

How To Mess Up a Town

by James Howard Kunstler

The town where I live, Saratoga Springs, New York, like practically every other town in America, is under assault by forces that want to turn it into another version of Paramus, New Jersey, with all the highway crud, chain store servitude, and loss of community that pattern of development entails.

Ironically, the forces who are ready to permit the most radical damage to the town's historic character consider themselves the most conservative; while the groups most concerned with preserving the town's best features, and even enhancing them, have been branded radical.

Until World War Two, Saratoga had the character of a city in the country. Its business district was a very densely developed grid of blocks crammed with buildings that stood shoulder to shoulder. The pattern was classic Main Street USA — though here the main drag is named Broadway. Spoking off Broadway were a half dozen major feeder streets, all lined with buildings, all vigorously mixed-use, with retail businesses, offices, and apartments disposed in an arrangement that has been the basis for good urbanism since classical antiquity.

Several mammoth Victorian hotels gave the town cosmopolitan swagger — and fabulous public spaces, along with the renowned racecourse. And of course there were the springs. The residential ring around this downtown core was developed to a density of about four to eight dwellings per acre, on a grid of tree-lined streets, in a readily recognizable pattern we might call Small Town USA. Saratoga's urban edge was clearly defined: beyond East Avenue and West Avenue lay good, well-farmed farmland.

The past forty-odd years, of course, just about everything has been done to destroy that pattern and dismantle the town. The mammoth hotels were razed in

the 1950s and replaced by strip malls with huge parking lots fronting on Broadway and its adjoining streets. All sorts of inappropriate suburban building forms were imposed on downtown sites — ridiculous one-story structures with blank walls, surrounded by bark mulch beds and, of course, acres of parking lots — destroying

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all pedestrian interest. The blocks on either side of Broadway were leveled in a mendacious urban renewal scheme that left 90 percent of that land in parking lots.

Many of the functions of everyday life were taken out of downtown and scattered out in the countryside where they are only accessible by motor vehicles. Last year it was the new junior high school, moved three miles out of town along a busy state highway, to which students are explicitly forbidden to walk or ride their bikes. This year it was the public skating rink, which was removed from the center of town and stuck three miles from Broadway out on a

county road across from the old dump. The reason it was moved, by the way, was because there wasn't enough parking. Do you suppose the children cared about the parking?

Saratoga's plight has been aggravated by the fact that the northernmost of its gateways, Exit 15 of Interstate 87, lies within the adjoining town of Wilton, which has aggressively turned the land around Exit 15 into a feeding frenzy for mall builders, national discount stores, franchise fry pits, and other agents of suburban sprawl in order to pay for its growing roster of "revenue-loser" residential subdivisions. Wilton has become the Anti-Saratoga, both in physical layout and economically, its chain stores sucking the lifeblood out of our downtown.

Wilton, of course, will have to suffer the consequences of its heedless and brainless "growth" — and I believe that suburbia of its type will begin to tank out alarmingly soon. Still, Saratoga is doing very little to make the best of its true virtues. I am convinced that Americans have literally lost the ability to think about their surroundings, and for a specific reason. Historically Americans have not had a high regard for the public realm, and this is a very unfortunate thing, because the public realm is the physical manifestation of the common good. When you degrade the public realm, as we have, you degrade the common good, and hence you impair the ability of a group of people incorporated as a republic to think about the public interest.

This is why we no longer possess the most fundamental notions of civic art — civic art being the effort that we make to honor and embellish the public realm in order to make civic life possible. This shows very clearly in the way that we have treated the streets here in my town of

continued on next page

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continued from previous page

Saratoga Springs. Design elements that a European child of twelve would grasp instinctively are completely mishandled here by grownup experts in the design and building professions.

For instance, a few years ago when the great mall incursion began, the town decided to "fight back" by installing Victorianoid lampposts and street benches on Broadway. Only they made one slight mistake with the benches. They bolted them into the outside edge of the sidewalks facing toward traffic. This fundamental error in thinking that people sit outdoors to watch cars, not other people, illustrates the pathetic level of civic art as it is practiced here. To make matters worse, the original problem has become incorrigible. As recently as this April, members of the Downtown Business Association begged the Department of Public Works to move the benches around so they faced the sidewalk, and the DPW refused on the grounds that sitters might extend their legs and trip pedestrians!

The most pathetic aspect of all this is that if we can't solve minuscule problems like benches facing the wrong way, how can we even begin to think about more complicated design issues, such as the way buildings relate to each other and to the street. In this area, by the way, we continue to fail spectacularly.

The most important building to be erected on Broadway in this half of the 20th Century was the Ramada Renaissance Hotel (since bought by the Sheraton chain). This hotel was designed with no shopfronts on Broadway. Instead, it presents four blank brown steel fire doors (from the hotel's conference rooms). This is the face that this huge and important building shows to Saratoga's most important street. Naturally, it is a colossal failure as a matter of civic art. The street at that end of town is dead at all times of the day and night, for the simple and obvious reason that there are no destinations for people on foot, no reason to be there.

The knowledge necessary to build really great towns that people would delight to live and work in, was fully in place, was fully possessed by Americans in our grandparents' day. We have thrown it all into the garbage can. It is as much of a struggle for us to regain this lost knowledge as it is for a stroke victim to learn how to speak all over again. We are also in the unhappy position of learning that without a regard for the public realm, for civic art, or civic life, we will probably not have much of a civilization. The future will require us to do things better, or the future will belong to other people in other societies. ♦

James Howard Kunstler is the author of "The Geography of Nowhere," a book about the economic and social consequences of suburban sprawl, and the need to change our current methods of land-use planning. He is the author of eight other books, all novels, a former editor with Rolling Stone Magazine, and a regular contributor to the New York Times Magazine.

