

Why is Everybody So Mad About Development?

by Edward T. McMahon

In recent months, newspapers around the country have reported about homeowners jamming public hearings to condemn proposed subdivisions and strip centers near their homes; demonstrators shouting down a developer who proposed a new condominium complex; angry neighbors storming onto a local tennis court to berate a development lawyer; and even how the Sierra Club has turned its attention from saving distant wilderness areas to fighting local developers.

A rising tide of hostility is engulfing developers, homebuilders, and their representatives from Phoenix to Philadelphia. Growth is a hot political issue for local governments in every region of the country. Snarling traffic, crowded schools, and tepid house prices have caused one jurisdiction after another to crack down on “development.”

What’s everybody so mad about? Why has fighting development become a national pastime? And, what, if anything, can builders do to alleviate public opposition to new development?

Developers haven’t always been held in such low regard. In fact, throughout history, some of the America’s most famous and revered figures have been developers. Thomas Jefferson, William Penn, James Oglethorpe and Jim Rouse to name just a few. The University of Virginia, Philadelphia and Savannah’s squares, Charleston’s row houses, Rockefeller Center, Baltimore’s inner harbor, the tree-shaded streets of Coral Gables, Oak Park, Chevy Chase, and many more of America’s most beloved and memorable places have been built by developers. What’s changed?

ANYPLACE, USA

One thing that has changed is the character and look of new development. We live in a country of highly varied his-

tory, climate, culture, and terrain. Not that long ago buildings reflected the differences between one region of the country and another: white clapboard houses in New England; adobe in New Mexico; stone or stucco in the Virginia Piedmont. Today, however, communities all over America look like they are being put together with interchangeable parts.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST REASONS PEOPLE FIGHT NEW DEVELOPMENT IS BECAUSE SO MUCH OF IT IS UGLY AND IT ALL LOOKS THE SAME, NO MATTER WHERE YOU LIVE.

When travelling, many of us have the disorienting feeling that we could be anyplace. Is it Albany or Albuquerque? Providence or Pittsburgh? Richmond or Rochester? Who can tell?

People complain about rising taxes, traffic congestion, air pollution, loss of green space, and other symptoms of sprawl. But one of the biggest reasons people fight new development is because so much of it is ugly and it all looks the same, no matter where you live. A civic activist in Orange County, California reflected this view when he said, “We were in favor of progress until we saw what it looked like.”

Eighty percent of everything ever constructed in America has been built since the end of World War II — and a lot of it is just plain junk: mini-marts, metal self-storage sheds, vinyl fast food franchises, billboards, big box retailers, particle board townhouses, super-ramas,

mega-malls and all the rest.

Many people now believe that new construction is only going to make the places where they live worse. In his book *The Geography of Nowhere*, James Howard Kunstler says people “are convinced the future is going to be worse than the past, because the future has been getting worse through their lifetime. Growth simply means more traffic, bigger parking lots and buildings bigger and uglier than before.”

So people become NIMBYs (“Not In My Back Yard”) or BANANA’s (“Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything”). If they’re successful in their efforts, NIMBYs use local government to torment developers (the people who create growth) with layer upon layer of regulation and bureaucratic hoopla. Eventually, the regulations make it so expensive and time-consuming to build something that development leapfrogs to the next jurisdiction farther out, where the process starts all over again.

TOWNS VS. SPRAWL

Another thing that has changed is how we arrange development. For three centuries, America built villages, towns, and cities with strong centers and clear edges beyond which lay farms, forests, and countryside. Since the 1950s, the centrifugal forces of sprawl have erased the distinction between city and countryside and taken all the objects that once made up cohesive human settlements — homes, schools, shops, offices, factories — and flung them randomly across the countryside.

As growth sprawls farther and farther out, our lives become more stressful and inconvenient. Once we had neighborhood schools and corner stores. Children could walk or bicycle to school. Senior citizens had the freedom to stroll to the library, pharmacy, or barbershop. Today,

the average family expends 18 percent of its income for a fleet of cars to navigate between distant housing tracts, commercial strips, and office complexes along congested and dangerous roads. Parents spend their weekends chauffeuring children to birthday parties, soccer practice, the mall, and everywhere in between. Even a trip to the “convenience” store can mean a ten-minute drive on a crowded highway.

Developers say “we just build what the market wants.” And there is no denying that people like the modern amenities provided in the typical new house. But many buy homes in communities they know are flawed because they have little choice.



More and more people want to live near places to walk and bike.

Studies recently conducted for the homebuilding industry by American LIVES and Inter-Communications, Inc. illustrate the extent to which consumer preferences vary from the prevailing development paradigm.¹ The results show that homebuyers most value natural open space, walking and bicycling trails, and houses with hidden garages — not subdivisions featuring fancy entrance signs, houses with gaping garages, tennis courts, and golf courses. Likewise, most people say they would prefer town centers with village greens surrounded by shops, civic buildings and churches, instead of suburbs dominated by commercial strip shopping.

¹ The American LIVES, Inc. and Intercommunications, Inc. joint surveys of homebuyers are reported on in the February 1997 issue of *Urban Land*, published by the Urban Land Institute.

Similarly, when a national polling organization asked Americans where they would most like to live: a city, suburb, small town, or rural area, a plurality said given a choice, they would prefer to live in a traditional small town. To understand why, think about small towns like Lexington, Virginia; Chestertown, Maryland; Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; or Sonoma, California. All these places have certain elements in common. They have an identifiable edge and a center. They are walkable and pedestrian-friendly. They have a mix of housing, small shops, and civic buildings. They are architecturally coherent and interesting. They have street trees and sidewalks. All this helps make for a sense of community.

Most developers, and most local governments for that matter, treat small towns and beloved urban neighborhoods as charming anachronisms rather than as models for how we could build in the future. Downtown Frederick, Maryland for example, is frequently touted for its walkability and charm but it is treated as if it is irrelevant to the planning future of Frederick County.

The real question is not whether our communities will grow, but how. The failure to understand this is what causes some people to regard all development as the enemy. Instead of debating whether growth will occur, we should be discussing the patterns of development: where we put it, how we arrange it, and what it looks like.

Starting from this premise I believe that there are several steps builders can take to alleviate public opposition to development:

1. Support Open Space Protection Efforts

Developers should join with civic groups and environmentalists to support local, regional, and statewide open space protection efforts. They should do this because the accelerating

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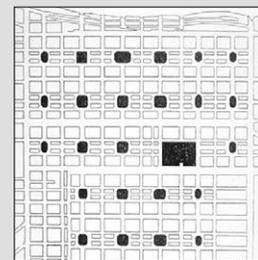
Savannah's Squares

James Edward Oglethorpe, a Tory member of the British Parliament, founded the City of Savannah in 1733. One of Oglethorpe's enduring legacies is a remarkable city plan. As planning journalist Philip Langdon notes in *A Better Place to Live*, Savannah's grid pattern of streets “is gloriously broken up by a series of shaded squares that function as neighborhood parks.”



“Developer”
James Edward Oglethorpe

Planner Edmund N. Bacon, in his groundbreaking book, *Design of Cities*, observes that “the visual effect of looking down lines of squares is exciting and constantly different, each square having its own special character and those in the central axis being strongly marked by monuments.” The squares also create oases of



Savannah's squares punctuate the city's grid.

calm within the city. As Bacon puts it, “when one is within any of these squares one feels entirely removed from the rushing traffic of the surrounding streets, which crosses but does not parallel the lines of sight.”

Savannah's founders also provided “trust lots” for public buildings and churches on each square, a civic gesture rare in more modern times.



The Gordon Monument and Post Office Building on Savannah's Wright Square, circa 1910. Detroit Publishing Company.

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loss of natural areas and green space is one of the major reasons why anti-development sentiment is growing across America. When people think all the land in their community is up for grabs, they oppose development everywhere. On the other hand, when people have some assurance that special places will be preserved, they are less likely to fight development at every turn.

Every jurisdiction needs an open space protection plan — and the financial resources to implement it. When communities have a road map delineating which land will be preserved, it becomes easier to facilitate quality development in the areas where it is most appropriate. Likewise, the faster a metropolitan area grows, the more important it is to establish a network of natural areas and open spaces where people can still experience the natural world and all its beauty. Just as communities need to upgrade and expand their grey infrastructure (i.e., roads, transit lines, sewers) so too communities need to upgrade and expand their green infrastructure (i.e., parks, greenways, natural areas)

Green space can provide a framework for new development by helping to shape and direct growth. In fact, land can be saved by development. Montgomery County, Maryland's "transfer of development rights" program, for example, has helped preserve over 29,000 acres of farmland, forests, stream corridors, and scenic viewsheds by allowing builders to buy development rights from rural landowners and transfer them to areas better served by roads, sewers, and other public services. *Editor's Note: For more on this program, see Rick Pruetz's "Putting Growth in its Place with Transfer of Development Rights," in PCJ #31 (Summer 1998).*

2. Save the Trees

Few things upset people more than cutting down large trees. When trees exist on land that is to be developed it makes good sense — economically, envi-

ronmentally, and politically — to preserve them. Preserving existing trees in a site plan for a new subdivision or other major development results in higher property values and a more pleasant place to live and work.

The forest products industry has long recognized the negative impact that highly visible clear cuts have on public perceptions of their industry. Likewise builders who clear cut trees or radically grade a site to facilitate the construction process, make a huge mistake. Savvy developers know that mature trees preserved during development add more value to the lot than post construction



Surveys reveal that homebuyers are attracted to houses that reflect regional styles.

landscaping. Studies show that developed lots with trees sell for an average of 20 to 30 percent more than similarly sized lots without trees.²

Tree planning and preservation can pay off not only on upscale properties, but on small inexpensive lots as well. Conserving trees enhances the appeal and the value of the development and lessens public opposition to new construction. Building with trees should be the rule rather than the exception.

3. Stop Building Look-alike Houses

Consumers are turned off by cookie-cutter subdivisions and the homogeneous look of many new houses. Buyers like vernacular and historic house styles

² See the National Association of Home Builders', *Building Greener Neighborhoods: Trees as Part of the Plan*, which includes case studies documenting the added value trees provide to development. The publication can be ordered by calling the NAHB at: 800-223-2665.



New homes are increasingly re-introducing front porches, and moving garages to the rear.

that characterize the immediate area or region. Jim Constantine, whose firm Community Planning and Research conducts "curb appeal" surveys to discover the types of home designs preferred by customers, says that "buyers are increasingly attracted to vernacular and historical house styles that characterize the immediate area or region."

Today, new houses pretty much look the same no matter where they are constructed. The most prominent architectural feature of most new houses is the front yard garage. Yet visual preference surveys conducted across the country reveal that this is the least liked aspect of many new housing developments.

The growing popularity of neo-traditional design has much to do with the historic styling of new houses that relegates the garages to the rear, the side, or a lane at the back of the property. To better understand the process of adapting vernacular house styles to modern floor plans and interiors, I recommend James W. Wentlings' article on "Using Vernacular Architecture in New Home Design" in the Fall 1995 issue of *Land Development*.

4. Provide Public Plazas and Places to Walk

Walking is the single most popular form of outdoor recreation in America, but new suburbs provide few places to walk and almost no place to mingle except the mall. The American LIVES surveys found that consumers rank "walking and bicycle paths" as one of the top features they desire in new home communities.

Providing bicycle paths and walking trails can yield a wide array of environ-

mental, economic, and physical fitness benefits and also make communities less dependent upon the automobile. This is especially important considering the role that traffic congestion has played in the burgeoning slow growth movement.

Davis, California, for example, a city of 55,000 people near Sacramento has 35 miles of bike lanes (about one-third of the city's 107 mile street network) and another 36 miles of separate off-road bike paths. The city requires employers to provide secure bicycle parking and shower facilities. As a result, more than 20 percent of all trips in the city are by bicycle. The Davis school district has no school buses and provides very little on-site parking for cars. Instead, each school provides a secure, supervised bike rack. Thousands of students ride bikes or walk to school. Building neighborhoods that would allow children to get to school on their own would be enormously attractive to homebuyers — and generate more support for the building industry.

5. Build Town Centers, Not Strip Centers

One surprise in the previously noted American LIVES surveys was the finding that homebuyers prefer “town centers with a village green surrounded by shops and civic buildings to commercial strip malls strung out along major highways.” In line with this, developers, encouraged by a growing number of local planners and proponents of “new urbanism,” are starting to build town centers again.

Of course, people like convenient parking, but two-thirds of those surveyed by American LIVES said small stores and a town center are likely to offer “better services as well as opportunities for socializing with your neighbors.” Schaumburg, Illinois; Boca Raton, Florida; and Bellevue, Washington are three examples of communities that have demolished or retrofitted existing shopping malls to construct mixed-use town centers. Improving the character and arrangement of our commercial areas could help lessen opposition to new development. *Editor's Note: For*

more on creating mixed-use centers, see Richard Untermann's "Center-ing Our Suburbs," in PCJ #22 (Spring 1996).

6. Cooperate With Environmentalists for Mutual Benefit

Developers and environmentalists actually have much in common. What's good for business can also be good for the environment. Yet, innovative developers who would protect the environment are often stymied by inflexible regulations.

Consider street standards. Overly wide streets mean more pavement, more run-off, more tree removal, and more speeding cars. This clearly hurts the environment *and* increases development costs. This is just one example of a number of issues on which builders and environmentalists agree. If builders and environmentalists would spend less time fighting each other and more time seeking common ground, all would benefit.

SUMMING UP:

Today, a growing number of builders recognize that there are attractive, efficient, profitable, and environmentally sensitive alternatives to sprawl. Planners should encourage these innovative builders, and foster creative partnerships among developers, environmentalists, and other concerned citizens. The end result will be communities we can all be proud to live in. ♦

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Editor's Note: This issue's column by Edward McMahon appeared, in slightly different form, in the Spring-Summer 1999 issue of Land Development, a publication of the National Association of Home Builders. Our thanks to the NAHB for permission to publish this article, which we felt many of our readers would find especially interesting.



Online Comments

“I agree the cookie-cutter subdivision house with the garage in the front that has no aesthetic appeal is deplorable. But let us ask ourselves: ‘Is it being consumed in the general market?’... There is an unfortunate underpinning in this whole issue. Americans love their cars. They live further and further away from where they work. They have more cars than eligible drivers per household. And, in the past 3-4 years the 70's mentality of ‘Big Iron’ has returned disguised as an SUV. Americans are not dependent on their cars; they enjoy their cars and will not give them up. Sprawl has been consumer driven.”

— *J. Martin Sanchez, Senior Planner, City of McKinney, Texas*

“Most people aren't aware of the degree to which it is not the market, but bureaucratic regulations — about width of right-of-way, set-backs, sidewalk and boulevard widths, parking, and so forth — that dictate the form of conventional suburban development. Many homebuyers accept designs which surveys prove they don't prefer (as McMahon points out), simply because not enough choice is available.... Another likely reason for the lack of choice is a widespread developer penchant for sticking with the tried and true, and fear of the risks of innovation (risks greatly heightened by a regulatory environment that tends to be hostile to styles other than the conventional ones).”

— *Christopher Leo, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Winnipeg, Manitoba*