

the urban-ator



standard, conventional suburban development over traditional neighbourhoods in cities and towns or rural villages and hamlets. Yet, the vast majority of development being built worldwide is suburban sprawl. In other words the preferences of a majority of the population, 55% to 70%, are being ignored. Where we have offered the alternative the results have been the same, the traditional projects, no matter their density, always outperform the suburban sprawl from a market, social as well as environmental perspective. From this evidence I'd say the 'battle' is going well.

What markets/countries do you operate in? Are there any preferences on where you prefer to work?

We work in many different countries around the world. Being a small firm we concentrate in North America and the Caribbean, but we have accepted invitations to work in countries such as Australia, Malaysia, China, the Philippines, Turkey and Germany. When we take on overseas projects we focus on those which will set a precedent in that country.

Is it difficult to maintain a holistic view on urban planning? How hard is it to reconcile all the differing viewpoints between business interests, the community and the government?

Actually, it is only a struggle to maintain the holistic view and reconcile differences when the planning approach used is incorrect. One of the bigger weaknesses in current planning practice is the separation of interests into 'specialties'. When each participant in the creation of a plan is allowed to effect design in a vacuum the end result is always a place which looks as if it was assembled by committee. We assumed complexity from the beginning, learning and creating the mechanisms to promote it in our communities through codes based on the principles of natural habitats. This way the relationship between business, community, and government is acknowledged as symbiotic and their interests mutually beneficial and self supporting.

Are there cultural considerations that dictate where your ideas would be acceptable? I.e. Countries and cultures where people are used to the concept of higher-density living and/or smaller personal space.

It is important to clarify at the outset that traditional planning promotes authentic community at every scale and density and that the techniques and principles we employ are embedded in all cultures. Most of the world had cities and towns long before America invented the office park, apartment complex and shopping mall. Second, the question assumes that what we do is necessarily high density. The idea that New Urbanism or Smart Growth is exclusively high density is incorrect. Low density development in the form of hamlets and villages are fundamental units of community around the world and have tremendous capacity to absorb new growth within a regional system. Cities are just one category of community. The movement has never been about selecting one density over another.

Can you explain a little on why urban sprawl is such a big issue to you and your firm?

I would argue that the big issue is the lack of alternatives which has created a system that defaults to sprawl. Our concern is not necessarily that sprawl exists but that sprawl is unstructured and anti-community. Without community, society and culture break down. Sprawl has no capacity to evolve into something greater over time and if it is the only model being used to develop, the

society and culture it houses will be unsustainable. These are critical flaws. The frustration we feel rests with the knowledge that the lifestyle choices and contemporary demands of people are easily accommodated by traditional patterns of urbanism; it's just that no one had taken the time until very recently to learn about its capacities and observe its function. It is a far more resilient pattern of development, as can be seen by the continuing evolution and revival of the world's great cities.

If everyone understands the impact and implications of uncontrolled urban sprawl, why are we still seeing traditional concepts of suburbia sprouting like wildfire?

Momentum. It takes a long time to slow or redirect a large force. Sprawl has been carefully packaged and expertly marketed for decades. It has its good points, but as mentioned earlier a significant portion of the population want something else. If a model for that something is not present, or has been tarnished by abuse or neglect, the only option is whatever the default setting happens to be. In today's world the default setting is sprawl. All zoning and development codes promote it, banks and lending institutions are structured to fund it, marketing people know only how to sell it and therefore buyers have been trained to recognize and value only it, and architects and planners have been schooled only in its techniques and methods. The architects and planners in turn are responding to the zoning and development codes, which are influenced by the requirements of lending institutions, etc. The whole system is mutually supportive. Trying to change just one element, means affecting the entire system. It takes a while for the ideas to spread, especially abroad, where growth and development pressures almost dictate that city building is provided in neat, pre-packaged systems. Suburbia is a fully supported and simple system to adopt. Its simplicity is its greatest strength and the main reason it 'spreads like wildfire'.

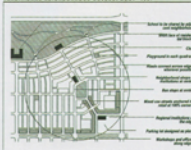
Have any governments (national, state or local) taken up your cause wholesale?

It is difficult to travel anywhere in the world today and not hear of governments discussing sustainable development and smart growth. As they all grapple with limited financial resources and dwindling natural ones many are looking at alternative ways to develop. At the local level, most municipalities and counties in the US now have some sort of traditional zoning ordinance on the books. Called 'New Ordinances' or 'Smart Growth' codes, are being level the development playing field, making traditional designs legal and practical, where before they often were illegal and costly. At the state level governments have begun to adopt regional comprehensive plans that designate where new growth can and cannot occur in order to guide development back to areas with infrastructure, which helps to curtail sprawl in undeveloped areas and lower costs. In the US, Australia, and Europe at the federal level many policies have been recently promoted. Sprawl are being revisited and modified. England and Australia have very advanced policies that promote the type of development we practice.

Were there any growing pains in coming up with your concept of urban planning?

What was the genesis of this idea? Our concept has evolved over time as we learned from our projects and the work of others. The initial concept which led to our first project called Seaside, was to emulate the best in urban design and architecture from communities in the south eastern US. Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, toured the region, studying places that seemed successful, places where people travelled to and which were held in high regard by local citizens. After measuring details such as street widths, building setbacks, and photographing dozens of communities from Key West to Savannah to Charleston, differences in style and architecture were noted, as were interesting similarities in the pattern of urbanism. These were codified and designed into

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the plan for Seaside. That was the beginning of the movement. Championing these fundamentals often leads to 'growing pains' as one bumps up against resistance from the status quo. The circle of players described in the earlier question has a vested interest in the existing system and are reluctant to change.

How hard would it be to change the mindset of the public to accept a smaller living space in exchange for (subjectively speaking) improved quality of life?

As it turns out not very difficult at all. It happens all by itself now. What is often not taken into account by developers and marketing professionals is that people require different space needs based not only on income but on their 'life phase' too. The young and the old generally do not want larger homes because of maintenance and cost issues. These two groups make over half of households in some countries. Their quality of life needs revolve around a set of priorities which lead them to make the buying and location decisions they make. For families the priorities are different. They have historically been the biggest buyer of larger homes in suburbia and this makes complete sense. Families need more space. Even when offered the option of suburbia over traditional neighbourhoods they often choose suburbia. The issue is not that they make this decision; the issue is that the design of the suburbs they move to fail to offer community and as their life phase changes they are forced to move. Suburbia and the urban sprawl it promotes must be designed better to accommodate people's needs.

Do you promote revitalising existing urban centers or to just start afresh on new tracts of land with your planning concept?

Both. There will be 90 million new Americans in the next thirty years. They will need 40 million new dwellings. Where are the statistics that show that we can accommodate the majority of the incoming population within existing urban boundaries? Infill or densification will not accommodate them - even assuming that we could reverse our American culture to one that would accept such densities. The single-family house is a deep part of our history. It is highly desired by the market and embedded into property rights laws in many states. Both revitalisation and 'Greenfield' development must be used to establish the correct models and accommodate new growth. To focus only on one, will mean abandoning the other and the implications of such a tactic are too great. This is especially true in the rapidly growing countries of Southeast Asia and China where population migration and growth will overwhelm existing urban areas making them unliveable well before modernisation is complete. In fact, there is a strong likelihood that the quality of life of cities in this part of the world will become so bad that economic growth and modernisation may be hampered.

How can the average layperson help in combating urban sprawl?

They can become more educated about the issues. An informed public is the greatest tool for change.



Current zoning practices do little to encourage multifunctional, adaptable, urban places. Too often, our urban planners have superseded the wide spectrum of urban typologies with one model; the suburb. The codes and vocabulary used to promote traditional designs differ from those used to promote suburbia. The urban and rural alternatives, which traditional design speaks to, incorporate the full spectrum of living environments, and this is the difference that the controversial concept of New Urbanism promotes. Smart Code® developed by Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co (DPZ) and Municipal Code Corp., provides a basis from which smarter zoning codes can be adopted by local officials. It is a template, written in ordinance form, that can be adjusting locally, but provides the nuts and bolts of what makes smart growth and New Urbanism possible. Based on a concept developed by DPZ, called the transect, that defines zones of development from rural to dense urban spaces, each zone has different development 'DNA' as defined by the 'transect'. 'If most of your community is suburban sprawl, the new code is intended to lay down a new genetic code,' says Demetri Baches, a director of the Miami-based architecture and town-planning firm. 'It will help create areas that are town centers. It's just like any other zoning ordinance - you apply it to make change.'

Combating urban sprawl has featured prominently on your firm's agenda. How goes the battle?

It's not so much a battle as it is a movement aimed at providing an alternative. The need is obvious if one considers that most scientific surveys show only 30% to 45% of people prefer the