Ten Failures that Shaped the 20th Century American City

by Laurence C. Gerckens, AICP

1 THE DEMISE OF COMMUNITY-ORIENTED DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT

Prior to the widespread adoption of zoning in the late 1920s, many of the most notable successes in housing and neighborhood design and planning were the work of government agencies or limited dividend corporations. Plans for communities such as Forest Hills Gardens, New York (built by the Russell Sage Foundation); Yorkshire Village, New Jersey and Union Park Gardens, Delaware (built by the federal government during World War I); and Radburn, New Jersey and Sunnyside Gardens, New York (developed by the City Housing Corporation) still serve as models of creative design.

In these community developments, architects, landscape architects, engineers, and builders cooperated in the integrated construction of entire neighborhoods, often complete with schools, parks, and local shopping areas. This allowed for economies of scale and improvements in building and land assembly practices, resulting in lower costs.

Ironically, one of most notable successes of early twentieth century planners, the introduction of zoning (see page 4 of Successes article), when combined with the conservative, market-driven climate of the 1920s, helped spell the end of this community-oriented approach to land development. Regulation of private one-lot-at-a-time development was touted as providing the same advantages as direct neighborhood construction – without community cost or the use of government land acquisition authority. Unfortunately, reliance on zoning had the effect of undermining some of the important planning values integral to these early twentieth century, neighborhood-oriented developments.

In fact, zoning most often facilitated a land-speculation-based, neighborhood-quality-less, and increasingly high-cost residential sprawl that failed to meet the housing and public service needs of those without high spending power. It is interesting to note, however, that a growing number of planners and designers are drawing lessons from the early planned communities in shaping new patterns of development. Editor’s Note: see Philip Langdon’s article “New Development, Traditional Patterns” in PCJ #36 (Fall 1999).

2 THE LOST VISION OF REGIONAL PLANNING

Regional planning, originally based on concepts enunciated by Patrick Geddes of Edinburgh, Scotland in Cities in Evolution (1915), was brought to America by Geddes’ protégé, Lewis Mumford, and propounded by Benton MacKaye in The New Exploration (1924). See page 10 for excerpts from The New Exploration. Geddes proposed careful forethought in the development of each urban region, a region extending from the mountainous edges of macro-watersheds to the sea. His “regional planning” gave equal emphasis to water supply, erosion, timberland, cropland, community sub-groupings, and urban centers, viewing the region as a symbiotic whole.

To Geddes and his followers, regional planning was a means of seeing urban areas in their broader context. Regional planning was intended to regulate and “nodulate” urban incursions into the surrounding countryside. By preserving broad bands of forest and farmland between urban areas, the unique life styles of city, village, and farm would be maintained.

Creation of the first county planning commission in America, at Los Angeles... continued on page 4a
Ten Failures…
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County in 1922, seemed to be a step
toward bringing Geddes’ vision to
fruition as it extended “city planning”
to include agriculture, forestry, and erosion
control. But the Regional Plan of New
York and Environ (1929) redirected
American regional planning, associating
it primarily with planning for metropoli-
tan expansion, through the provision of
large-scale transportation systems and
mass recreation areas. Whether inten-
tionally or not, American regional plan-
ting too often became a means for
implementing exactly those conditions
that Geddes, MacKay, and others
intended it to prevent.

3 THE FRAGMENTED
NATURE OF METROPOLITAN
GOVERNANCE

Laws empowering individual
communities to plan and act to
fulfill their own definitions of
the public interest might well have made
sense at the beginning of the twentieth
century when urban settlements were
small and isolated from one another. But
such “home rule,” when engaged in by a
plethora of communities within a met-
ropolitan area, led to the failure to
address pressing area-wide issues.

Perhaps the most telling case-in-
point was the failure of school desegre-
gation efforts. These efforts failed, in
large part, because the unit dealt with
was the individual segregated school
district and not the metropolitan region.
One could flee from the once segregated
central school district to an all-white
suburban school district with impunity.
This “white flight” contributed to intensi-
fication of the racial and economic
division between the central city and its
surrounding suburbs. (See page 6a for
more on segregation).

But school desegregation was just
one of a cluster of issues – including
affordable housing, public transportation,
water quality, solid waste, and
more – not effectively dealt with largely
because of the fragmented nature of metropoli-
tan governance.

Early efforts toward metropolitan
governance, such as the consolidation
of the City of Nashville and Davidson
County in 1962, were met with
vehement denunciations elsewhere
as an “un-American” attack on local
democratic government. But as the
impacts of unchecked metropolitan
expansion became more apparent in
increased costs, functional duplication,
and inefficiencies, interest in metropoli-
tan government increased.

The formation of metro govern-
ments in places like Nashville,
Indianapolis, Miami, and Tor-
onto, however, is still the exception
rather than the
rule. The need to
tackle the failure
of effective
metropolitan gov-
ernance remains
high on the list
of America’s chal-
genues as we enter
the new millen-

St. Louis Metro Area Municipalities shown right:
According to a report of St. Louis 2004, a non-profit
organization promoting regional cooperation,
St. Louis ranked fifth (in 1992) among America’s
thirty-five largest metro areas, in number of govern-
ment units with 771. As former Senator John C.
Danforth noted in the organization’s 1997 “Report to
the Community”: “Our region of 2.5 million people
consists of two states, the City of St. Louis, eleven
surrounding counties and a multitude of municipalities,
school districts, taxing authorities and govern-
ment service providers. It is a system that encourages
jealousies and fosters stalemate … A comprehensive
answer to our problems of governance is probably
beyond our reach, but the status quo is absolutely un-
acceptable. If we are to be a leader in the 21st century,
we should, at the least, look for regional solutions to
specific examples of governmental gridlock.”
Map at right from Savitch (editor), Regional Politics:
America in a post-cityage (1996). Figure 4.2.
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The Unfulfilled Promise of High Tech Housing

The nation’s most promising effort in high tech housing – as well as its most abject failure, was the Lustron House. Designed in 1946 by architects Morris Beckman and Roy Blass – and financed with a $15.5 million dollar loan from the federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation – the Lustron House was conceived by engineer Carl Strandlund as a low-cost, “high tech” response to the housing needs of returning GI’s. Components of the all-steel, porcelain enamel paneled ranch style house would be delivered by truck.

Unfortunately, the Lustron Corporation encountered significant early production problems, and after only about 2,500 units were delivered, declared bankruptcy. It left the federal government with the largest loss ever taken on a housing program. Interestingly, the remaining Lustrons are today prized by their owners for their thoughtful design and easy maintenance.

American housing remains a modified custom-design on-site construction system constrained by 1920s era definitions of housing, antiquated building and zoning codes, and a tax system that encourages communities to exclude less expensive housing. What is still needed is a factory-molded basic unit along the lines of what Lustron sought to achieve in the 1940s, with plug-on elements permitting expansion or retraction as family needs change, designed to be organized into attractive higher density neighborhoods capable of service by public transit. Such a system could well replace the poorly constructed low-density deteriorating neighborhoods that ring our central cities and bring home ownership to a larger segment of Americans.

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Shaker Heights, Ohio is a first-ring suburb of Cleveland with a population of 30,000. It is a diverse suburb racially (67% white, 31% black, 3% other) and ethnically, as well as in terms of housing prices. Our homes range from $80,000 “starters” to $1.5 million mansions. While planning policies dealing with yard signs and home loans helped to stem white flight, the primary factors to successful integration were and are the people and the neighborhood associations.

In the late 1950s, black families started to move into the Ludlow neighborhood. After some initial hesitation, black and white families began to meet and socialize with each other. The common concerns were falling real estate values and white flight. In the spring of 1957, many “for sale” signs sprouted up and down the streets.

The first significant planning policy that contributed to the community’s integration was the 1964 prohibition of “for sale” signs in yards; only small window signs were allowed. The ban remained in effect until 1995, when concerns over First Amendment issues caused the City to change this ordinance.

Beginning in 1961, one of the neighborhood associations began making short-term loans to prospective home buyers. Other neighborhood associations followed suit, using events, such as a 1966 concert featuring Ella Fitzgerald, to help raise funds. In 1985, the City created the Fund for the Future of Shaker Heights, offering revolving loans to assist white buyers moving into predominantly black neighborhoods, and black buyers moving into predominantly white neighborhoods. Over the years, these homebuyer incentive programs have helped to maintain integrated neighborhoods.

Joyce G. Braverman is Assistant Director of Planning & Development for the City of Shaker Heights, Ohio. She is also President of the Ohio Planning Conference, a chapter of the American Planning Association.
trolleys, buses, and commuter rail were still valued contributors to urban transportation. Trolley car and bus stops at the micro scale, and commuter rail stations at the macro scale, created centers of interchange that supported concentrations of commercial uses accessible to all.

But by 1945, after twelve years of depression and four years of war, the public transit systems of America were worn out, requiring billions in reinvestment if their services were to survive. America chose to disinvest in these services in favor of support for the private automobile and over-the-road trucking fleets. Trolley and bus systems failed, commuter lines were sharply curtailed. As Lewis Mumford put it, the American national flower became the cloverleaf intersection.

In the post war period, with reduced levels of public transit and a shift of commercial and industrial enterprises to highway intersections and outlying “greenfield” locations, the poor – who often could not afford to own and maintain a car – were left stuck in city centers.

Fulfillment of the promise of “the new urbanism” will depend on a new regional, if not national, commitment to public, pluralistic, socially equitable public transit systems.

A Great Celebration!

From the Burlington, Vermont, Free Press, August 5, 1929:

“The trolleys are no more in Burlington, Winooski and Essex Junction!”

With Burlington’s streets decorated in holiday attire, two bands playing, camera men hustling about to get pictures and a crowd estimated all the way from 5,000 to 10,000 people looking on, an ancient trolley car was sacrificed in fire and smoke on Main street yesterday afternoon as the final ceremony which sent the trolley system into oblivion.

Editor’s Note: As a postscript to this, last year the Metropolitan Planning Organization sponsored a study on the feasibility of restoring trolley (or “light rail”) service to the Burlington area!
In a Land of Great Wealth
From the Inaugural Address of Lyndon Baines Johnson, January 20, 1965

On this occasion the oath I have taken before you and before God is not mine alone, but ours together. We are one nation and one people. Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen but upon all citizens. …

They came here – the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened – to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty; bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind. And it binds us still. If we keep its terms we shall flourish.

Justice was the promise that all who made the journey would share in the fruits of the land.

In a land of great wealth, families must not live in hopeless poverty. In a land rich in harvest, children just must not go hungry. In a land of healing miracles, neighbors must not suffer and die untended. …

Our Nation's course is abundantly clear. We aspire to nothing that belongs to others. We seek no dominion over our fellow man, but man's dominion over tyranny and misery.

But more is required. Men want to be part of a common enterprise, a cause greater than themselves. And each of us must find a way to advance the purpose of the Nation, thus finding new purpose for ourselves. Without this, we will simply become a nation of strangers. …

I do not believe that the Great Society is the ordered, changeless, and sterile battalion of the ants. It is the excitement of becoming – always becoming, trying, probing, falling, resting, and trying again – but always trying and always gaining.

In each generation, with toil and tears, we have had to earn our heritage again. If we fail now then we will have forgotten in abundance what we learned in hardship: that democracy rests on faith, that freedom asks more than it gives, and the judgment of God is harshest on those who are most favored.

If we succeed it will not be because of what we have, but it will be because of what we are; not because of what we own, but rather because of what we believe.

8 Abandonment of the Quest for a “Great Society”

If government fails to support effective programs to provide quality housing, education, health care, jobs, and transportation for those the market economy chooses to ignore, then an equitable, just, and peace-seeking society must abolish poverty itself, raising up all of its citizens to be able to participate fully in the market-driven economy.

President Johnson’s “War on Poverty” and his other Great Society programs intended just that: to provide social equity in a period of unprecedented prosperity – not only out of a sense of fair play and justice, but also to preclude future class conflict.

The Vietnam War, with its enormous social, human, and economic costs, doomed Johnson’s Great Society. Even the powerful American economic engine could not provide for both modern high tech warfare and the means of noticeably raising the standard of living of millions of its citizens. The end-of-the-war “peace bonus,” touted as being capable of shifting what had been massive war-time military spending to social purposes proved to be a chimera, founded on the assumption that the more well-to-do would prefer a poverty-free society to continuing hefty military expenditures and enhanced personal tax cuts.

The prosperity of the late Reagan Era, bought at the price of a $4 trillion national debt, left those in the bottom forty percent income range with less spending power than they had in the 1960s. For the less well-to-do – and for the urban areas in which they were increasingly concentrated – the legacy of the last decades of the twentieth century can be summed up as one of lost opportunities for eliminating poverty despite unprecedented national affluence.

9 Narrowing the Mission of HUD

At the end of World War II, President Truman proposed creation of a “Department of Urban Culture” to complement the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to represent and fulfill the needs of those Americans not directly engaged in farming. The idea failed to receive Congressional support. Later, President Kennedy proposed creation of a Department of Urban Affairs and Housing to deal with the issues and aspirations of urban dwellers. This agency was finally ap-proved in 1965, during the Johnson Administration, as the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

HUD, under its first Secretary, Robert C. Weaver, aggressively undertook programs to empower the urban poor (The Model Cities Program, 1966), to provide for urban development at the new town scale for a broad range of population by income and race (The New Communities Acts, 1968 and 1970), and to provide for high tech housing and the modernization of the American housing industry (Operation Breakthrough, 1968). But with inauguration of President Nixon, in 1969, and his unilateral termination of all federal housing programs in 1973, HUD as an agency for national urban innovation was emasculated.

In recent years HUD has undertaken some promising efforts, such as the Hope VI program intended to encourage local housing authorities to develop mixed income housing, with townhouse and garden style apartments instead of massive high-rises. However, HUD’s current undertakings are still quite modest when compared to the 1960s vision for the agency – and to the need for a co-ordinated national effort aimed at meeting the housing needs of all Americans.
In the early 1960s, in the prime of "Section 701" federally financed comprehensive planning programs, noted architect Albert Mayer echoed Patrick Geddes earlier words, cautioning that "trend is not destiny." Mayer suggested that much planning at that time was "trending" that avoided hard decisions relative to the equity of the resulting communities and the quality of life being projected.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, the lure of universal access to vast data bases and the seemingly objective application of GIS-based data systems has subrogated questions of social equity and imaginative public action to the needs and outputs of what Geddes termed the "dry statistical record." We now leave the twentieth century having fulfilled Geddes' greatest fears. Data projection of "what will be" has assured its inevitability without fulfillment of the human and creative possibilities of what could be — and without answering the moral issues of what should be.

We enter the twenty-first century with urban and regional structures shaped, in large measure, by failures and lost opportunities. In 1890 Jacob Riis, in his landmark expose How the Other Half Lives, referred to "the harvest of tares," the social weight that America would be required to carry into the twentieth century for its failure to deal effectively with the tenement house problems of the nineteenth. The legacy of our twentieth century failure to deal effectively with the inequalities of our society is the tare weight we carry into the new millennium.

Laurence Gerckens, national historian for the American Institute of Certified Planners, founder of the National Conference of Certified Planners, and emeritus professor at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, teaches American urban planning history as an adjunct professor at Michigan State University, Kansas State University, and Goucher College, Baltimore. Gerckens has contributed a number of articles to the Planning Commissioners Journal.

Homeless in America
Families with children are among the fastest growing segments of the homeless population. In its 1998 survey of 30 American cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayors found that families comprised 38 percent of the homeless population.

A lack of affordable housing and the limited scale of housing assistance programs have contributed to the current housing crisis and to homelessness. Between 1973 and 1993, 2.2 million low-rent units disappeared from the market. These units were either abandoned, converted into condominiums or expensive apartments, or became unaffordable because of cost increases.

A housing trend with a particularly severe impact on homelessness is the loss of single room occupancy (SRO) housing. In the past, SRO housing served to house many poor individuals, including poor persons suffering from mental illness or substance abuse. From 1970 to the mid-1980s, an estimated one million SRO units were demolished.

A 1999 review of homelessness in fifty cities by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty found that in virtually every city, the city's official estimated number of homeless people greatly exceeded the number of emergency shelter and transitional housing spaces. Moreover, there are few or no shelters in many rural areas of the United States, despite significant levels of homelessness.

Surveys also tend to undercount the number of homeless people because they are not in places researchers can easily find. This group of people, often referred to as "the unsheltered" or "hidden" homeless, frequently stay in automobiles, camp grounds, or other places that researchers cannot effectively search. For instance, a national study of formerly homeless people found that the most common places people who had been literally homeless stayed were vehicles (59.2 percent) and makeshift housing, such as tents, boxes, caves, or boxcars (24.6 percent).

The above information was provided by the National Coalition for the Homeless. For more information or fact sheets, contact Mary Ann Gleason, Executive Director, at 202-737-6444.