

CITIES & TOWNS

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MARCH-APRIL 2014—VOLUME 3, NUMBER 2

Social striving propels the drive-only suburban machine

Coalitions and strategic politics — and shifting cultural values — can deliver the structural change needed to allow American urbanism to flower again, according to Benjamin Ross, author of Dead End.

REVIEW BY ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

See also “Political strategies for smart growth” on Page 3.

I’ve studied a lot of books on New Urbanism. Every once and a long while one of them opens my eyes to an entirely new way of thinking. Such is *Dead End: Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism*.

Ross packs a trove of trenchant analysis into a readable 256 pages. He concludes with much-needed ideas on how urbanists can gain political influence to initiate structural change and once again build healthy cities and towns as a matter of course.

An environmental scientist with a PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Ross spent 15 years as president of the Maryland Action Committee for Transit, honing his skills as a grassroots activist in southern Montgomery County, where New Urbanism has been gaining a solid foothold for a quarter-century. He absorbed the arcane details of this trend while breathing the political air of the nation’s capital, and this apparently inspired the first comprehensive political strategy for New Urbanism.

I hope this book inspires other works along the same lines. As the author says, “change requires politics, and politics requires strategy.” For that undertaking, *Dead End* is more than a good beginning.

To take on a project as ambitious as this, a writer has to determine what makes people tick. *Dead End* is the shrewdest book on the psychology of the built environment that I have read in a long time.

The roots of that psychology go back nearly 200 years. The publisher says *Dead*

SEE ‘DEAD END’ ON PAGE 4

Asheville, North Carolina. Communities should nourish the mind, body, and spirit, says Kaid Benfield, author of *People Habitat*. See review on Page 11.



Civic Master Plan points the way

A small community in South Carolina invests in a new American dream — one of recycling, refilling, and regenerating urban places.

ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

You want to know where American urbanism is heading? One answer can be found in Beaufort, South Carolina.

Beaufort has only 12,300 residents and is the county seat in a small metro area that includes Hilton Head Island, located between Savannah, Georgia, to Charleston, South Carolina. While urbanism may be associated with larger cities, Beaufort has created a far-reaching Civic Master Plan to reverse decades of sprawl and revitalize its historic core. Many communities large and small could learn from Beaufort, which has tied measurable investment metrics to smart growth and placemaking.

Beaufort’s historic district has earned national acclaim and put the town on the map for tourism. The historic area was built in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Growth in the last century, determined by zoning and road investments, has followed typical low-density, less connected, suburban patterns.

Most of the city’s voters live in subdivisions built from the 1950s through 1970s, but the historic area is the community’s pride and “living room.” Everybody goes there for entertainment, public events, and to bring guests. Public buildings, a waterfront, and a University of South Carolina campus are there.

While the conventional suburban housing has found ready buyers over the years, it has lost some of its luster — especially with the young. The demand for walkable urban places has grown, but the creation of new places of this kind has been strictly limited.

Channeling that demand into a new

SEE ‘BEAUFORT’ ON PAGE 7

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Better! Cities & Towns is dedicated to covering smart growth and New Urbanism.

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Better! Cities & Towns is published eight times a year (every 6.5 weeks) by Better! Cities & Towns Inc., 218 Utica st., Ithaca, NY 14850. ISSN # 1096-1844.

POSTMASTER: send address changes to Better! Cities & Towns Inc., PO Box 6515, Ithaca, NY 14851.

Periodicals permit approved at Ithaca, NY, and additional mailing offices. Subscription is \$79/year in the U.S. and Canada.

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Speaking of the new dream

ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

Like many a Baby Boomer, I was a Monkees fan. Sure, they were pre-packaged by a TV producer and mass marketed by NBC, but the boys had good material. “Pleasant Valley Sunday,” a 1968 international hit with a relentless beat, memorable guitar hook, and tight harmonies, may have been the most popular rock statement on suburban culture ever. It told of “status symbol land” where “weekend squires” mow the lawn and Mr. Green, so serene, has a TV in every room.

The satirical lyrics bit into the cul-de-sac version of the American Dream. Yet for critics of the built environment who rejected the physical form of conventional suburbs, the song appeared to miss the point.

Who cares about the supposedly shallow concerns of suburbanites or the popularity of charcoal grills? The problem is that postwar suburbs made the automobile mandatory and stripped communities of the fine-grained mix required for urban placemaking.

Or so we thought. After reading Benjamin Ross’s brilliant *Dead End* (see review on Page 1), I’m now thinking that The Monkees hit the nail on the head after all.

Many have theorized as to why the US transformed itself — in the course of a generation or two — from a nation of distinct main streets, downtowns, and neighborhoods, to a poorly organized sprawl of cul-de-sacs and strip malls.

But the “mad glee,” as James Howard Kunstler described it, with which Americans demolished historic buildings and neighborhoods 60 years ago, and the total abandonment of the grid pattern, remained enigmas. So has nimbyism, which is impervious to logic. New Urbanism improves property values, reduces traffic, and preserves the countryside, but facts rarely penetrate the emotions of a vocal minority.

Ross’s theory holds that the suburban migration can be explained in terms of status. Social standing has a pervasive influence on culture and the choices we make about dress, food, parenting styles, entertainment, and, especially, where and how we live.

Consider this: Nearly every detail of sprawl is a status marker — from the fine-grained separation of price points, to the segregation of rental apartments in remote pods, to the “lawyer foyers,” to the wide and mostly useless front lawns. These markers are important to the self-worth of tens of millions of affluent Americans.

SUBVERSIVE URBANISTS

That explains the conservative reaction to New Urbanism. We weren’t just messing with the planning, development, and architecture professions — or just fighting zoning laws and doing battle with the DOT. We were subverting cultural norms.

So much has happened in the last 40-plus years — the fall and rise of cities, the tremendous emerging market for urban places, the penetration of bohemian counterculture into American life — that New Urbanism has moved to the center of a new normal.

The new urbanist education and reform efforts have been described in Sisyphean terms — endlessly rolling a boulder up hill. Clearly we need a more effective approach. Richard Florida has made a significant impact by promoting the so-called “Creative Class” that prefers walkable urban places. While the vagueness of this group opens Florida’s theory to criticism, he describes an undeniable trend in terms of social class. Florida is on to something.

Suburban and urban civic leaders alike seek creative types that correlate with innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic activity. This argument turns the class-based preference for drive-only suburbs on its head. Now, if you want your town to get ahead, you need walkable urban. Author Leigh Gallagher alluded to a similar idea in her 2013 book *The End of the Suburbs*. The suburban American Dream of 60 years no longer rules. The emerging American Dream is urban.

The Pleasant Valley lifestyle still lures many Americans and it is still supported by exclusionary zoning and road subsidies. Appealing to the intellect by promoting the Smart Code and smart development is still important. But the critical battle is for the heart. We’ll likely win more ground there by emphasizing the new American Dream.

The old American Dream of keeping up with the Joneses built the suburbs. The new one could rebuild our cities, towns, and neighborhoods and revitalize the suburbs for our children. ♦

Political strategies for smart growth

The following are political strategies outlined by Benjamin Ross in *Dead End: Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism*.

Ross speaks to the hearts of urbanists when he says: “Creating denser cities is just the beginning of the unmaking of sprawl. What fills in the urban spaces must be truly urban.” To achieve that, urbanists are needed to lead coalitions with a specific aim. “Urbanists ... can succeed only by mobilizing constituencies that link their prosperity and social standing to the fulfillment of their vision.” [Emphasis is mine].

Smart growth begins locally. Ross offers three detailed case studies of how coalitions were brought together successfully: Portland, Oregon; Arlington, Virginia; and the Purple Line transit system in Montgomery County, Maryland. The urban growth boundary (UGB) of Portland brought environmentalists into the coalition. Urbanists have criticized the UGB for its requirement to maintain 20 years of growth inside — plenty of room for sprawl. That provision, however, gave environmentalists the incentive to favor density in order to hold the line on the UGB.

UGBs are not feasible in today’s political climate — that goes double for statewide laws, like Oregon’s, that prevent leapfrog development. Ross outlines many other strategies, including these:

- Renters are a growing part of the 21st Century population, and rental apartments are the strongest part of the real estate market. In liberal big cities, rent control has been a powerful mobilizing force. In many more places, Ross says, renters can be persuaded to support infill development in exchange for a package that encompasses inclusionary zoning, reductions in barriers to small-scale infill (like duplex conversions and accessory units), and reductions in minimum parking requirements (tied to meeting affordability goals).
- Cities with exclusionary zoning can be won over with an appeal that combines open space preservation with enhancement of prestige and prosperity (e.g., without walkable places, a community will be unable to appeal to key demographic groups and will be left behind economically).
- Cities often have urbanist constituencies in waiting, capable of becoming an electoral force. Business coalitions can be put together for infill development, especially near downtown.
- In conservative places, activist groups are likely to be small. “Yet small advocacy groups can have influence far out of proportion to their numbers when their ideas excite larger constituencies,” he says. An ongoing advocacy organization is better than an ad-hoc group. “Here, the advocates’ greatest asset is credibility. Independence, presence in the community, and transparent finances are the foundations of that credibility.”
- Rail transit is a key to overcoming the obstacles of exclusionary zoning, because — whatever its cost-benefit calculations — rail is popular and has high status. “Rail transit is not merely a conveyance. It is the political and mental key that opens the door to change.”
- The larger the area that makes a decision, the more easily a majority can coalesce around smart growth.
- Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), which are supposed to coordinate land use and transportation policy

regionally but in practice rarely challenge local land use decisions, could be reformed through direct election of their boards. Portland has such a system and it may be attainable elsewhere, “especially as the growing affluence of urban downtowns and the changing racial composition of both cities and suburbs calm suburban fears of metropolitan government.”

- At the state level, modest reforms have proven possible in recent years including encouraging recalcitrant suburbs to accept transit-oriented development and penalizing those that allow too much sprawl.

Suburban land tenure and exclusionary zoning depend on anti-democratic forces and nimbyism. Land-owners have more power than renters. Existing residents trump the potential beneficiaries of smart growth — those who would occupy walkable places. Above all, Ross calls for more democracy in land use decisions.

GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS

Urbanists have advantages today that coalitions of the 1970s and 1980s lacked. “With the flowering of the New Urbanism, the design principles that Arlington worked out by trial and error can be learned from textbooks. The market demand for city living has brought the political backing of business interests. And a mass constituency for urbanism has grown in a post-suburban generation.”

But there are new obstacles as well. “Nimby sentiment has hardened since the seventies, and an organized opposition to smart growth has emerged from right-wing think tanks.” ♦

The politics of Lean

In the past year a new strain of urbanism has emerged, called Lean Urbanism, that focuses on smaller-scale, less expensive, incremental revitalization. While *Dead End* never mentions Lean Urbanism, some of the book’s ideas would be of interest to Lean proponents.

Benjamin Ross criticizes the tendency for current planning practice, even the new urbanist variety, to strongly tilt toward unified control of a large parcel. Such planning robs a city of fine-grained urban texture.

“Even when common ownership is not imposed by fiat, zoning laws encourage it. Some places allow mixed-use development only on large lots. Elsewhere, the expense of seeking approvals is so great that small-scale projects are unfeasible. If rules were friendlier to a diversity of ownership, infill projects could be more like old downtowns, given life and color by their smaller property owners.”

Immigrants are one of two primary beneficiaries of a Lean approach, according to Andres Duany, who first proposed the concept. Ross suggests a very Lean approach to getting immigrants involved.

“Duplex conversion, which offers immediate relief for the pressing problem of housing affordability, could be the one zoning issue that rouses ethnic constituencies.”

Ross’s central thesis that suburban sprawl is based on the status of conspicuous waste is also of interest to Lean proponents. Due to environmental concerns, conspicuous waste has lost its luster. An alternative status indicator is emerging: Lean.

Dead End

FROM PAGE 1

End “[b]rings together the history of suburbanization and urban decline and revival in a single book ... providing an unparalleled synthesis of leading cross-disciplinary scholarship in urban history and urban planning.” That is not an overstatement — the footnotes reveal an astonishing breadth of research. I have read dozens of historical accounts on this subject, have written some of my own, and have absorbed countless articles and lectures, yet I learned something on every page of *Dead End*.

Ross makes a convincing argument that *status-seeking was the primary motive* for the policies that promoted single-family houses and automobiles while strangling compact cities and towns. Status-seeking remains deeply imbedded in the American psyche today, but that is not the real issue: Rather, these desires are channeled through our legal system in ways that still favor automobile-oriented, detached housing.

While Ross’s tale strikes an emotional chord, this is not an outraged book on the sad state of our communities. This is an analysis of history and current events with the aim of mapping a course out of America’s addiction to sprawl. The history has been told before in wide-ranging volumes, but the strands have not been woven together so completely into a single narrative.

CONTROLLING DEVELOPMENT

Zoning is the strongest pillar in what Ross calls the current system of “suburban land tenure.” Private covenants, governed today by homeowners’ associations (HMOs), are another substantial pillar:

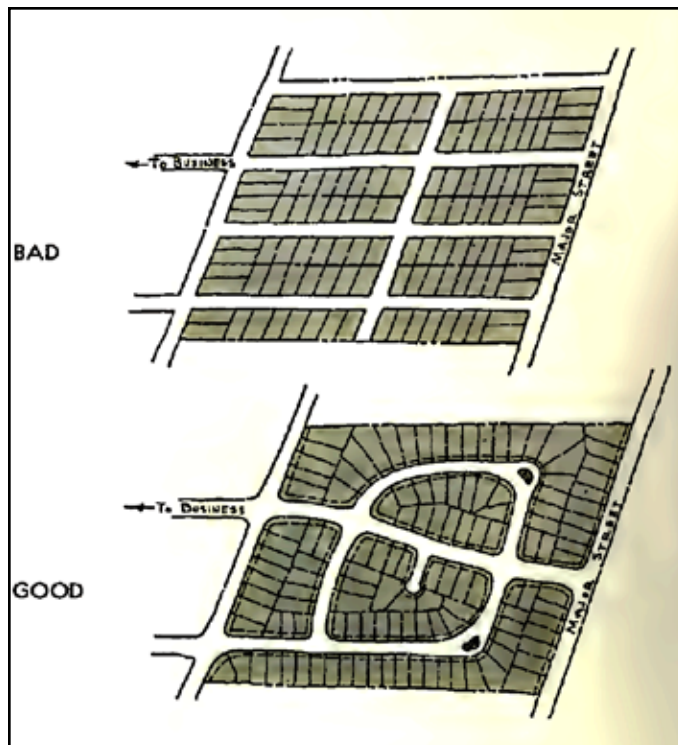
The regime of covenants and zoning obliterated a basic principle of 19th Century real estate law, that owners of land could build as they

Form-based coding and democratic urbanism

Zoning is the most pervasive force maintaining the status quo in land use, and its basic structure is undemocratic, Ross says. “Tenants should receive the same notice of proposed changes as landlords. Associations should be recognized as representing neighborhoods only if they accept renters as equal members as homeowners.”

New urbanist have initiated a “fundamental rethinking of zoning” in form-based coding (FBC), Ross notes. This idea offers communities more control over the exterior of buildings while giving up some control over the interior uses. Developers make the opposite bargain, he explains.

“On the surface, the form-based code aims at the substance of rules rather than procedure, but in practice it alters power relationships, Mixed-use buildings, no longer exceptions, are no harder to approve than single-use buildings, and no more liable to neighborhood obstruction. Citizens who wish to preserve sprawl no longer possess means of influence that those who wish to challenge it lack.”



FROM DEAD END, BY BENJAMIN ROSS, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Good and bad street layouts according to the Federal Housing Administration. (From *Planning Profitable Neighborhoods*, 1938).

liked absent special circumstances. Free trade in land, which had earlier displaced feudal landholding in Europe, now gave way to the new suburban land tenure. The collectivist spirit of the new system was a sharp departure from the individualism of American legal and economic thinking. Sacred doctrines of freedom of contract and freedom of movement were set aside; people and buildings would henceforth be separated according to fine gradations of social status.

Ross argues that suburban zoning springs more from private covenants than from simple 19th Century city codes that regulated street width and building height.

Private covenants took root in socialist, utopian societies where intellectuals escaped the city in the first half of the 19th Century — and thus were anti-urban from the start. These societies were limited in influence and mostly short-lived, but the codes were later picked up by purely market-driven developments like Riverside, the community that Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. designed west of Chicago in the 1870s.

Private covenants worked imperfectly and incompletely, Ross explains. “Homeowners and real estate developers desired more comprehensive and more effective controls. This was something only the power of government could achieve,” he writes, explaining why the covenants morphed into zoning in the 1910s and 1920s. Zoning provided a profession for planners and the opportunity for patronage and graft for machine politicians. Private covenants continued to be used through the middle of the 20th Century in upper-class subdivisions that imposed racial and ethnic restrictions and architectural standards.

Homeowners’ Associations (HOAs) became ubiquitous only after 1963, when the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), issued an endorsement. Municipalities saw the value of avoiding maintenance costs for internal streets and public spaces.

HOAs rose from 500 in 1962 to 20,000 in 1975, and 80 percent of new housing was subject to private covenants by 1994, Ross reports.

A primary purpose of zoning was to restrict apartments, which were perceived as lower class. That was the issue in the Supreme Court's 1927 *Euclid v. Ambler* decision, which provided the legal foundation for zoning. The court starkly described the apartment dwelling type as a "mere parasite" on a single-family neighborhood. Whether the court considered the buildings, or the people in them, to be parasites, is open to question.

The text of that decision is startling in its open condemnation of residences that are not single-family houses. The waves of immigrants crowding the Lower East Side in Manhattan had subsided by 1927, but the image of that crowding was still vivid in the minds of the American elite.

THE PLANNING PROFESSION ARRIVES

The planning profession was built on the intellectual foundation of the Garden City movement of the United Kingdom and the City Beautiful movement in the US, but planners applied those ideas selectively at best, Ross says. "The classicism of the City Beautiful was still in vogue in the 1920s among architects and builders of public buildings, but

the new planning profession had moved on," he writes. Zoning, according to the Supreme Court, must contribute demonstrably to the "public health, safety, morals, or general welfare." Planners had the job of making those demonstrations. "They were now technocrats, collecting facts and using them to calculate the future course of the metropolis."

Among the tools was "redlining," and here Ross adds to the usual explanation—that the federal government colluded with banks to deny financing to African-American neighborhoods. The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), established in April 1933 as part of the New Deal, was biased at heart against all urban places; the agency's policies dovetail nicely with Ross's theory about status. Says Ross:

The HOLC appraisal methods did vast damage. Recognizing the value of a house depends on its surroundings, the agency established four categories of neighborhoods. Its ratings reflected the housing market's established pecking order of social status. Newly built subdivisions automatically scored higher than older ones, and traditional urban layouts, such as houses built close to the street, were downgraded. Old streetcar suburbs lacked access to funds that flowed into newer developments built for the automobile.

The ethnic and racial makeup of neighborhoods also factored into the appraisals. African-American sections

received the lowest scores.

Color-coded maps displayed the results of this evaluation, with the lowest category shown in red. For years afterward these maps were used by private banks for lending decisions, giving rise to the term "red-lining."

Next came the FHA, a New Deal program, established in June 1934, that adopted the HOLC appraisal system and went much further. The FHA was biased against rental housing, particularly rental units near single-family houses.

The FHA recommended segregating apartments units in, to quote the administration, "what amounts to a privately owned and privately controlled park area." This became the model for suburban "garden" apartments. Due to minimum parking requirements, the units came to be surrounded by parking lots rather than gardens. A similar design was imposed on rowhouses.

FHA'S IDEAL SUBDIVISION

Crucially, FHA established a norm for the ideal subdivision — this became the model for the postwar automobile-oriented suburb. "FHA design standards specified minimums for lot sizes, front and side setbacks, and the width of a house," reports Ross. See FHA's 1938 drawing for "good" and "bad" street layouts on page 4. FHA standards exerted a huge influence. "Developers who laid out entire communities and built the houses were favored with commitments

Sprawl repair challenges and opportunities

As urbanists wrestle with the challenges of transforming suburbs into more urban, walkable places, they face varying levels of difficulty depending on when communities were built, according to *Dead End*. Successful examples include the east side of Portland, Oregon, where languishing streetcar suburbs were brought back to life, and Arlington, Virginia, where 1940s neighborhoods have been revitalized with transit-oriented downtowns.

These places had the benefit of existing street grids, allowing mixed-use, urban buildings to be constructed on a lot-by-lot basis.

Streetcar suburbs are the easiest to revive, followed by the postwar suburbs of the 1950s. Inner suburbs are undergoing economic stress, but "they remain attractive places to live, and close-in locations make it practical to commute by bus."

Postwar-vintage suburbs are generally free of stultifying homeowners' associations. They also have narrower thoroughfares — an increase in suburban street widths can be traced to 1965, when the Institute of Transportation Engineers hiked its minimum from 26 feet to 32 feet — which has a significant impact on walkability.

Sprawl became progressively worse as the 20th Century progressed. "The worse the sprawl, the harder it is to fix," author Benjamin Ross notes. "In more recently built suburbs, where the superblock layout funnels traffic onto six- and eight-lane arterials," the gradual upgrade that Portland and Arlington accomplished is nearly impossible, Ross says.

In the White Flint Metro station area in Montgomery County, Maryland, and Tyson's Corner in Virginia, efforts to create transit-oriented downtowns are requiring extensive retrofits to establish a grid of streets. "These thorough makeovers are so expensive that only wealthy sections of the favored quarter can afford them. The new street networks are never as dense and well connected as in older cities, and they emerge only after decades."

Tyson's Corner may never get there, Ross says. "Its planners were unable to overcome local engineers' insistence that more people always need more roads, and its central highways will gain more lanes of traffic."

Residents of outer suburbs who feel threatened by smart growth may have nothing to fear. The challenges of sprawl repair in suburbs built from the 1970s on likely mean that many of these places will not see retrofit for decades at least.

to approve loans before the houses were built,” Ross notes.

Minimum parking requirements were implemented throughout most of the nation in the late 1940s. “Curbside parking was disfavored because it was *déclassé*, suggestive of old neighborhoods with no garages and cars in the street,” he says. Sometimes this was justified on aesthetic grounds, although Ross notes that a car in the driveway is no more attractive than one on the street. Early off-street parking requirements often did little to increase the supply of parking, because each driveway takes away an on-street spot. But, from a status point of view, “one’s own BMW in the driveway is entirely different from someone else’s Toyota on the curb,” Ross observes.

The suburban norm of garages at the fronts of houses, condemned by new urbanists as “garagescapes” and “snout houses,” is also an indicator of status. These garages in effect announce how many automobiles a household owns. Suburbs are all about status and conspicuous waste—large front yards, greenery that is not allowed to be productive (no tomatoes or chickens, thank you). Postwar America offered legally enforced conspicuous waste to the white middle class, which snapped it up.

The car was privileged in public policy as the high-class way to get around. And specific changes to the built environment can be traced to political maneuvers. Larger curb return radii subtly transformed the character of street corners across the US, increasing crossing distances and allowing vehicles to speed around the turn. “These changes were no whim of car-loving traffic engineers. Behind them stood the lobbying might of the trucking industry,” Ross explains.

The beginnings of modern traffic engineering profession, and the mindset that holds considerable influence today, are related in the following passage:

The planning profession, driven by its scientific pretensions and encouraged by automotive lobbies, outsourced the design of roads to specialists. As [pre-eminent planner] Harland Bartholomew later put it, the design of highways was “a scientific process or an engineering matter, just as the design of a sewer and drainage system.” Traffic engineers could determine the proper width of streets in much the same way that sanitary engineers calculated the diameter of sewer pipes.

The narrow, tree-lined streets of the early 20th Century Garden City planners blew up to enormous proportions over time. See photo of an intersection in West Palm Beach, Florida, at upper right.

Jane Jacobs, J.C. Nichols, Herbert Hoover, Robert Moses, and many others play prominent roles in this book — as their lives are woven into the tapestry of 20th Century planning. The Housing Act of 1949, also known as “urban renewal,” with its windswept plazas, and the freeways that allowed motor vehicles to cruise at top speed through dense neighborhoods, brought an urban form of sprawl into the city. The bulldozing of urban neighborhoods set the stage for the epic battle between Moses and Jacobs, and the grassroots movement to save cities.

THE BOHEMIANS

Ross highlights an underappreciated thread of American urbanism. At a time when white America was flocking to suburbs and minorities had little choice but to settle in cities, one group enthusiastically embraced urbanism: bohemians. Ross describes two strains: artists and political leftists. Both rejected



FROM DEAD END, BY BENJAMIN ROSS, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bicycle lanes are a futile gesture when placed amid 45 lanes of motor vehicle traffic. Forest Hill Boulevard and State Route 7 in Palm Beach County, Florida. From *Dead End* (Google Earth photo).

the conformity of suburbia and were scorned, in turn, by the suburban middle class as less than red-blooded Americans.

Bohemian culture had its genesis in New York’s Greenwich Village, and spread to enclaves in other big cities like San Francisco and New Orleans. Greenwich Village was the home and inspiration for Jane Jacobs, who launched the modern urbanism movement in planning. Ross devotes an entire chapter to Jacobs, who, though influential in cities, had no impact in slowing sprawl.

Hipsters, the latest version of bohemians, are now flocking to cities all across America and helping to bring them back to life. And like their antecedents, hipsters are in the crosshairs of cultural warriors.

ANTI-URBANISTS

This brings us to the anti-urbanists, writers associated with libertarian/conservative think tanks like the Reason Foundation, Cato Institute, and Heritage Foundation, who are paid to attack smart growth. Ross ably dissects the illogical arguments of Joel Kotkin, Randal O’Toole, Wendell Cox, and others of this kind.

Such writers are put in a bind. “To be accepted in the conservative network, writers must defend suburban land tenure and yet appear to uphold the doctrine of the sovereign consumer,” Ross says. “But suburbia has little to do with the free markets that libertarians claim to believe in. Covenants, zoning, subsidies, and exclusions created it and keep it alive.” Likewise, their support of highways makes little sense from a free-market point of view. Suburban roads are, “even more than suburban neighborhoods, made by government,” he points out.

To solve this problem, says Ross, “They drew up a case for sprawl that rests overtly on population statistics and economic

theories, but conveys an underlying message that is cultural and emotional. The single-family suburb embodies true Americanism, under attack by an alien cultural elite."

Cox calls his book on sprawl *War on the Dream*. O'Toole founded "The American Dream Coalition," and Kotkin claims the state of California is waging a war on suburbia on behalf of "aging hippies who made their bundle during the state's glory days and settled in places like Mill Valley."

This un-American charge has a long history. George Babbitt, Sinclair Lewis's fictional Realtor, denounced long-haired professors and proclaimed American superiority in 1922. It echoes 1950s McCarthyism, and it aligns with the current Agenda 21 rhetoric of the Tea Party, "which married dislike of cities to fervor against government." Logic is not paramount when you have identified the enemy — folks who challenge the automobile-dominated suburban way of life.

UPENDING SOCIAL STATUS

The counterculture of the 1960s, which grew out of bohemian culture, "upended the ranking of social status," Ross explains. "Cool outranked square; authenticity displaced wealth; old houses and old clothes were better than new." The hipsters, as disrespected as they are in some quarters, have considerable status among the young.

Urbanists have violated the status rules of sprawl, and have often done so on suburbia's home turf. Familiar status markers, e.g., big lots and setbacks, are gone in new urban places. And the market is paying a premium for new urban communities, which may explain some of the resentment these communities have encountered.

"At the heart of New Urbanism was a root and branch rejection of the doctrines that created suburbia," Ross says while identifying the practical difficulties that encumbered new urbanist developers: "The builders of new mixed-use areas were carried forward on a current of popular demand, but they swam with weights tied to their ankles. Only after a safe passage through treacherous waters of negotiations and approvals could they put a shovel in the ground. Along the way they invariably had to compromise urbanist visions to meet



FROM DEAD END, BY BENJAMIN ROSS, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Ross writes about the Ashby BART station parking lot, which some neighborhoods fought to save in order to prevent a mixed-use building — an example of nimbyism in the city. (Courtesy of BART.)

the demands of traffic engineers, zoning boards, and suburban neighbors."

Ross covers still more fertile ground. One chapter identifies five patterns of governance that perpetuate sprawl. He also criticizes historic preservation policies as the third pillar of suburban land tenure, working with zoning and private covenants to "embalm communities" in the present state. Ross's ideas here may be controversial, but he recognizes legitimate purposes of historic preservation

and calls for specific reforms.

The psychological motivations for spread-out development suggest particular strategies for reversing the trend (see Page 3). Urbanists, smart growth proponents, transit and complete streets advocates, and others can learn an immense amount from *Dead End*.

Dead End: Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism, Oxford University Press, 2014. Hardcover, 256 pp. \$29.95. ♦

Beaufort

FROM PAGE 1

American dream of mixed-use, compact neighborhoods offers the city a way to revitalize the economy and protect the active lifestyle amenities that attract tourists and new residents to the town.

A nimby (not in my backyard) contingent fought hard against the change. They like the restrictions against mixed-use, multifamily, and walkable streets. On the other side, business leaders signed on for the economic development. Many residents also became convinced that the Civic Master Plan would set a better path for growth. This support had to be solicited and earned.

You have to be "willing to keep a hand on rudder and handle the headwinds, and there will be many headwinds in the future, but we have a plan for moving forward," says city manager Scott Dadson, an economist.

In late February 2014 city council

adopted the final pieces of the plan, which follows in the great tradition of American city planning. The Beaufort plan doesn't begin to compare with the scale and ambition of, say, Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago, but in some respects the modern planners have it tougher. Burnham worked at a time when the culture of building and architecture naturally created human-scale places. The planners of Beaufort must recreate that culture to build places of synergy — where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

The plan uses the entire new urban toolbox — including street standards that allow for complete streets, mixed-use site plans for vacant land, sprawl repair, infill development, and buildings assembled to create a strong sense of place.

The change of direction required leadership. "Scott doesn't hesitate when he is excited about an idea," says Demetri Baches of Metrocology, part of a team of new urbanists who helped the city draft

the plan, which has five volumes and covers nearly 19 square miles. The multi-disciplinary Lawrence Group, with principal Craig Lewis, led the team — which also included urbanists Seth Harry, James Wassell, Josh Martin, and, on the City of Beaufort staff, Lauren Kelly.

The city council kept the project going as the momentum built.

Dadson describes four parts of implementation, in sequential order. The first is to get good development going — one block at a time. The second is to make connections between places — complete streets, multiuse trails, corridors of green space and transportation. Third, the rules of the game must change — form-based codes replace Euclidean zoning and the state Department of Transportation (DOT) has to be persuaded to make better infrastructure investments. Finally, these ideas are integrated into day-to-day operations of the city.

“The plan doesn’t say do everything on a citywide basis right now,” Dadson says. “We do it a block at a time. If you build success at a block at a time, it convinces people that it’s the right thing to do.”

KEY PROJECTS

The city began working on Sector 1 of the Civic Master Plan, which covers the historic core, in 2010. Economic development — especially on the heels of the Great Recession — is key, so the planners identified up to 50 potential projects. Some of these projects had been sitting on the shelf for years, and the planners drew updated plans and images. The city offered economic development incentives and applied for grants.

A public-private partnership called Midtown Square came out of the box first. The city used community development block grants to make streetscape improvements and clean up 400 tons of debris on the 2-plus-acre, long-vacant infill site. The project, 18 small-lot single family houses and six live-work townhouses designed by urbanists Brown Design Studio and Allison Ramsey Architects, won Best Planned Community for 2013 in *Southern Living*.

The largest regional lifestyle magazine in the US, *Southern Living* caters to an affluent, mostly suburban audience. Giving top honors to a project like Midtown Square indicates that infill urban-



COURTESY OF ALLISON RAMSEY ARCHITECTS

Plan and houses for Midtown Square, which showed the economic potential of urban place.



COURTESY OF ALLISON RAMSEY ARCHITECTS

ism is now an aspirational choice among this demographic. Developers Steven Tully and John Trask III marketed the “simple style and grace of a traditional urban lifestyle.”

Custom homes started at \$260,000 and pre-designed houses sold for less than that, according to the city — relatively affordable new housing in a coastal community.

Other, similar, infill residential construction is underway downtown. Also, the old vacant city hall, with neoclassical architecture, was renovated into a grocery store.

The mixed-use Marina Redevelopment, moving forward now, won an award from the American Institute of Architects. The 4.2-acre publicly owned

parking lot is being converted to a mixed-use urban place that will better connect downtown to the best natural feature — the water. The plan includes apartments, a new wharf building, shops and other uses fronting a new public square that overlooks the harbor.

The projects include “sprawl repair,” such as the conversion of the Beaufort Plaza Shopping Center into a mixed-use town center. The owner of the plaza has timed the commercial leases to expire at the same time to begin a makeover that is expected to launch later in 2014.

That shopping center is on Boundary Street, and here we get into category 2 on Dadson’s list. This key arterial road leading into downtown was first planned for transformation into a multimodal



COURTESY OF THE LAWRENCE GROUP

The Marina Redevelopment is shown at lower left in this plan of downtown. A new parking deck will replace the current Marina lot, and will be wrapped by liner buildings (upper center).

is to create a clear, exciting vision for the city’s future that has raised outside funding. “We are now doing \$11 million in capital spending and \$1 million of that is local,” says Dadson. “That’s real, and it’s a return of 10 to 1.”

The plan has motivated the private sector, as evidenced in Midtown Square, the Marina, Beaufort Plaza, the old city hall, and many other infill developments.

POLITICAL SUPPORT AND OPPOSITION

All of these projects moving forward swung the Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Beaufort (a coalition of main street businesses), and the Economic Development Commission — in favor of the plan. “Originally, the business community didn’t acknowledge or care what was going on,” Baches said. “They had been trained for years not to expect much from planning efforts. But when they saw all of the projects that came out of the initial planning process, they got excited.”

The Civic Master Plan had one relentless and powerful — although surprising — opponent that fought the plan right to the end. The Historic Beaufort Foundation, which oversees a large collection of listed historic houses, feels threatened by new development in the downtown. The plan does *not* call for the redevelopment of historic properties — rather, it identifies vacant properties near downtown and opportunities for suburban retrofit. Currently, many historic properties are not well

boulevard by urbanists Dover, Kohl and Partners in the late 1990s. The city applied for a US DOT multimodal Tiger grant and was awarded \$12.6 million in 2011. The city raised local funds through a penny increase in a sales tax. Redevelopment in the area will be shaped by a form-based code.

“Once the Boundary Street project gets underway and the Marina redevelopment starts, momentum will swing strongly in the favor of the approach outlined in the Civic Master Plan,” Baches said.

Boundary Street helped the city to work with University of South Carolina, located on the street, to expand its downtown campus.

A “rails to trails” project was key to gaining support among some of Beaufort’s suburban residents. The 3.3-mile, 12-foot-wide, multiuse Spanish Moss Trail connects Beaufort to a nearby historic town Port Royal. By the end of 2014, it will be 7 miles long. Eventually, it will be 13.6 miles long and traverse much of Beaufort County. The trail brought in funding by the Cox Foundation, the county, the state, and the federal government. The trail, other parks improvements, and the promise of open space preservation appeal to the active lifestyle of Beaufort’s residents — urban and suburban alike.

The most impressive accomplishment of the Civic Master Plan, Dadson says,

A map of Boundary Street improvements — expected to break ground in the spring



COURTESY OF THE LAWRENCE GROUP

maintained and have been lost over the years due to neglect, Baches said.

However, more development downtown will raise values that could result in some properties being delisted and re-developed. The foundation therefore became the most vocal opponent of the plan — not only in historic areas of the city, but in the suburbs as well.

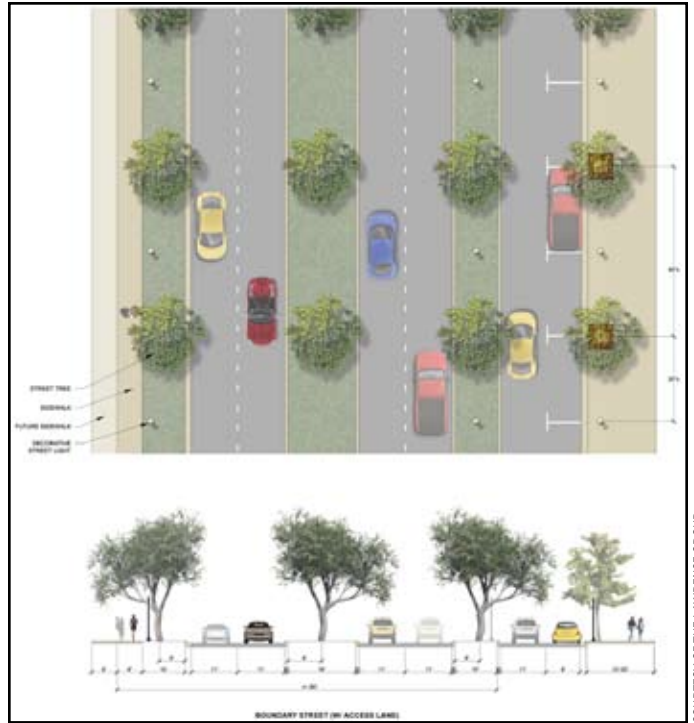
This group joined forces with a number of suburban residents who opposed particular projects — like the Spanish Moss Trail, near their backyards. “Many of those who live in the 1960s subdivisions don’t want or like change,” Baches says. “The nimby thing is huge.”

GENERATIONAL FACTORS

Beaufort has attracted many retirees, a lot of them former government and military personnel, who are Baby Boomers or slightly older. “That’s a suburban generation, a growth at all costs generation, an engineered solutions generation. The separation of uses is still ingrained in them,” notes Dadson. Communicating an urban vision of prosperity can be difficult.

The generational divide is *not* the most important factor in determining support for the plan, Dadson says. “It’s not millennials, boomers, people from Ohio, southerners. It’s people that see Beaufort as a special place and like what it has to offer. That mindset that comes from all demographic groups.”

Baches believes that younger adults are more supportive of change, but they are hard to engage. Many citizens who



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Multiway boulevard plan and section for Boundary Street

initially did not care enough one way or another eventually came out to support the plan, and the next generation was at least a motivating factor.

“Instead of a chamber filled with people who are negative, that room was filled easily half and half with supporters and opponents,” Baches said. “Those in favor said ‘what’s on these plans is not for you and me, it’s for our grandchildren. You and me need to get out of the way and let this happen.’”

With the approval of the plan, the process of “changing the rules of the game” has just begun. Most of the city still has Euclidean zoning that favors low-density development, separated by use. Even tougher, Dadson says, will be getting the South Carolina DOT to reverse course from generations of drive-only highway investment.

DOT has control over major roads and holds all of the purse strings, he notes. They will allow the municipality to take over control of roads, but no money comes with that control.

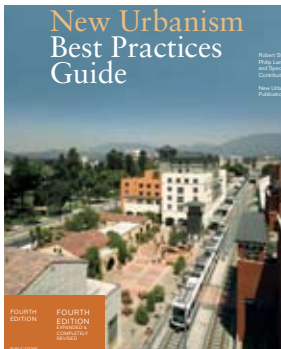
These are ongoing struggles, and they echo those faced by thousands of communities across the US. Meanwhile, the Beaufort Civic Master Plans points a way toward, as Dadson puts it: “recycling, regenerating, and refilling the community.” ♦

Spanish Moss Trail rails-to-trail project



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REVIEWS

**People Habitat:
25 Ways to Think About Greener,
Healthier Cities**

By F. Kaid Benfield

Island Press, 2014, 304 pp., \$25 paperback or e-book

REVIEW BY PHILIP LANGDON

A blog post by F. Kaid Benfield is always a welcome event. Since 2007, Benfield, a “self-taught urbanist” who grew up in Asheville, North Carolina, has written more than 1,000 posts for *Switchboard*, the blog of the Natural Resources Defense Council—an organization he served for years as a litigator.

To my mind, Benfield is one of the people who put the “smart” in smart growth. He helped establish the LEED for Neighborhood Development rating system, and is now “special counsel for urban solutions” at NRDC’s Washington office. A vivid and reflective writer, he explores the “nooks and crannies” of communities rather than restricting himself to the drier realms of statistics and policies. Now, to the good fortune of readers, he has sifted through his accumulated writings, added some new material, and given us a collection of 25 essays—pieces that strike a judicious balance between urbanism



Hackesche Höfe in East Berlin

and the imperatives of the natural environment.

The title of his book, *People Habitat*, alludes to the fact that just as plants and animals thrive only when they have an environment that suits their needs, people also require a supportive habitat. The kind of habitat that helps people flourish, he says, “begins in our homes” and “extends outward, to our

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neighborhoods, our cities or towns, and even to the regions beyond.”

Benfield focuses much of his attention on the neighborhood—the scale at which people most often interact with the world. In text and photos, he presents examples from many countries. In East Berlin, he finds lessons for urban development in a complex called Hackesche Höfe, which was built early in the 20th century and restored beginning in 1995. Hackesche Höfe, by architect August Endell, is organized around eight interlocking courtyards; each of them, Benfield observes, is “intimate and generally invisible from the others, so one passes through the outdoor spaces in much the way one might pass through rooms in a vintage house, each space harmonious with the others, but distinctive, too.”

A VILLAGE IN A CITY

Hackesche Höfe, Benfield says, is like a village in the city. And after the complex was restored, its business owners and tenants “worked out a scheme that requires that all restaurants and shops must be run by their owners,” Benfield points out. “In other words, no chain businesses.” (Pike Place Market in Seattle has operated under a similar rule.)

Not everything called smart growth measures up to Benfield’s standards. Although Arlington, Virginia, has done an

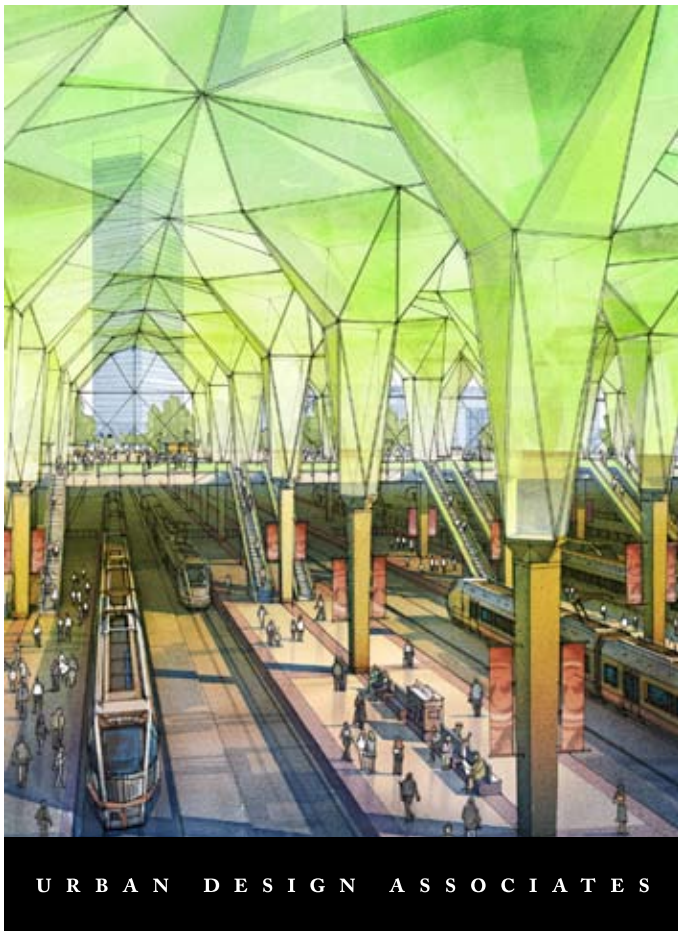
effective job of placing new offices, retail, and housing close to Metro rail stations—helping to revive a tired corridor and put thousands of workers and residents where they can get around without a car—Benfield shows a portion of Arlington’s development and labels it “a high-rise canyon without soul.” It appears to lack intimacy. Its architecture—at least what’s shown in the book—is not inspirational. He contrasts it to buildings in London and Japan that have “living walls,” abounding with vegetation.

Borrowing from the thinking of New Urbanist architect Steve Mouzon, Benfield argues that “places are sustainable only if they are also lovable.” One of the things that makes a place lovable, declares Benfield, is nature: “I believe nature has an intrinsic appeal for humans and, if we design density so that it brings more nature into communities, density could become far more appealing and popular.”

Trees matter. Little parks, tucked into neighborhoods, are greatly needed. “In cities,” he says, “the presence of nature—whether interspersed among our streets, buildings, and yards or organized into parks—connects us with growth and with the seasons, providing a softness to complement the concrete of our streets and sidewalks and the brick and wood of our houses.”

Another strong theme of *People Habitat*, it is that smart

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growth advocates must strive harder to include *all* the components of good placemaking and social well-being in their plans and projects. In his view, the smart-growth movement has strayed from some of its early aspirations.

“When originally conceived, smart growth was about much more than development and transportation reform,” he says. “It was also about conservation of land; bringing reinvestment to forgotten neighborhoods in a just, equitable way; preservation and adaptation of historic and cultural resources; and enhancement of environmental quality, to name just a few key goals. Many smart growth advocates remain supportive of these original values. But few of them, particularly at the national level that I know best, actually spend much time on them.”

On rare occasions, Benfield falls prey to a common mistake of bloggers who didn’t spend years being trained in the ins and outs of journalism: he doesn’t get all the facts. In discussing Southlands, an “agricultural urbanism” project that was proposed several years ago in Tsawwassen, British Columbia, he says the developer’s idea “was to justify encroaching on real farmland by saving remnants of the former farms for the new residents to enjoy.” He adds: “I don’t think that one was ever built.”

Readers shouldn’t have to wonder whether a project discussed in the text has been abandoned or not. I emailed several sources, including the planner, Duany Plater-Zyberk

& Co., and the developer, Century Group. It turns out that the 536-acre project won municipal approval last fall by a wide margin and is expected to be voted on within the next several months by Metro Vancouver, the regional planning authority. Southlands (see June 2008 *New Urban News*) may yet come to fruition, though its plan has been modified since DPZ’s 2008 charrette.

Such missteps, however, are infrequent in *People Habitat*. On the whole, people who care about the shaping of the built environment—from neighborhoods to regions—will find Benfield’s book stimulating and immensely readable. And more than that: wise.

Spot’s Parking Lot

By BC Brown

Espresso Press, 2014, hardcover, 32 pages.

REVIEW BY ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

This is the first specifically and intentionally new urban children’s book that I have come across. I have spent much the last 14 years reading children’s books. We must have a thousand or so in the house. And I can tell you that Spot’s Parking Lot is ... perfect.

The main character of this charming book is a dog named Spot, who is shown doing all kinds of things, often with a

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companion — an unnamed squirrel — in places the size of single parking “spot.”

The two-minute story tells of what could be done with a strip mall parking lot. Essentially, you can turn it into a town. The message is delivered in a clever and funny way. There is no preaching. Hats off to the author and illustrator, BC Brown, a young woman who has written five novels.

I gave it to my youngest daughter, who is 8 and has already graduated to full length books. But not long ago, she was reading books just like Spot’s Parking Lot.

She was amused at all of the things that could fit into a 10-foot by 20-foot space, including a living room, rows of books, grocery aisle, bus shelter, vegetable garden, cafe tables, dancers dancing, a giant tree. “I like the ones with plants in them,” Skye said. She immediately got that all of the activities could be combined to create a neighborhood.

I asked her if she learned anything. “Not really.”

“But it was a fun book?”

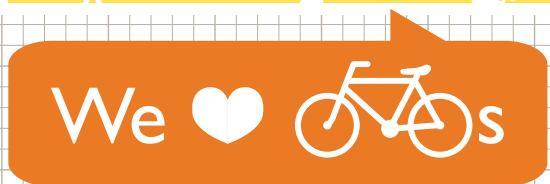
“Yes.”

“Did it have any message?”

She thought about that. “Don’t use so many cars and take the parking lots and build other things on them?”

That’s pretty much it. ♦

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Freeways Without Futures 2014 report released

Last month, CNU released its biennial Top 10 list of “Freeways Without Futures,” selecting the US urban highways most in need of being removed. Solutions like at-grade boulevards that can serve roughly the same number of cars while creating walkable, livable communities. These transformations can even save taxpayers billions of dollars in highway construction and maintenance, while bringing revitalization to cities.

The “Freeways Without Futures” list recognizes the urban highways doing significant damage to their cities and most in need of replacement with more people-friendly options. This list also recognizes the grassroots advocates, city officials, and others who are working locally to redefine their urban environment. The CNU top 10 prospects for highway removals in 2014 are (in no particular order):

- New Orleans, LA – Claiborne Expressway
- Buffalo, NY – The Skyway and Route 5
- Syracuse, NY – Interstate 81
- Rochester, NY – Inner Loop

- Toronto, Ontario – Gardiner Expressway
- St. Louis, MO – Interstate 70
- San Francisco, CA – Interstate 280
- Detroit, MI – Interstate 375
- Long Beach, CA – Terminal Island Freeway
- Hartford, CT – Aetna Viaduct

This list is by no means definitive – many more removal campaigns deserve to be internationally recognized for their scope and resolve. Five additional campaigns are noted in the full report as freeways to watch.

CNU received nominations from more than 50 cities, which were evaluated on criteria that included:

Age of freeway. Most freeways on the ‘teardown list’ are at the end of their lifespans and will need to be rebuilt at great cost, if the highways are to be maintained. Reconstruction of these aging highways would cost significantly more than replacing the road with a boulevard.

Cost versus short-term mobility improvement. Often the freeway rebuild option, while costing several millions

dollars more than a surface street alternative, lead to only a few minutes off driving times or a return in a couple years to the same level of congestion.

Development potential. Often including a waterfront location. All of the freeways have blighted surrounding neighborhoods and depressed property values. When the freeways are removed, the revival can start.

Improved access. Often a new boulevard helps improve access to the area. Limited-access freeways often disrupt the city street grid, reducing access to adjacent neighborhoods and overall mobility, including transit, traffic, bike, and pedestrian flow.

Timeliness. Most of the nominees are under study now by state Departments of Transportation, often for new ramps, costly repairs or full rebuilding.

Local support. The best candidates for removals have strong local supporters, including civic activists or key elected officials, who understand that the lands within the freeway corridor can be transformed into community-wide assets. ♦

The planning aikido of Harriet Tregoning

TIM HALBUR, CNU COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

Last month, Washington DC Planning Director Harriet Tregoning announced that she’d be leaving her position after 6 years to become the director of HUD’s Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities, the position vacated by Shelley Poticha last year. This is great news for those of us engaged in reforming HUD policies, like outdated limits on retail/office in mixed-use developments.

Tregoning exemplifies a new kind of urban planner that uses, it seems to me, a sort of planning aikido. Aikido is focused on taking your opponent’s momentum from their attack and synchronizing your own movements with theirs to channel that energy to your benefit. Tregoning uses this technique to help drive momentum where other cities stall out and bend to what they see as political will against new development.

Her own description of the role of planning director is “someone who manages change in communities,” as she describes in a recent radio interview. “You can’t stay the way

you are,” she says. “Your demographics are changing. Things are declining, or things are improving. Whatever is happening, things are changing, and planning can really mitigate the negatives, enhance the positives, and turn things around if things are going poorly. But for many people, change is a really difficult topic. I can’t say I love it myself in my neighborhood. I think that’s most of what’s [behind] the conflict that you hear. People would much rather have things not change.”



Harriet Tregoning

I worked briefly with Harriet in my stint with ArtPlace, a national consortium supporting creative placemaking. ArtPlace’s mission of driving economic revitalization and placemaking through the arts was a challenging concept for many of those involved in the arts, but Tregoning’s office took a no-nonsense approach that was highly effective. Their Arts & Culture Temporiiums were a series of pop-up “artist villages” that were opened in underused properties in neighborhoods needing a boost. These interventions were successful in bringing new people, energy, and dollars into neighborhoods in need. And in a process

that could easily inspire calls of “gentrification,” an emphasis on local artists and flavor kept those worries at bay.

I wish Tregoning luck in her new endeavor — the political tide has buffeted the Sustainable Communities program since its inception. But I have great faith that she is the right person to face the tide and come out above the waves.

Come hear Harriet Tregoning speak at CNU 22 in Buffalo, New York, where she will join Toronto Planning Director Jennifer Keesmaat in what is sure to be an inspiring conversation about revitalizing cities. ♦

Provided to BCT courtesy of the Congress for the New Urbanism, The Marquette Bldg., 140 S. Dearborn, Ste. 404, Chicago, IL 60603. 312/551-7300; fax: 312/346-3323. www.cnu.org

UPDATE

■ **Dan Cary**, a professional planner, environmentalist, and early supporter of New Urbanism, died in early March at age 64. Cary, a big man with a colorful personality, served as the planning director of West Palm Beach, executive director of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, and planning director for the South Florida Water Management District. In these professional capacities he took risks for two decades to support better planning ideas that are now becoming mainstream practice. “Dan was an embodiment of two seemingly contradictory characteristics: idealism and effectiveness,” said Congress for the New Urbanism cofounder Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk.

■ **Berlin, Maryland**, was named the “coolest small town” in America by Budget Traveler magazine. Berlin’s charm is due to planning decisions in addition to its historic main street. The town is a tourist destination and the planning and building approach of civic leaders has brought economic development benefits,

according to Smart Growth Maryland, a blog written by members of the Maryland Department of Planning”

“Forward-thinking town leaders played on its historic charm, developed new zoning to bolster local businesses, participated in state programs that helped elevate sidewalk appeal and created a slew of festivals and events that brings thousands of visitors to the town.”

■ The inaugural **International Urbanism Symposium** was held early Feb-

ruary in Seaside Florida, where sixteen world-renowned architects and planners gathered to share their experiences working in the global arena. The symposium attendance exceeded expectation, which consisted of architects, planners, students, and local residents.

Participants discussed the rapid urbanization and population shift from rural to urbanizing centers. Dhuru Thadani provided an overview of 2014 Seaside Prize winner Rob Krier’s outstanding contribution to the fields of architecture and urbanism.

Andres Duany placed Seaside as the forerunner to his thinking about ‘Lean Urbanism,’ a term that describes how future developments need to be designed and built if they are to be environmentally and economically feasible.

■ **Recently growth in the City of Seattle has outpaced that of its suburbs** — breaking a trend dating to 1910, according to a report in *The Seattle Times*.

“Between 2011 and 2012, Seattle’s population grew at a rate 25 percent faster than that of surrounding King County. During this period, Seattle’s growth rate was 67 percent faster than Bellevue’s.

“This reversal isn’t unique to Seattle. Since 2011, most big cities across the country have outpaced their suburbs when it comes to population growth.”

Comments under the article reveal that this new reality generates resentment among many suburban folks, who find themselves lower in the real estate pecking order than the hipsters, minorities, intellectuals, and other city residents. Other suburban residents, more practical and open-minded, are happy with the return of urbanism — and its promise to preserve regional open space and reduce traffic congestion. ♦

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