

An Analysis of Suburban Sprawl

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If one were to describe the American dream, he would almost immediately begin describing the homogeneous, sprawling stereotype of generic American suburbia. In the 20th century, Americans found a new habitat for themselves. As modes of transportation became more advanced and widespread, Americans were finally able to expand out of walking distance from where they shopped and worked. This newfound freedom allowed for the creation of suburbs, as we now know them. The suburbs quickly became extremely popular, expanding by nearly fifty percent in the mid-1950s alone and housing the majority of Americans by 1970 [Wik]. Most suburbs developed naturally, not initially bounded or constrained to any standards, instead allowed to grow endlessly. The question of responsibility immediately arises, as culpability of these packed, sprawling developments is examined. The problem is quickly traced to the lack of clear foresight by original developers and the plethora of private parties that go on to expand in the same spaces. Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk are at the center of the *New Urbanism* movement, which puts forth an alternative to these expansive communities [Ste04]. Through the careful planning of Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and other New Urbanists, evident in towns like Seaside, Florida and Kentlands, Maryland, it is clear that it is possible to build a new suburban development, while still maintaining a sense of community and coziness. Although developers and local governments employ zoning laws and planning to control suburban sprawl, a completely controlled and micromanaged plan is necessary to prevent private companies from continuously enlarging and over-expanding suburban developments.

Before examining the problems of sprawling suburbs and possible solutions, the history, significance, and popularity of suburbs must be analyzed; it is impossible to generate a solution without first understanding the specifications of the problem. The suburbs saw their greatest growth period following World War II, as communities sprung up to accommodate soldiers returning home and settling down to raise families. In the late 1940s, coinciding with the end of the war, Abraham Levitt and his sons produced Levittowns in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania [Got77, 95-96]. These Levittowns provided a model for all the other suburbs that have become commonplace all over the country.

The popularity of suburbs is attributable to many different factors. After World War II, the soldiers returned to the United States and naturally began to raise families, spurring a drastic population increase. With so many people, there was simply less room left to live comfortably in cities, so American families left urban environments to raise their children in calmer areas. In the same period, the Iron Curtain was drawn, and the United States began a cultural war on the Soviet Union. Instead of promoting community, it was more capitalistic to encourage an ownership society where everyone could own everything. The notion of the American dream became a driving force in society, as virtually everyone pursued this hope. Instead of being a means to the ends, suburban life became the goal; as Mark Gottdiener articulates it, in Levittown “people were enabled to pursue

an American ideal, a private home on Long Island.” [Got77, 96] The drive to fulfill the American dream lead to the phenomenon of Urban Exodus, when the rich abandon cities, leaving behind a poorer urban environment, and thus encouraging more movement to the suburbs. Between the late 1940s and the 1970s, the suburbs became the most desirable place to be, as they were still in commuting distance of metropolitan areas, but provided the safety and comfort of less dense housing.

The utter popularity of the suburbs, however, is not the sole cause of suburban sprawl; much of the problem lies in the original design of the community and how it is subsequently developed. Initially a large portion of land would be apportioned off by the local government and zoned as residential, prohibiting construction of offices, factories, and retail establishments. Some developer would then buy the land and divide it into lots. On most of these lots the developer would build houses along with the necessary infrastructure plumbing and electrical utilities, sidewalks, streetlamps, and roads. After the development was set up and inhabited, spot builders came to the scene and filled the remaining lots with new houses. At the same time, large developers were monitoring trends in housing and development, attempting to predict where people might want to start building houses in the next couple of decades. It is these large developers who are responsible for the concatenation of developments, sprawling them out and spilling them into once rural areas. At the top of the problem are speculators, who buy up land and sell it off, with little regard for regional limitations, such as proximity to utilities and merely diversity of housing. These speculators know that they can make money by buying and selling land, so they do so with little regard for anything else [Got77, 94-108]. This process is cyclical, and each of these types of businessmen is always working to make money by expanding the suburbs.

In order to further understand the problem of suburban sprawl, the actual symptoms must be recognized. The suburban developments described here are so homogenous and uniform that one from California and one from New York would be virtually indistinguishable. These sprawling developments form long, winding, “cookie-cutter” developments, where each house seems like it



Figure 1: An American Cookie-cutter Suburb

was stamped into place. The developments are focused not on the people, but on the cars; without sidewalks or shoulders on the road, the threat of a car driving down the narrow, curvy would intimidate any pedestrian or biker. These developments are comprised of an expanse of identical

streets, with identical lots on each street, with identical houses on each lot. This homogeneity is quite useful. In a process pioneered by Abraham Levitt, the houses are built according to principles of modular unit building, in which workmen are trained to build specific parts of houses, so that they can erect many houses very quickly [Got77, 96]. Without this process, it would have been impossible to house enough people in the suburbs, because it would have taken far too long to draw out unique plans and build each house individually. Another glaring problem of these sprawling developments is the utter dependence on automobiles. The residential areas are so large that a car is required for navigating the maze of houses, let alone getting groceries, taking children to school, or going to work. These developments have nothing to create cohesion among the residents; they are completely decentralized, so there is nowhere for a community to be established.

After making observations in line with these mentioned, a handful of architects in the late 1970s began to start a movement in search of the roots of community planning to make a development with the benefits of both suburban and urban life. This movement became the New Urbanist movement and was realized first by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk's concept of the traditional neighborhood development [Tu99, 425-7]. In order to find the solution to the sprawling suburb, these New Urbanists analyzed pre-World War II urban planning to find a more venerable city plan. They studied the early twentieth century urban plans of Ebenezer Howard and Raymond Unwin from England, and Frederick Law Olmstead, Clarence Stein and John Nolan from America. Instead of blandness, the New Urbanists strived for an interesting, multidimensional look; *Consumer Reports* magazine wrote of them in 1997,

These neotraditional places would look and work like the back streets of a comfortable pre-World War II city, with a rich mix of housing types, cultural centers, and shopping districts and a vibrant public personality [Fur97, 203, qtd].

They decided that through a retro look, they could recall the milieu of a quaint European village that did not suffer from problems of dehumanization.

In summary, the problems that Duany and Plater-Zyberk identified with suburban development were omnipresent in their own time and remain the norm today. Firstly, the sprawling suburban development stretches for miles in every direction, creating an amorphous mass of suburbanization. The boundaries between developments are often blurred or not present at all, leading to what distinguished architect Peter Calthorpe calls a "crisis of place" taking place in America [Fur97, 204]. This crisis of place not only gives suburbs a bland and cramped feeling, but it is also responsible for a lack of community there, so one of the primary aims of the New Urbanist movement is to enforce a strong sense of camaraderie in their planned developments by luring people out of their homes. Secondly, so much sprawl, when not complemented by the basic necessities of a neighborhood, means everyone must use a car to go anywhere, even to simply take their children to a playground. Thus a major priority of the movement is to optimize transportation flow and centrality of the space so that it would again be possible to have a productive day without making use of an automobile. This concern was of so much importance that the movement is sometimes called transit-oriented development [Ste04]. Finally, the New Urbanists realized that suburbs were experiencing a waning sense of aestheticism. Instead of building dynamic houses in interesting ways, sprawling suburbs were comprised of a static image, copied and repeated hundreds of times following simple lines. All houses were the same distance away from the road, displaying only a modicum of landscaping craftsmanship, with very little accent or ornamentation on the exterior of the house. In fact, a house, when viewed from the street, would often seem to be dominated by its garage, further enforcing the notion of an automobile-centric society. If one were to stand at the

end of a street and look down at all the houses, it would not look like a dwelling space; it would have the unsettling appearance of infinite regress, as if a few houses were just reflected continuously to the horizon. These developments are also marked by a noticeable dearth of trees and foliage, adding to the already unavoidably unnatural atmosphere. Solving these problems required Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and the other New Urbanists to break down and analyze the problem of suburbs.

Duany and Plater-Zyberk came up with a thirteen guidelines to build a strong, cohesive neighborhood, eliminating all the problems of sprawling suburbs. To be a successful New Urbanist neighborhood, a development must adopt most of these principals authentically, convincingly, and elegantly. First, a town must have a clear central building, structure, or area to allow for socialization and the assertion of a focal point for the community. Second, all of the residences must be within about a five-minute walk from the center, giving the development a maximum radius of about half a mile. Third, to give the community an urban feel, a variety of residencesingle houses, row houses, and apartmentsshould be used to cut down on repetition and conformity. Fourth, there

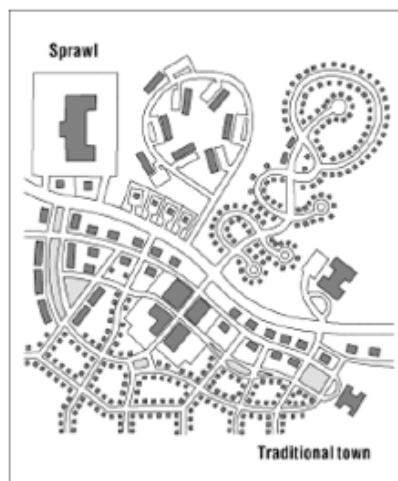


Figure 2: Contrasting sprawling and traditional neighborhoods shows that organization is key.

should be small shops to provide for the daily needs of residents, so a huge shopping escapade is not required every other week. Fifth, houses should not have integrated garages, but an optional building behind the house that can be used as a shed, workspace, or garage. Sixth, schools should be placed so that most of the children in the development could get there in a five-minute walk. Seventh, there should be playgrounds or small parks within five hundred feet of each house. Eighth, in order to ease pedestrianism, the development should be connected with a network of roads and footpaths, so that people can easily walk around safely. Ninth, also for the sake of pedestrians and bikers, the streets should be narrow and lined with trees to discourage drivers from speeding through the area. Tenth, buildings at the center of town should be positioned such that they create a well-defined outdoor space to allow for easy convocation. Eleventh, parking lots and the optional garages should not be behind or to the sides of buildings, but in back, as they are eyesores and should be shunned. Twelfth, prominent sites, like those in the town center, should be reserved for public buildings to provide for community functions and educational spaces. Thirteenth, the neigh-

borhood should be self-governing, since each development would have different needs for security, maintenance, and taxation [Ste04]. These thirteen guidelines successfully work to solve problems of sprawl, homogeny, automobile circulation, community, and aesthetics in suburban developments.

While the developments of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk may seem to have their own homogeny, it is not on a level perceivable by the residents. That is to say, while looking at all of the communities designed by the two, it is clear that they all function and are designed similarly; however, from the myopic view of an inhabitant, only the immediate comfort and variety



Figure 3: An aerial view of Seaside, Florida.

is apparent. In this way, New Urbanism leaves the homogeny of the United States suburbs possible, while eliminating the symptoms of sprawl. The towns of Seaside, Florida and Kentlands, Maryland are perfect examples of the towns designed by Duany and Plater-Zyberk. These towns conform directly to the thirteen principles of New Urbanism. Seaside, Florida, conceptualized in the late 1970s and realized in 1981, resides on an eighty-acre lot on Floridas coastline [Ste04]. In addition to adhering to the rules of an Urbanist community, the delegation of Seasides design afforded it increased variety. Instead of designing all of the houses themselves or contracting the job out to a developer, Duany, Zyberk, and the other architects on the project decided that each house would be designed by a unique architect to ensure the greatest range in style and appearance. However, rules were laid to ensure a certain degree of conformity, lest the community fall into a disarray of chaotic visual cacophony. Kentlands, Maryland is considered a textbook example of a New Urbanist town. Kentlands was begun in 1991 and by 1998 filled a 352 acre plot with 1200 housing units and 355,000 square feet of retail establishments [Tu99, 429]. Enforcing a strong community, approximately twenty-eight percent of the Kentlands development is devoted to public open space, including a wetland reserve and greenbelts to give the sub-neighborhoods their own individuality [Tu99, 429]. The layout of the houses conforms perfectly to the New Urbanist principles. All the houses are only slightly set back from the street and are adorned with white picket fences, making the residents feel comfortable to spend time in their yards without feeling overexposed. Instead of a driveway for each house, there are alleys providing vehicular access. The streets are narrow and there are more than three miles of jogging trails, making Kentlands ideal for pedestrians and runners. These towns of Kentlands, Maryland and Seaside, Florida are small utopias, especially when compared to their competition of sprawling developments.

These New Urbanist buildings are built and maintained under what seem like pedantic, fastidious rules. However, this extreme micromanaging of every building, road, and open space allows for



Figure 4: A jogger in Kentlands, Maryland.

successful dense housing in a suburban environment without sacrificing aesthetics and community. The utopian communities established by Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zybek, and their colleagues and contemporaries do more than just provide a few grains of utopian salt to the sprawling suburban sea; they provide examples that all communities can implement in one way or another. Robert Steuteville cleverly notes, “Just as Starbucks raised the quality of coffee in competing restaurants and cafés, mainstream developers are adopting new urban design elements such as garages in the rear of houses, neighborhood greens and mixed-use town centers.” These few Urbanist creations have made waves in city planning all over the country. Many suburbs plagued by sprawl are working to build strong villages as a central base for the residents to socialize and unify. Ironically it is the strict rules imposed by this movement that promotes the American dream in ways freely acting capitalists were never able.

References

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