



Suburban Sprawl's Stranglehold

A Case for New Urbanism Principles

Better urban design.



Special points of interest:

- The Dangers of sprawl.
- Urbanism offers alternatives.
- Transforming streets.
- Real place-making.
- Connected street networks.



“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

Volume 3 Lake County Edition

How might Urbanism help *re-think* conventional thinking.

Sprawl's strangle hold on Lake County Florida planning and development may have far reaching consequences for the future. When one considers the growing number of cities, towns, counties, and municipalities that have adopted some sort of smart growth policy as a means to mitigate transportation issues, problems associated with sprawl, or planning more sustainable communities – then one might wonder why others have not gotten the message.

Urbanism's as well as many planning agencies across America have adopted the premise that cities, towns, and neighborhoods deserve better places to live, work, and play. Many agree that the best way to accomplish this endeavor is through community outreach, education, and disseminating rational urbanism principles that favor and promote denser mixed-use zoning, walkable places that also offer alternative means of transportation other than the car. In other words, from this author's perspective one is not as likely to see a cemetery on your way to church, the shopping

Understandably, personal transportation has become the life blood of American culture. The pursuit of an American liberty and freedom. But in car dependent environments, attention should focus on those who do not enjoy these driving privileges. Namely these include the poor, sick or disabled, and the elderly.

For these groups, urbanism hopes to bring about awareness and a catalyst for change so that cities, towns, and neighborhoods can ultimately be designed to function better and safer alternatives for everyone. Because every community is different, one way to begin an analysis is through direct observation and careful analysis. It helps to see the “big picture.”



Suburban Sprawl: Alive and well in Lake County.

Un-walkable places and streets
 To reiterate, a recent issue of Better! Cities and Towns, Kelly Morphy stated, “through-out the country, examples are still found where efforts to make towns better have been stymied by community members, civic leaders, or transportation officials who just don't “get it.” Kelly Morphy is Director of

Community Outreach at the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute. www.walklive.org
 The dream of wide streets facilitate fast moving unimpeded free flowing traffic, otherwise known as “passive design” is a practice long carried out for decades and still in place through present day. That is, conventional street design founded in highway de-

sign principles that favoring wide, straight, flat and open roads with clear zones.





Conventional traffic engineers offers road signs as one of the best solutions for increasing awareness in the hopes of preventing traffic accidents and fatalities.

*Living Communities—
“Streets designed for pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers also encourage the casual meetings among neighbors that help form the bonds of community.”*

Rise of Sprawl

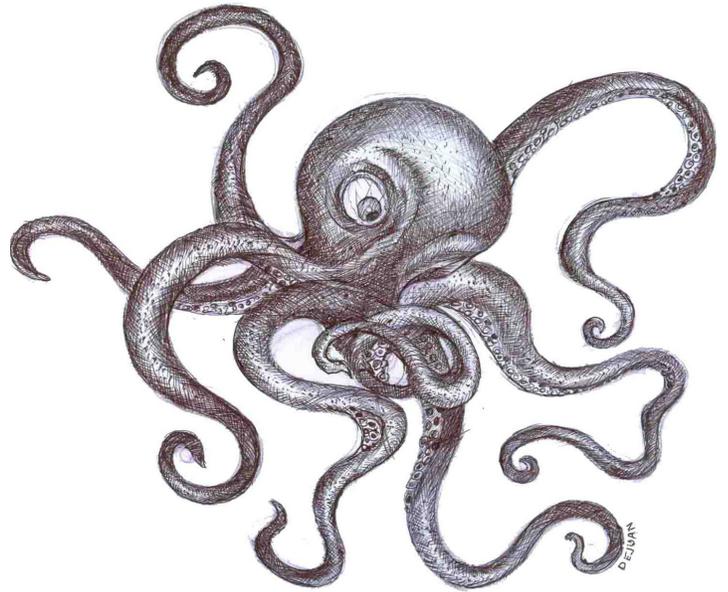
Suburban sprawl is like an octopus illustrated on the right. Its tentacles reaching farther and farther until it is out of control and no longer able to sustain even itself.

For many reading this who are already familiar with the dangers of sprawl, I will only go as far as emphasizing the its most detrimental affects.

Negative impacts of conventional zoning streets as conduits of sprawl—the major arterials which actually perpetuate and encourage high speed traffic.

The detrimental affect has been increased traffic injuries and fatalities that have been documented to be directly correlated to vehicle speed. Simply put, when roads are widened they design speed for which they are designed will encourage vehicles to travel 10 to 15 miles higher than the posted speed or target speed).

More evidence of sprawl indicates a loss of “sense of place.” We know sprawl’s signature is seen in the strict separation of uses by zoning. Public spaces are literally non-existent and appear as “spaces between buildings” or worse the parking lots themselves. The notion of civic spaces is irrelevant with the exception of some left-over public lands for recreational uses which in most cases can only be reached by car. Which leads to the case where transportation alternatives such as buses, street cars,



Clermont, Florida. Lake County.

or more complex systems like light rail have not been included in conventional planning—much less the inclusion of grids that provide an efficient interconnected network of routes that are useful to drivers, pedestrians, and bicycles. For some communities, transporting individuals via community van helps those with needs whom otherwise can not drive.

Photo above. Plate I. Courtesy Google Earth. Shows the City of Clermont Originally designed with the familiar street grid of traditional towns prior to the 1950’s. The city dissected in two by regional highway 50 that extends to both the east and west coast’s and bounded by highway 27, another state wide through way running north –south. Their impact on traffic is long

Business as Usual

Well established to this day, highways such as Hwy 27 are a valuable asset to the overall growth and prosperity of the region, but they do not have to be a curse.

Highway to Nowhere

After the 1950's as the city expanded so did the rapid spread of conventional transportation planning and zoning emphasizing the car as the primary means of getting around. Yet even in the 1950's there was not much to see and do here until the population began

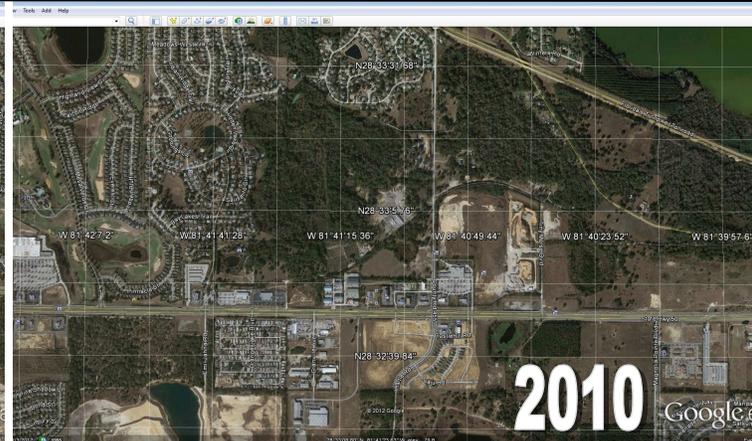
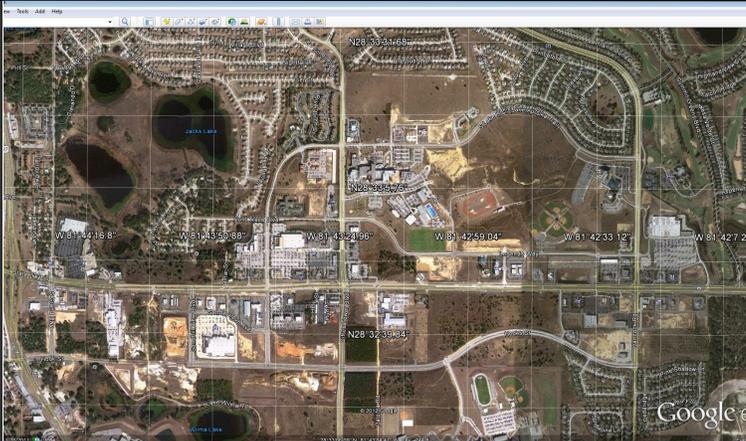
to grow in the 1970's. As the photo indicates, as the growth spread eastward so did sprawl along with it. Plate 3, below affirms the even more rapid spread of sprawl in recent years as we have come to know it. This times, within the last decade bringing along the "classic" elements that come along with rapid development and growth – the big box retailers, from home improvement warehouses, mega marts, and automobile dealership. Don't get me wrong, this is all supposed to be good for the community.

Where in my opinion it might not appear so good is in the "How" aspect.

In the process, the city it sprang from began to lose its identity as it continued to spread leaving behind its historical past. The connection to the new places only affordable by the automobile and great scenic spots among the rolling hills were paved over by parking lots. In fact with as many new roads and widened road improvements, the kind of connections urbanists refer to are lacking fragmented developments such as these.



Urbanism principles offers places for people even in the most dense environments like midtown Manhattan., New York. Greenacre Park.



The Negative Impacts of Sprawl

- Automobile dependency.
- Increased traffic congestion.
- Increase use and spending on higher costs of gasoline.
- Air and water, and ground water pollution.
- Can lead to higher taxes needed to pay for public services to cover larger service areas.
- Higher costs for public infrastructure to dispersed development.
- A decline in economic opportunity in existing towns and cities.
- Public health impacts associated with less physical activity.
- More time spent driving leading to health concerns and increased traffic accidents.
- Lacking sense of place—less traditional gathering places for social contact, civic, and economic activity

“Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets.”
Jane Jacobs

Growth Without Vision



This ill-conceived shopping plaza shows little regard for the local community and surrounding region by missing the opportunity to create a better experience for shopping, dining, and entertainment.

Instead by not taking advantage of the full use of new urbanism tools and principles, the end outcome is a mediocre, over the hill, strip mall; stripped of local community identity or a chance for creating a place conceived through the use of public spaces and a walkable connected street grid.

Branded Sprawl Center

Sometimes we have to step back and take a close look at the big picture to dissect what planners and developers and non-local architects conspired to create in the hill tops of Clermont Florida.

Along the west side of highway 27 three separate parcels were dedicated exclusively to commercial retail development. Yet what is not so obvious from a bird's eye view is that on the ground we notice a big difference. We can identify several symptoms of sprawl—that is single use zoning, yet these three sites are separated from each other. In other words you have to drive and park your car three times to reach each location by driving

on a major arterial linking the three that snakes along the rear. Partly because of the unique terrain features, one can not see the other shopping centers lessening the visual connection.

So the question is, why would the three locations be separated when they all fall under one use?

We know that specialization within the real estate industry and development guides such as the Shopping Center Development Handbooks still influence property development even to this day six decades after they were introduced. Another side effect of what you do see, is the parking lots (gray areas) for each site which includes over the excessive over-

flow parking that is rarely if ever used at all to justify increased traffic during the holiday season; especially on days like "black Friday."

Because one has to park and drive (not walk) to each shopping venue this only increases traffic on the roads (which of

course were provided in any regard to accommodate shoppers.

Important to note, a large number of shoppers reside in a retirement community just immediately south.

Why would planners want grandpa and grandma drive more and spend more gas?



Above: Another useless road separating same uses.

Missing the Target: Unintended Consequences

The social costs of sprawl and its' public health impacts as well as environmental impacts are well researched and documented.

In our example, we can argue that if we only take into account automobile dependency (caused by single-use development that forces people to make multiple trips using their automobile) will increase traffic congestion, increase gasoline use and maintenance costs of car ownership or multiple cars per household, and longer time spent driving which means less time with family, friends, or productivity at work.

In addition, heavy vehicle use can contribute to health concerns, risk of injury or fatalities in traffic accidents including pedestrian injuries and fatalities, and decline in physical activity such as walking which researchers have linked to obesity and other health risks.

In the long term view, we imagine that planners at this stage would want what is best for the community today as well as into the future.

The sustainable economic vitality and development of a town center or village center should be a high priority to avert their decline over time.

When conceiving an outcome for any significant development Kelly Morphy states in his article is published in the October-November 2012 issue of *Better! Cities & Towns* that - "Identifying the desired outcomes should drive the process" in creating the plan. Knowing the "how to" and the reason for doing so in the first place is part of the process. The question one might ask is in the first place is—"Do we

want to create a village center that offers dense mixed-uses for future flexibility, and walkable places that local residents can benefit from as well as regional or out of town visitors?

Should we create a place that achieve goals like transportation alternatives which take into account the poor and elderly?

Should we create places that add identity, character and vibrancy to the community?

Should we put forth a plan that look far enough ahead into the future so that future residents and users appreciate its value and make it flexible to endure the test of time or the ups and downs of economic cycles? Should we build on the idea of bringing everyone together in one place and less emphasis on the automobile as the only driving force?

Planners should recognize that it is people that make places and that physical connections should foster social interaction, rather than keep people apart.



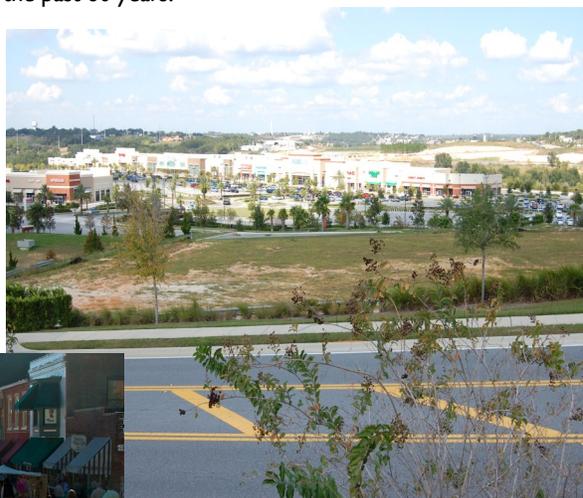
It's safe to say that most people love shopping, dining out, and going to the movies so we must think more about the big picture and ask what is it we are *really* building.

Urbanists and more and more planners know the answer already; that is, places for people. Essentially at the core of what the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) is about—creating people places for living, working, and playing in cities, towns, and neighborhoods across America and the globe.

Our shopping center is only one more recent example that is contradictory to the growing trend that has been engaged by cities, and towns, across America in the past 20 years. That is, the embracing traditional compact development with complementary uses close to one another in lieu of sprawl's Euclidian single use automobile dependent planning policies of the past 60 years.



Highway engineer's commonly refer to pedestrians as "peds" for short. To save space on more road signs because vehicles travel at ever higher rates of speeds.



Above: A view to another ugly strip center.

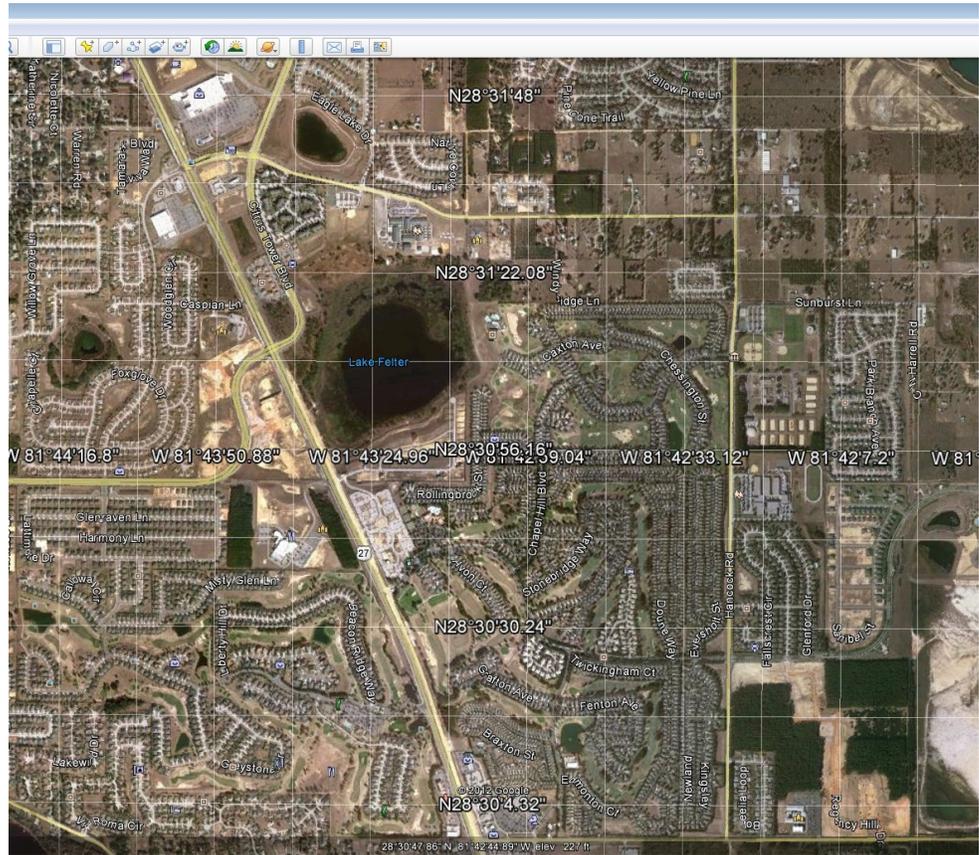
Left: Main street Weston, MS

Missing the Target: The Bigger Picture

Upon looking at the larger picture as shown on the right, The areas immediately south and east of the new shopping center contain vast sprawl single family residential communities. One of them, Kings Ridge is a large retirement community of single family homes.

Losing site of the big picture has resulted in the creation of just another run-of-the-mill strip shopping center. Even recently as “out door shopping venues were gaining favor such as the Winter Garden Mall— no effort or consideration was made to develop a place that even resembles the notion of a “lifestyle shopping village.” It is important to note that having the first movie theatre in the area, a JC Penny, Wal-Mart and more restaurants satisfy consumer wants. They are a welcome necessity to maintain a growing local economy and a more appealing place to live.

In our opinion, the manner upon which the development was executed leaves a lot to be desired in terms of keeping with urbanist principles, Creating truly wonderful places takes vision, knowledge, creativity, and most of all *the will* to make better places for people to live, work, and play. What would be a more appropriate or optimum use for this shopping center site? To answer that question, we believe that community involvement, developers, and local government policies could Work together with planners, architects, and urban designers to build a better community in the context of a true town center or walkable shopping village.



South Clermont. State Highway 27.

Residents of Kings Ridge must travel quite a distance to the Walmart, then drive again if they want to go to the price club big box store; then drive again to the JC Penny and more shopping; then drive again to reach the movie theatre at the other end of the same shopping center. With no other choices than driving, and actually doing even more driving may actually make it less appealing to get in the car in the first place, rather than deal with busy traffic.



The 4th Street trolley. Tucson, AZ



Perhaps in the near future transportation alternatives such as cable cars will offer more choices for Clermont residents. We can hope!



Reach Out

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Act now! The Future of Lake County is our hands.

Smart growth links:

The Congress for the New Urbanism CNU

www.cnu.org

Smartgrowth.org

Smartgrowthamerica.org

Placemakers.com

Completestreets.org

T4america.org

Transportation for America



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 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.



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

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A Florida native 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.

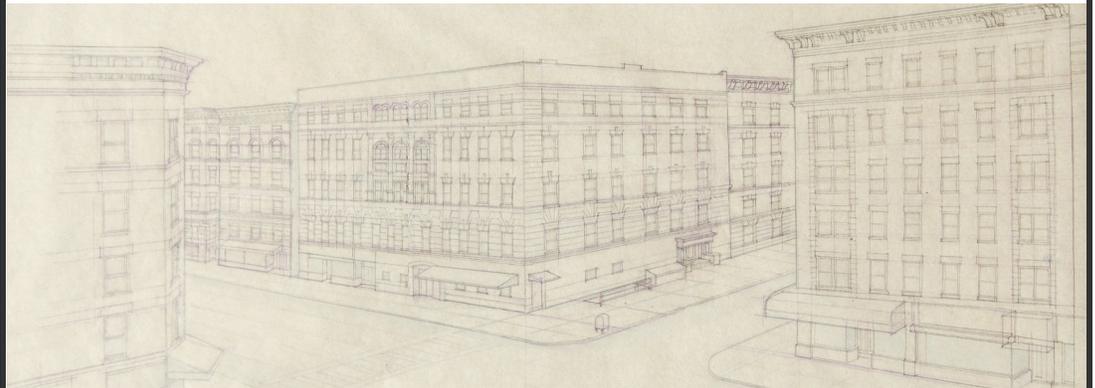


Illustration: Javier De Juan

Smart Growth

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.

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



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