

SUBURBAN NATION: THE RISE OF SPRAWL AND THE DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM,

by Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck. North Point Press, 200)

This book was written by three well-known architect-planners, who designed and helped develop over 200 planned communities and revitalized urban centers across the nation. They are cofounders of the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU), an organization dedicated to community-friendly “smart growth.” Although, as a transportation professional, I was familiar with the thesis and the arguments made, I found the concrete examples of “good” and “bad” communities and the graphics very instructive. Although the book sometimes reads like a manifesto mirroring the writers’ beliefs and biases which culminate in the Charter for New Urbanism in Appendix B, it is written with enthusiasm and conviction and redeemed by the logical organization of chapter topics and subtopics, by numerous graphics illustrating their points, and by copious notes and scholarly references.

In the past decade, “suburban sprawl” has been transformed from the yuppie ideal of single-family homes on large, green lots outside congested urban centers, into a code word with many negative connotations. I found the generalizations in the book unsettling and overdone: “In the sparse universe of sprawl, the elementary particle is the single-family house”... and “Americans have the finest private realm, but our public realm is brutal.” The primary adverse impact of urban and suburban sprawl is environmental degradation: although only 5% of the land area in the USA is built-up, recent growth has accelerated the loss of wetlands, wildlife habitats and watersheds, especially in fast growing sun-belt states like Florida and California. Its opposite is “sustainable growth,” an agenda for community- and environmentally-friendly development and renewal, espoused by Vice President Gore’s initiatives and by the Transportation Efficiency Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) in 1998. The authors strive to first analyze the plethora of interrelated socio-economic and environmental ills spawned by the spread of suburbia, and then to provide prescriptive “how-to” examples of well thought-out urban and community development, including planned economic growth, transportation, and civic services.

The authors blame “sprawl” and misguided planning by narrow disciplinary specialists for a broad range of societal and environmental ills, from the loss of green fields and environmental degradation, to the “mallings” of America and the decay of urban centers. At the core of this Gordian knot is “automobility” in transportation policies and infrastructure subsidies, seen here as a twin of sprawl and a cause of the lack of public transit that should provide both mobility and access to jobs. Poor transportation planning to accommodate low density housing in isolated suburbs, and the lack of people-friendly, walkable neighborhoods, are seen as causing congestion and gridlock, long commutes, air pollution, as well as gobbling up wetlands and agricultural land.

This book is not original in either outlook or substance, but one of dozens written in the past decade by authors such as Jane Holtz Kay (*Asphalt Nation*), J.H. Kunstler (*The Geography of Nowhere: the Rise and Decline of America’s Manmade Landscape*); and *Home from Nowhere: Our Everyday World for the Twenty first Century*), and others listed in a lengthy bibliography.

However, what distinguishes this book, in my opinion, is the recognition of the multifaceted and complex fabric of urban and suburban planning and historic transportation and economic (tax, zoning, permitting) policies at federal, state and local levels that underlie the built environment in USA. Ultimately this is a nation of individuals freely making lifestyle choices, and not constrained by either landform, or land and water availability, as is Japan or Europe. I was bothered by the authors’ blanket condemnation of government policies and planning at all levels (“In sum: the federal government is distant, local government is myopic and regional government is lacking”), but encouraged that they dared to make explicit state and federal policy recommendations for a citizens’ and planners’ action platform in Chapter 11.

In advocating mixed-use communities and bottom-up rezoning combined with regional transportation and development planning, the authors make a compelling case for their “TRANSECT” concept, which might be loosely paraphrased as “think globally, act locally, but plan regionally.” This concept involves joint planning and coordinated development by multidisciplinary teams and recognizes a full spectrum of “appropriate” planning and design principles ranging from outlying suburbs to downtowns. An excellent short overview of these issues is provided by Donald Chen in his December 2000 *Scientific American* article “The Science of Smart Growth,” including a text-box describing the TRANSECT concept by the chief author, Andres Duany.

Ample reference materials on the ills of transportation and socioeconomic and cultural ills rooted in urban sprawl can be found on several websites, including www.sprawlwatch.org/, www.smartgrowth.org/, and www.transact.org/

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