Partners—NCARB certified Florida registered architect and urbanist with 20 years of Florida experience in a variety of public and private architectural projects.

Sol Architecture and Partners LLC, a Florida CBE, MBE

A Florida native small practice offering a full range of professional architectural and interior design services including planning and urban design. Our Vision: “To serve our communities and support them by advocating and developing sustainable, livable, walkable, and diverse compact mixed-use neighborhoods, and towns—increasing the potential of adding value towards the advancement of the greater good of society.”

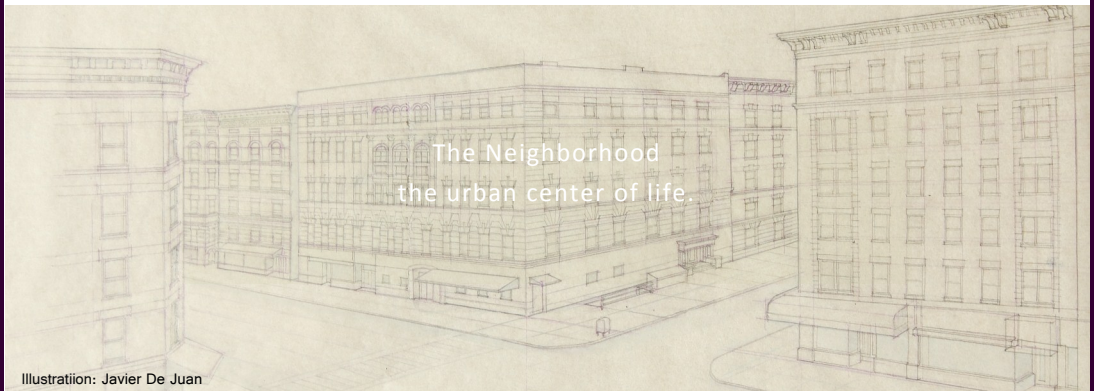


Illustration: Javier De Juan

Smart Growth

People places implement best practices and use the most effective methods, options, and tools available to promote the desirable outcome for all stakeholders. The end result would achieve a “fine grained” design which adds the most value to a location and creates a safe walkable places for people to live, work, shop, and play.

Smart growth initiatives

The establishment of great communities is the driver for the Smart Growth movement. Communities that choose smart growth strategies can create new neighborhoods as well as support existing ones; safe, and diverse, with vitality. Smart growth design encourages social, civic, and physical activity and promotes more choices and personal freedom.



New York City: an historical model. Smart growth opportunities abound in the U.S., taking a lesson from under our noses—and thinking with our feet.

Smart growth seeks to foster greater protection of the environment while acknowledging the necessity of stimulating economic growth in our local communities and regions.

Smart Growth Principles

- Mix land uses
- Creating walkable communities.
- Compact building design.
- Foster strong sense of place.
- Encourage community and stakeholder participation in development process.
- Preserve the environment.
- Expand opportunities for housing choices across all income levels.
- Provide a variety of transportation alternatives.