

Home From Nowhere

Can the momentum of sprawl be halted? America's zoning laws, intended to control the baneful effects of industry, have mutated, in the view of one architecture critic, into a system that corrodes civic life, outlaws the human scale, defeats tradition and authenticity, and confounds our yearning for an everyday environment worthy of our affection

by James Howard Kunstler



AMERICANS sense that something is wrong with the places where we live and work and go about our daily business. We hear this unhappiness expressed in phrases like "no sense of place" and "the loss of community." We drive up and down the gruesome, tragic suburban boulevards of commerce, and we're overwhelmed at the fantastic, awesome, stupefying ugliness of absolutely everything in sight -- the fry pits, the big-box stores, the office units, the lube joints, the carpet warehouses, the parking lagoons, the jive plastic townhouse clusters, the uproar of signs, the highway itself clogged with cars -- as though the whole thing had been designed by some diabolical force bent on making human beings miserable. And naturally, this experience can make us feel glum about the nature and future of our civilization.

When we drive around and look at all this cartoon architecture and other junk that we've smeared all over the landscape, we register it as ugliness. This ugliness is the surface expression of deeper problems -- problems that relate to the issue of our national character. The highway strip is not just a sequence of eyesores. The pattern it represents is also economically catastrophic, an environmental calamity, socially devastating, and spiritually degrading.

It is no small irony that during the period of America's greatest prosperity, in the decades following the Second World War, we put up almost nothing but the cheapest possible buildings, particularly civic buildings. Compare any richly embellished firehouse or post office built in 1904 with its dreary concrete-box counterpart today. Compare the home of a small-town bank president of the 1890s, with its massive masonry walls and complex roof articulation, with the flimsy home of a 1990s business leader, made of two-by-fours, Sheetrock, and fake fanlight windows. When we were a far less wealthy nation, we built things with the expectation that they would endure. To throw away money (painfully acquired) and effort (painfully expended) on

something certain to fall apart in thirty years would have seemed immoral, if not insane, in our great-grandparents' day.

The buildings our predecessors constructed paid homage to history in their design, including elegant solutions to age-old problems posed by the cycles of weather and light, and they paid respect to the future in the sheer expectation that they would endure through the lifetimes of the people who built them. They therefore embodied a sense of chronological connectivity, one of the fundamental patterns of the universe: an understanding that time is a defining dimension of existence -- particularly the existence of living things, such as human beings, who miraculously pass into life and then inevitably pass out of it.

Chronological connectivity lends meaning and dignity to our little lives. It charges the present with a vivid validation of our own aliveness. It puts us in touch with the ages and with the eternities, suggesting that we are part of a larger and more significant organism. It even suggests that the larger organism we are part of *cares* about us, and that, in turn, we should respect ourselves and our fellow creatures and all those who will follow us in time, as those preceding us respected those who followed them. In short, chronological connectivity puts us in touch with the holy. It is at once humbling and exhilarating. I say this as someone who has never followed any formal religious practice. Connection with the past and the future is a pathway that charms us in the direction of sanity and grace.

The antithesis to this can be seen in the way we have built things since 1945. We reject the past and the future, and this repudiation is manifest in our graceless constructions. Our residential, commercial, and civic buildings are constructed with the fully conscious expectation that they will disintegrate in a few decades. This condition even has a name: "design life." Strip malls and elementary schools have short design lives. They are expected to fall apart in less than fifty years. Since these things are not expected to speak to any era but our own, we seem unwilling to put money or effort into their embellishment. Nor do we care about traditional solutions to the problems of weather and light, because we have technology to mitigate these problems -- namely, central heating and electricity. Thus in many new office buildings the windows don't open. In especially bad buildings, like the average Wal-Mart, windows are dispensed with nearly altogether. This process of disconnection from the past and the future, and from the organic patterns of weather and light, done for the sake of expedience, ends up diminishing us spiritually, impoverishing us socially, and degrading the aggregate set of cultural patterns that we call civilization.

Destroying the Grand Union Hotel

THE everyday environments of our time, the places where we live and work, are composed of dead patterns. These environments infect the patterns around them with disease and ultimately with contagious deadness, and deaden us in the process. The patterns that emerge fail to draw us in, fail to invite us to participate in the connectivity of the world. They frustrate our innate biological and psychological needs -- for instance, our phototropic inclination to seek natural daylight, our need to feel protected, our need to keep a destination in sight as we move about town. They violate human scale. They are devoid of charm.

Our streets used to be charming and beautiful. The public realm of the street was understood to function as an outdoor room. Like any room, it required walls to define the essential void of the room itself. Where I live, Saratoga Springs, New York, a magnificent building called the Grand Union Hotel once existed. Said to have been the largest hotel in the world in the late nineteenth century, it occupied a six-acre site in the heart of town. The hotel consisted of a set of narrow buildings that lined the outside of an unusually large superblock. Inside the block was a semi-public parklike courtyard. The street sides of the hotel incorporated a gigantic verandah twenty feet deep, with a roof that was three stories high and supported by columns. This facade functioned as a marvelous street wall, active and permeable. The hotel's size (a central cupola reached seven stories) was appropriate to the scale of the town's main street, called Broadway. For much of the year the verandah was filled with people sitting perhaps eight feet above the sidewalk grade, talking to one another while they watched the pageant of life on the street. These verandah-sitters were protected from the weather by the roof, and protected from the sun by elm trees along the sidewalk. The orderly rows of elms performed an additional architectural function. The trunks were straight and round, like columns, reiterating and reinforcing the pattern of the hotel facade, while the crowns formed a vaulted canopy over the sidewalk, pleasantly filtering the sunlight for pedestrians as well as hotel patrons. All these patterns worked to enhance the lives of everybody in town -- a common laborer on his way home as well as a railroad millionaire rocking on the verandah. In doing so, they supported civic life as a general proposition. They nourished our civilization.

When I say that the facade of the Grand Union Hotel was permeable, I mean that the building contained activities that attracted people inside, and had a number of suitably embellished entrances that allowed people to pass in and out of the building gracefully and enjoyably. Underneath the verandah, half a story below the sidewalk grade, a number of shops operated, selling cigars, newspapers, clothing, and other goods. Thus the street wall was permeable at more than one level and had a multiplicity of uses.

The courtyard park that occupied the inside of the six-acre block had winding gravel paths lined with benches among more towering elm trees. It was a tranquil place of repose -- though sometimes band concerts and balls were held there. Any reasonably attired person could walk in off the street, pass through the hotel lobby, and enjoy the interior park. This courtyard had even-more-overt characteristics of a big outdoor room than the street did. It was much more enclosed. Like the street facade, the courtyard facade featured a broad, permeable verandah with a high roof. The verandah functioned as a mediating zone between the outdoor world and the world of the hotel's interior, with its many public, semi-public, and private rooms. One passed from public to private in a logical sequence, and the transition was eased at each stage by conscious embellishment. The order of things was, by nature, more formal than what we are accustomed to in our sloppy, clownish, informal age. The layers of intersecting patterns at work in this place were extraordinarily rich. The patterns had a quality of great aliveness, meaning they worked wonderfully as an ensemble, each pattern doing its job while it supported and reinforced the other patterns. The hotel was therefore a place of spectacular charm. It was demolished in 1953.

Although nothing lasts forever, it was tragic that this magnificent building was destroyed less than a hundred years after it was completed. In 1953 America stood at the brink of the greatest building spree in world history, and the very qualities that had made the Grand Union Hotel so wonderful were antithetical to all the new stuff that America was about to build. The town demolished it with a kind of mad glee. What replaced the hotel was a strip mall anchored by, of

all things, a Grand Union supermarket. This shopping plaza was prototypical for its time. Tens of thousands of strip malls like it have been built all over America since then. It is in every one of its details a perfect piece of junk. It is the anti-place.

What had been the heart and soul of the town was now converted into a kind of mini-Outer Mongolia. The strip-mall buildings were set back from Broadway 150 feet, and a parking lot filled the gap. The street and the buildings commenced a nonrelationship. Since the new buildings were one story high, their scale bore no relation to the scale of the town's most important street. They failed to create a street wall. The perception that the street functioned as an outdoor room was lost. The space between the buildings and the street now had one function: automobile storage. The street, and consequently the public realm in general, was degraded by the design of the mall. As the street's importance as a public place declined, townspeople ceased to care what happened in it. If it became jammed with cars, so much the better, because individual cars were now understood to be not merely personal transportation but personal home-delivery vehicles, enabling customers to haul away enormous volumes of merchandise very efficiently, at no cost to the merchandiser -- which was a great boon for business. That is why the citizens of Saratoga Springs in 1953 were willing to sacrifice the town's most magnificent building. We could simply throw away the past. The owners of the supermarket that anchored the mall didn't live in town. They didn't care what effect their design considerations had on the town. They certainly didn't care about the town's past, and their interest in the town's future had largely to do with technicalities of selling dog food and soap flakes.

What has happened to the interrelation of healthy, living patterns of human ecology in the town where I live has happened all over the country. Almost everywhere the larger patterns are in such a sorry state that the details seem irrelevant. When Saratoga Springs invested tens of thousands of dollars in Victorian-style streetlamps in an effort to create instant charm, the gesture seemed pathetic, because the larger design failures were ignored. It is hard to overstate how ridiculous these lampposts look in the context of our desolate streets and the cheap, inappropriate new buildings amid their parking lots in what remains of our downtown. The lamppost scheme was like putting Band-Aids on someone who had tripped and fallen on his chainsaw.

The one-story-high Grand Union strip-mall building must be understood as a pattern in itself, a dead one, which infects surrounding town tissue with its deadness. Putting up one-story commercial buildings eliminated a large number of live bodies downtown, and undermined the vitality of the town. One-story mall buildings became ubiquitous across the United States after the war, a predictable byproduct of the zoning zeitgeist that deemed shopping and apartment living to be unsuitable neighbors.

Creating Someplace

ALMOST everywhere in the United States laws prohibit building the kinds of places that Americans themselves consider authentic and traditional. Laws prevent the building of places that human beings can feel good in and can afford to live in. Laws forbid us to build places that are worth caring about.

Is Main Street your idea of a nice business district? Sorry, your zoning laws won't let you build it, or even extend it where it already exists. Is Elm Street your idea of a nice place to live -- you know, houses with front porches on a tree-lined street? Sorry, Elm Street cannot be assembled

under the rules of large-lot zoning and modern traffic engineering. All you can build where I live is another version of Los Angeles -- the zoning laws say so.

This is not a gag. Our zoning laws are essentially a manual of instructions for creating the stuff of our communities. Most of these laws have been in place only since the Second World War. For the previous 300-odd years of American history we didn't have zoning laws. We had a popular consensus about the right way to assemble a town or a city. Our best Main Streets and Elm Streets were created not by municipal ordinances but by cultural agreement. Everybody agreed that buildings on Main Street ought to be more than one story tall; that corner groceries were good to have in residential neighborhoods; that streets ought to intersect with other streets to facilitate movement; that sidewalks were necessary, and that orderly rows of trees planted along them made the sidewalks much more pleasant; that roofs should be pitched to shed rain and snow; that doors should be conspicuous, so that one could easily find the entrance to a building; that windows should be vertical, to dignify a house. Everybody agreed that communities needed different kinds of housing to meet the needs of different kinds of families and individuals, and the market was allowed to supply them. Our great-grandparents didn't have to argue endlessly over these matters of civic design. Nor did they have to reinvent civic design every fifty years because no one could remember what had been agreed on.

Everybody agreed that both private and public buildings should be ornamented and embellished to honor the public realm of the street, so town halls, firehouses, banks, and homes were built that today are on the National Register of Historic Places. We can't replicate any of that stuff. Our laws actually forbid it. Want to build a bank in Anytown, USA? Fine. Make sure that it's surrounded by at least an acre of parking, and that it's set back from the street at least seventy-five feet. (Of course, it will be one story.) The instructions for a church or a muffler shop are identical. That's exactly what your laws tell you to build. If you deviate from the template, you will not receive a building permit.

Therefore, if you want to make your community better, begin at once by throwing out your zoning laws. Don't revise them -- get rid of them. Set them on fire if possible and make a public ceremony of it; public ceremony is a great way to announce the birth of a new consensus. While you're at it, throw out your "master plan" too. It's invariably just as bad. Replace these things with a traditional town-planning ordinance that prescribes a more desirable everyday environment.

The practice of zoning started early in the twentieth century, at a time when industry had reached an enormous scale. The noisy, smelly, dirty operations of gigantic factories came to overshadow and oppress all other aspects of city life, and civic authorities decided that they had to be separated from everything else, especially residential neighborhoods. One could say that single-use zoning, as it came to be called, was a reasonable response to the social and economic experiment called industrialism.

After the Second World War, however, that set of ideas was taken to an absurd extreme. Zoning itself began to overshadow all the historic elements of civic art and civic life. For instance, because the democratic masses of people used their cars to shop, and masses of cars required parking lots, shopping was declared an obnoxious industrial activity around which people shouldn't be allowed to live. This tended to destroy age-old physical relationships between shopping and living, as embodied, say, in Main Street.

What zoning produces is suburban sprawl, which must be understood as the product of a particular set of instructions. Its chief characteristics are the strict separation of human activities, mandatory driving to get from one activity to another, and huge supplies of free parking. After all, the basic idea of zoning is that every activity demands a separate zone of its own. For people to live around shopping would be harmful and indecent. Better not even to allow them within walking distance of it. They'll need their cars to haul all that stuff home anyway. While we're at it, let's separate the homes by income gradients. Don't let the \$75,000-a-year families live near the \$200,000-a-year families -- they'll bring down property values -- and for God's sake don't let a \$25,000-a-year recent college graduate or a \$19,000-a-year widowed grandmother on Social Security live near any of them. There goes the neighborhood! Now put all the workplaces in separate office "parks" or industrial "parks," and make sure nobody can walk to them either. As for public squares, parks, and the like -- forget it. We can't afford them, because we spent all our funds paving the four-lane highways and collector roads and parking lots, and laying sewer and water lines out to the housing subdivisions, and hiring traffic cops to regulate the movement of people in their cars going back and forth among these segregated activities.

The model of the human habitat dictated by zoning is a formless, soul-less, centerless, demoralizing mess. It bankrupts families and townships. It disables whole classes of decent, normal citizens. It ruins the air we breathe. It corrupts and deadens our spirit.

The construction industry likes it, because it requires stupendous amounts of cement, asphalt, and steel and a lot of heavy equipment and personnel to push all this stuff into place. Car dealers love it. Politicians used to love it, because it produced big short-term profits and short-term revenue gains, but now they're all mixed up about it, because the voters who live in suburban sprawl don't want more of the same built around them -- which implies that at some dark level suburban-sprawl dwellers are quite conscious of sprawl's shortcomings. They have a word for it: "growth." They're now against growth. Their lips curl when they utter the word. They sense that new construction is only going to make the place where they live worse. They're convinced that the future is going to be worse than the past. And they're right, because the future has been getting worse throughout their lifetime. Growth means only more traffic, bigger parking lots, and buildings ever bigger and uglier than the monstrosities of the sixties, seventies, and eighties.

So they become NIMBYs ("not in my back yard") and BANANAs ("build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything"). If they're successful in their NIMBYism, they'll use their town government to torture developers (people who create growth) with layer upon layer of bureaucratic rigmarole, so that only a certified masochist would apply to build something there. Eventually the unwanted growth leapfrogs over them to cheap, vacant rural land farther out, and then all the new commuters in the farther-out suburb choke the NIMBYs' roads anyway, to get to the existing mall in NIMBYville.

Unfortunately, the NIMBYs don't have a better model in mind. They go to better places on holiday weekends -- Nantucket, St. Augustine, little New England towns -- but they think of these places as special exceptions. It never occurs to NIMBY tourists that their own home places could be that good too. *Make Massapequa like Nantucket? Where would I park?* Exactly.

These special places are modeled on a pre-automobile template. They were designed for a human scale and in some respects maintained that way. Such a thing is unimaginable to us today. We must design for the automobile, because...because all our laws and habits tell us we must. Notice that you can get to all these special places in your car. It's just a nuisance to use the car while

you're there -- so you stash it someplace for the duration of your visit and get around perfectly happily on foot, by bicycle, in a cab, or on public transit. The same is true, by the way, of London, Paris, and Venice.

The future will not allow us to continue using cars the way we've been accustomed to in the unprecedented conditions of the late twentieth century. So, whether we adore suburbia or not, we're going to have to live differently. Rather than being a tragedy, this is actually an extremely lucky situation, a wonderful opportunity, because we are now free to redesign our everyday world in a way that is going to make all classes of Americans much happier. We do not have to come up with tools and techniques never seen before. The principles of town planning can be found in excellent books written before the Second World War. Three-dimensional models of the kinds of places that can result from these principles exist in the form of historic towns and cities. In fact, after two generations of architectural amnesia, this knowledge has been reinstalled in the brains of professional designers in active practice all over the country, and these designers have already begun to create an alternate model of the human habitat for the twenty-first century.

What's missing is a more widespread consensus -- a cultural agreement -- in favor of the new model, and the will to go forward with it. Large numbers of ordinary citizens haven't heard the news. They're stuck in old habits and stuck in the psychology of previous investment; political leadership reflects this all over America. NIMBYism is one of the results, a form of hysterical cultural paralysis. *Don't build anything! Don't change anything!* The consensus that exists, therefore, is a consensus of fear, and that is obviously not good enough. We need a consensus of hope.

In the absence of a widespread consensus about how to build a better everyday environment, we'll have to replace the old set of rules with an explicit new set -- or, to put it a slightly different way, replace zoning laws with principles of civic art. It will take time for these principles to become second nature again, to become common sense. It may not happen at all, in which case we ought to be very concerned. In the event that this body of ideas gains widespread acceptance, think of all the time and money we'll save! No more endless nights down at the zoning board watching the NIMBYs scream at the mall developers. No more real-estate-related lawsuits. We will have time, instead, to become better people and to enjoy our lives on a planet full of beauty and mystery. Here, then, are some of the things citizens will need to know in order to create a new model for the everyday environment of America.

The New Urbanism

THE principles apply equally to villages, towns, and cities. Most of them apply even to places of extraordinarily high density, like Manhattan, with added provisions that I will not go into here, in part because special cases like Manhattan are so rare, and in part because I believe that the scale of even our greatest cities will necessarily have to become smaller in the future, at no loss to their dynamism (London and Paris are plenty dynamic, with few buildings over ten stories high).

The pattern under discussion here has been called variously neo-traditional planning, traditional neighborhood development, low-density urbanism, transit-oriented development, the new urbanism, and just plain civic art. Its principles produce settings that resemble American towns from prior to the Second World War.

1. The basic unit of planning is the neighborhood. A neighborhood standing alone is a hamlet or village. A cluster of neighborhoods becomes a town. Clusters of a great many neighborhoods become a city. The population of a neighborhood can vary depending on local conditions.
2. The neighborhood is limited in physical size, with well-defined edges and a focused center. The size of a neighborhood is defined as a five-minute walking distance (or a quarter mile) from the edge to the center and a ten-minute walk edge to edge. Human scale is the standard for proportions in buildings and their accessories. Automobiles and other wheeled vehicles are permitted, but they do not take precedence over human needs, including aesthetic needs. The neighborhood contains a public-transit stop.
3. The secondary units of planning are corridors and districts. Corridors form the boundaries between neighborhoods, both connecting and defining them. Corridors can incorporate natural features like streams and canyons. They can take the form of parks, nature preserves, travel corridors, railroad lines, or some combination of these. In towns and cities a neighborhood or parts of neighborhoods can compose a district. Districts are made up of streets or ensembles of streets where special activities get preferential treatment. The French Quarter of New Orleans is an example of a district. It is a whole neighborhood dedicated to entertainment, in which housing, shops, and offices are also integral. A corridor can also be a district -- for instance, a major shopping avenue between adjoining neighborhoods.
4. The neighborhood is emphatically mixed-use and provides housing for people with different incomes. Buildings may be various in function but must be compatible with one another in size and in their relation to the street. The needs of daily life are accessible within the five-minute walk. Commerce is integrated with residential, business, and even manufacturing use, though not necessarily on the same street in a given neighborhood. Apartments are permitted over stores. Forms of housing are mixed, including apartments, duplex and single-family houses, accessory apartments, and outbuildings. (Over time streets will inevitably evolve to become less or more desirable. But attempts to preserve property values by mandating minimum-square-footage requirements, outlawing rental apartments, or formulating other strategies to exclude lower-income residents must be avoided. Even the best streets in the world's best towns can accommodate people of various incomes.)
5. Buildings are disciplined on their lots in order to define public space successfully. The street is understood to be the pre-eminent form of public space, and the buildings that define it are expected to honor and embellish it.
6. The street pattern is conceived as a network in order to create the greatest number of alternative routes from one part of the neighborhood to another. This has the beneficial effect of relieving traffic congestion. The network may be a grid. Networks based on a grid must be modified by parks, squares, diagonals, T intersections, rotaries, and other devices that relieve the grid's tendency to monotonous regularity. The streets exist in a hierarchy from broad boulevards to narrow lanes and alleys. In a town or a city limited-access highways may exist only within a corridor, preferably in the form of parkways. Cul-de-sacs are strongly discouraged except under extraordinary circumstances -- for example, where rugged topography requires them.
7. Civic buildings, such as town halls, churches, schools, libraries, and museums, are placed on preferential building sites, such as the frontage of squares, in neighborhood centers, and where

street vistas terminate, in order to serve as landmarks and reinforce their symbolic importance. Buildings define parks and squares, which are distributed throughout the neighborhood and appropriately designed for recreation, repose, periodic commercial uses, and special events such as political meetings, concerts, theatricals, exhibitions, and fairs. Because streets will differ in importance, scale, and quality, what is appropriate for a part of town with small houses may not be appropriate as the town's main shopping street. These distinctions are properly expressed by physical design.

8. In the absence of a consensus about the appropriate decoration of buildings, an architectural code may be devised to establish some fundamental unities of massing, fenestration, materials, and roof pitch, within which many variations may function harmoniously.

Under the regime of zoning and the professional overspecialization that it fostered, all streets were made as wide as possible because the specialist in charge -- the traffic engineer -- was concerned solely with the movement of cars and trucks. In the process much of the traditional decor that made streets pleasant for people was gotten rid of. For instance, street trees were eliminated. Orderly rows of mature trees can improve even the most dismal street by softening hard edges and sunblasted bleakness. Under postwar engineering standards street trees were deemed a hazard to motorists and chopped down in many American towns.

Accommodating Automobiles

THE practice of maximizing car movement at the expense of all other concerns was applied with particular zeal to suburban housing subdivisions. Suburban streets were given the characteristics of county highways, though children played in them. Suburban developments notoriously lack parks. The spacious private lots were supposed to make up for the lack of parks, but children have a tendency to play in the street anyway -- bicycles and roller skates don't work well on the lawn. Out in the subdivisions, where trees along the sides of streets were often expressly forbidden, we see those asinine exercises in romantic landscaping that attempt to recapitulate the forest primeval in clumps of ornamental juniper. In a setting so inimical to walking, sidewalks were often deemed a waste of money. In the new urbanism the meaning of the street as the essential fabric of the public realm is restored. The space created is understood to function as an outdoor room, and building facades are understood to be street walls.

Thoroughfares are distinguished by their character as well as by their capacity. The hierarchy of streets begins with the boulevard, featuring express lanes in the center, local lanes on the sides, and tree-planted medians between the express and local lanes, with parallel parking along all curbs. Next in the hierarchy is the multilane avenue with a median. Then comes a main shopping street, with no median. This is followed by two or more orders of ordinary streets (apt to be residential in character), and finally the lane or alley, which intersects blocks and becomes the preferred location for garages and accessory apartments.

Parallel parking is emphatically permitted along the curbs of all streets, except under the most extraordinary conditions. Parallel parking is desirable for two reasons: parked cars create a physical barrier and psychological buffer that protects pedestrians on the sidewalk from moving vehicles; and a rich supply of parallel parking can eliminate the need for parking lots, which are extremely destructive of the civic fabric. Anyone who thinks that parallel parking "ruins" a residential street should take a look at some of the most desirable real estate in America:

Georgetown, Beacon Hill, Nob Hill, Alexandria, Charleston, Savannah, Annapolis, Princeton, Greenwich Village, Marblehead. All permit parallel parking.

Residential streets can and should be narrower than current specifications permit. In general, cars need not move at speeds greater than 20 m.p.h. within a neighborhood. Higher speeds can be reserved for boulevards or parkways, which occupy corridors. Within neighborhoods the explicit intent is to calm and tame vehicular traffic. This is achieved by the use of corners with sharp turning radii, partly textured pavements, and T intersections. The result of these practices is a more civilized street.

Even under ideal circumstances towns and cities will have some streets that are better than others. Over time streets tend to sort themselves out in a hierarchy of quality as well as size. The new urbanism recognizes this tendency, especially in city commercial districts, and designates streets A or B. B streets may contain less-desirable structures -- for instance, parking-garage entrances, pawnshops, a homeless shelter, a Burger King -- without disrupting the A streets in proximity. This does not mean that B streets are allowed to be deliberately squalid. Even here the public realm deserves respect. Cars are still not given dominion. A decent standard of detailing applies to B streets with respect to sidewalks, lighting, and even trees.

Property Values and Affordable Housing

ZONING required the artificial creation of "affordable housing," because the rules of zoning prohibited the very conditions that formerly made housing available to all income groups and integrated it into the civic fabric. Accessory apartments became illegal in most neighborhoods, particularly in new suburbs. Without provision for apartments, an unmarried sixth-grade schoolteacher could not afford to live near the children she taught. Nor could the housecleaner and the gardener -- they had to commute for half an hour from some distant low-income ghetto. In many localities apartments over stores were also forbidden under the zoning laws. Few modern shopping centers are more than one story in height, and I know of no suburban malls that incorporate housing. In eliminating arrangements like these we have eliminated the most common form of affordable housing, found virtually all over the rest of the world. By zoning these things out, we've zoned out Main Street, USA.

The best way to make housing affordable is to build or restore compact, mixed-use, traditional American neighborhoods. The way to preserve property values is to recognize that a house is part of a community, not an isolated object, and to make sure that the community maintains high standards of civic amenity in the form of walkable streets and easy access to shops, recreation, culture, and public beauty.

Towns built before the Second World War contain more-desirable and less-desirable residential streets, but even the best can have income-integrated housing. A \$350,000 house can exist next to a \$180,000 house with a \$600-a-month garage apartment (which has the added benefit of helping the homeowner pay a substantial portion of his mortgage). Such a street might house two millionaires, eleven professionals, a dozen wage workers, sixteen children, three full-time mothers, a college student, two grandmothers on Social Security, and a bachelor fireman. That is a street that will maintain its value and bring people of different ages and occupations into informal contact.

Density, Not Congestion

"CONGESTION" was the scare word of the past, as "growth" is the scare word of our time. The fear of congestion sprang from the atrocious conditions in urban slums at the turn of the century. The Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1900 is said to have contained more inhabitants per square mile than are found in modern-day Calcutta. If crowding had been confined to the slums, it might not have made such an impact on the public imagination. But urban congestion was aggravated by the revolutionary effects of the elevator, the office skyscraper, the sudden mass replication of large apartment buildings, and the widespread introduction of the automobile. These innovations drastically altered the scale and tone of city life. Within a generation cities went from being dynamic to being -- or at least seeming -- frighteningly overcrowded. Those with the money to commute were easily persuaded to get out, and thus in the 1920s came the first mass evacuation to new suburbs, reachable primarily by automobile. The movement was slowed by the Great Depression and then by the Second World War. The memory of all that lingers. Tremendous confusion about density and congestion persists in America today, even though most urban areas and even many small towns (like my own) now suffer from density deficits. Too few people live, and businesses operate, at the core to maintain the synergies necessary for civic life. The new urbanism proposes a restoration of synergistic density, within reasonable limits. These limits are controlled by building size. The new urbanism calls for higher density -- more houses per acre, closer together -- than zoning does. However, the new urbanism is modeled not on the urban slum but on the traditional American town. This is not a pattern of life that should frighten reasonable people. Millions pay forty dollars a day to walk through a grossly oversimplified version of it at Disney World. It conforms exactly to their most cherished fantasies about the ideal living arrangement.

Houses may be freestanding in the new urbanism, but their lots are smaller than those in sprawling subdivisions. Streets of connected row houses are also deemed desirable. Useless front lawns are often eliminated. The new urbanism compensates for this loss by providing squares, parks, greens, and other useful, high-quality civic amenities. The new urbanism also creates streets of beauty and character. This model does not suffer from congestion. Occupancy laws remain in force -- sixteen families aren't jammed into one building, as in the tenements of yore. Back yards provide plenty of privacy, and houses can be large and spacious on their lots. People and cars are able to circulate freely in the network of streets. The car is not needed for trips to the store, the school, or other local places. This pattern encourages good connections between people and their commercial and cultural institutions.

The crude street pattern of zoning, with its cul-de-sacs and collector streets, actually promotes congestion, because absolutely every trip out of the single-use residential pod must be made by car onto the collector street. The worst congestion in America today takes place not in the narrow streets of traditional neighborhoods such as Georgetown and Alexandria but on the six-lane collector streets of Tysons Corner, Virginia, and other places created by zoning. Because of the extremely poor connectivity inherent in them, such products of zoning have much of the infrastructure of a city and the culture of a backwater.

Composing a Street Wall

IN order for a street to achieve the intimate and welcoming quality of an outdoor room, the buildings along it must compose a suitable street wall. Whereas they may vary in style and expression, some fundamental agreement, some unity, must pull buildings into alignment. Think of one of those fine side streets of row houses on the Upper East Side of New York. They may express in masonry every historical fantasy from neo-Egyptian to Ruskinian Gothic. But they are all close to the same height, and even if their windows don't line up precisely, they all run to four or five stories. They all stand directly along the sidewalk. They share materials: stone and brick. They are not interrupted by vacant spaces or parking lots. About half of them are homes; the rest may be diplomatic offices or art galleries. The various uses co-exist in harmony. The same may be said of streets on Chicago's North Side, in Savannah, on Beacon Hill, in Georgetown, in Pacific Heights, and in many other ultra-desirable neighborhoods across the country.

Similarly, buildings must be sized in proportion to the width of the street. Low buildings do a poor job of defining streets, especially overly wide streets, as anyone who has been on a postwar commercial highway strip can tell. The road is too wide and the cars go too fast. The parking lots are fearsome wastelands. The buildings themselves are barely visible -- that is why gigantic internally lit signs are necessary. The relationship between buildings and space fails utterly in this case. In many residential suburbs, too, the buildings do a poor job of defining space. The houses are low; the front lawns and streets are too wide. Sidewalks and orderly rows of trees are absent. The space between the houses is an incomprehensible abyss.

The new urbanism advances specific solutions for these ills -- both for existing towns and cities and to mitigate the current problems of the suburbs. Commerce is removed from the highway strip and reassembled in a town or neighborhood center. The buildings that house commerce are required to be at least two stories high and may be higher, and this has the additional benefit of establishing apartments and offices above the shops to bring vitality, along with extra rents, to the center. Buildings on designated shopping streets near the center are encouraged to house retail businesses on the ground floor.

A build-to line determines how close buildings will stand to the street and promotes regular alignment. Zoning has a seemingly similar feature called the setback line, but it is intended to keep buildings far away from the street in order to create parking lots, particularly in front, where parking lots are considered to be a welcome sign to motorists. When buildings stand in isolation like this, the unfortunate effect is their complete failure to define space: the abyss. In the new urbanism the build-to line is meant to ensure the opposite outcome: the positive definition of space by pulling buildings forward to the street. If parking lots are necessary, they should be behind the buildings, in the middle of the block, where they will not disrupt civic life.

Additional rules govern building height, recess lines according to which upper stories may be set back, and transition lines, which denote a distinction between ground floors for retail use and upper floors for offices and apartments. (Paris, under Baron Haussmann, was coded for an eleven-meter-high transition line, which is one reason for the phenomenal unity and character of Parisian boulevards.)

In traditional American town planning the standard increments for lots have been based on twenty-five feet of street frontage, which have allowed for twenty-five-foot row houses and storefronts, and fifty-, seventy-five-, and 100-foot lots for freestanding houses. Unfortunately, the old standard is slightly out of whack with what is needed to park cars efficiently. Therefore,

under the new urbanism lot size will be based on the rod (sixteen and a half feet), a classic unit of measurement. This allows for a minimum townhouse lot of sixteen and a half feet, which has room for parking one car in the rear (off an alley) plus a few feet for pedestrians to walk around the car. The 1.5-rod townhouse lot permits two cars to park in the rear. The two-rod lot allows for a townhouse with parking for two cars plus a small side yard. Three rods allows for a standard detached house with on-site parking in different configurations. The four-rod lot provides room for a very large detached building (house, shops, offices, or apartments) with parking for as many as ten cars in the rear. The issue of a standard increment based on the rod is far from settled. Some new-urbanist practitioners recommend an adjustable standard of twelve to eighteen feet, based on local conditions.

The new urbanism recognizes zones of transition between the public realm of the street and the semi-private realm of the shop or the private realm of the house. (In the world of zoning this refinement is nonexistent.) Successful transitions are achieved by regulating such devices as the arcade, the storefront, the dooryard, the ensemble of porch and fence, even the front lawn. These devices of transition soften the visual and psychological hard edges of the everyday world, allowing us to move between these zones with appropriate degrees of ease or friction. (They are therefore at odds with the harsh geometries and polished surfaces of Modernism.)

The arcade, for instance, affords shelter along the sidewalk on a street of shops. It is especially desirable in southern climates where both harsh sunlight and frequent downpours occur. The arcade must shelter the entire sidewalk, not just a portion of it, or else it tends to become an obstacle rather than an amenity. Porches on certain streets may be required to be set back no more than a "conversational distance" from the sidewalk, to aid communication between the public and private realms. The low picket fence plays its part in the ensemble as a gentle physical barrier, reminding pedestrians that the zone between the sidewalk and the porch is private while still permitting verbal and visual communication. In some conditions a front lawn is appropriate. Large, ornate civic buildings often merit a lawn, because they cannot be visually comprehended close up. Mansions merit setbacks with lawns for similar reasons.

Architectural Codes

THE foregoing presents the "urban code" of the new urbanism, but architectural codes operate at a more detailed and refined level. In theory a good urban code alone can create the conditions that make civic life possible, by holding to a standard of excellence in a town's basic design framework. Architectural codes establish a standard of excellence for individual buildings, particularly the surface details. Variances to codes may be granted on the basis of architectural merit. The new urbanism does not favor any particular style.

Nowadays houses are often designed from the inside out. A married couple wants a fanlight window over the bed, or a little octagonal window over the Jacuzzi, and a builder or architect designs the room around that wish. This approach does not take into account how the house will end up looking on the outside. The outside ceases to matter. This is socially undesirable. It degrades the community. It encourages people to stay inside, lessening surveillance on the street, reducing opportunities for making connections, and in the long term causing considerable damage to the everyday environment.

The new urbanism declares that the outside does matter, so a few simple rules re-establish the necessary design discipline for individual buildings. For example, a certain proportion of each exterior wall will be devoted to windows. Suddenly houses will no longer look like television sets, where only the front matters. Another rule may state that windows must be vertical or square, not horizontal -- because horizontal windows tend to subvert the inherent dignity of the standing human figure. This rule reinstates a basic principle of architecture that, unfortunately, has been abandoned or forgotten in America -- and has resulted in millions of terrible-looking houses.

Likewise, the front porch is an important and desirable element in some neighborhoods. A porch less than six feet deep is useless except for storage, because it provides too little room for furniture and the circulation of human bodies. Builders tack on inadequate porches as a sales gimmick to enhance "curb appeal," so that the real-estate agent can drive up with the customer and say, "Look, a front porch!" The porch becomes a cartoon feature of the house, like the little fake cupola on the garage. This saves the builders money in time and materials. Perhaps they assume that the street will be too repulsive to sit next to.

Why do builders even bother with pathetic-looking cartoon porches? Apparently Americans need at least the idea of a porch to be reassured, symbolically, that they're decent people living in a decent place. But the cartoon porch only compounds the degradation of the public realm.

In America today flat roofs are the norm in commercial construction. This is a legacy of Modernism, and we're suffering because of it. The roofscapes of our communities are boring and dreary as well as vulnerable to leakage or collapse in the face of heavy rain or snow. An interesting roofscape can be a joy -- and a life worth living is composed of many joys. Once Modernism had expanded beyond Europe to America, it developed a hidden agenda: to give developers a moral and intellectual justification for putting up cheap buildings. One of the best ways to save money on a building is to put a flat roof on it.

Aggravating matters was the tendency in postwar America to regard buildings as throwaway commodities, like cars. That flat roofs began to leak after a few years didn't matter; by then the building was a candidate for demolition. That attitude has now infected all architecture and development. Low standards that wouldn't have been acceptable in our grandparents' day, when this was a less affluent country, are today perfectly normal. The new urbanism seeks to redress this substandard normality. It recognizes that a distinctive roofline is architecturally appropriate and spiritually desirable in the everyday environment. Pitched roofs and their accessories, including towers, are favored explicitly by codes. Roofing materials can also be specified if a community wants a high standard of construction.

Architectural codes should be viewed as a supplement to an urban code. Architectural codes are not intended to impose a particular style on a neighborhood -- Victorian, neoclassical, Colonial, or whatever -- though they certainly could if they were sufficiently detailed and rigorous. But style is emphatically not the point. The point is to achieve a standard of excellence in design for the benefit of the community as a whole. Is anything wrong with standards of excellence? Should we continue the experiment of trying to live without them?

Getting the Rules Changed

REPLACING the crude idiocies of zoning with true civic art has proved to be a monumentally difficult task. It has been attempted in many places around the United States over the past fifteen years, mainly by developers, professional town planners, and architects who are members of the new-urbanist movement. They have succeeded in a few places. The status quo has remarkable staying power, no matter how miserable it makes people, including the local officials who support it and who have to live in the same junk environment as everybody else. An enormous entrenched superstructure of bureaucratic agencies at state and federal levels also supports zoning and its accessories. Departments of transportation, the Federal Housing Administration, the various tax agencies, and so on all have a long-standing stake in policies that promote and heavily subsidize suburban sprawl. They're not going to renounce those policies without a struggle. Any change in a rule about land development makes or breaks people who seek to become millionaires. Ban sprawl, and some guy who bought twenty acres to build a strip mall is out of business, while somebody else with three weed-filled lots downtown suddenly has more-valuable property.

I believe that we have entered a kind of slow-motion cultural meltdown, owing largely to our living habits, though many ordinary Americans wouldn't agree. They may or may not be doing all right in the changing economy, but they have personal and psychological investments in going about business as usual. Many Americans have chosen to live in suburbia out of a historic antipathy for life in the city and particularly a fear of the underclass that has come to dwell there. They would sooner move to the dark side of the moon than consider city life.

Americans still have considerable affection for small towns, but small towns present a slightly different problem: in the past fifty years many towns have received a suburban-sprawl zoning overlay that has made them indistinguishable from the sprawl matrix that surrounds them. In my town strip malls and fast-food joints have invaded what used to be a much denser core, and nearly ruined it.

Notwithstanding all these obstacles, zoning must go, and zoning will go. In its place we will re-establish a consensus for doing things better, along with formal town-planning codes to spell out the terms. I maintain that the change will occur whether we love suburbia or not.

Fortunately, a democratic process for making this change exists. It has the advantage of being a highly localized process, geared to individual communities. It is called the charette. In its expanded modern meaning, a "charette" is a week-long professional design workshop held for the purpose of planning land development or redevelopment. It includes public meetings that bring all the participants together in one room -- developers, architects, citizens, government officials, traffic engineers, environmentalists, and so on. These meetings are meant to get all issues on the table and settle as many of them as possible. This avoids the otherwise usual, inevitably gruesome process of conflict resolution performed by lawyers -- which is to say, a hugely expensive waste of society's resources benefiting only lawyers.

The object of the charette is not, however, to produce verbiage but to produce results on paper in the form of drawings and plans. This highlights an essential difference between zoning codes and traditional town planning based on civic art. Zoning codes are invariably twenty-seven-inch-high stacks of numbers and legalistic language that few people other than technical specialists understand. Because this is so, local zoning- and planning-board members frequently don't understand their own zoning laws. Zoning has great advantages for specialists, namely lawyers

and traffic engineers, in that they profit financially by being the arbiters of the regulations, or benefit professionally by being able to impose their special technical needs (say, for cars) over the needs of citizens -- without the public's being involved in their decisions.

Traditional town planning produces pictorial codes that any normal citizen can comprehend. This is democratic and ethical as well as practical. It elevates the quality of the public discussion about development. People can see what they're talking about. Such codes show a desired outcome at the same time that they depict formal specifications. They're much more useful than the reams of balderdash found in zoning codes.

An exemplary town-planning code devised by Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and others can be found in the ninth edition of *Architectural Graphic Standards*. The code runs a brief fourteen pages. About 75 percent of the content is pictures -- of street sections, blocks, building lots, building types, and street networks. Although it is generic, a code of similar brevity could easily be devised for localized conditions all over America.

The most common consequence of the zoning status quo is that it ends up imposing fantastic unnecessary costs on top of bad development. It also wastes enormous amounts of time -- and time is money. Projects are frequently sunk by delays in the process of obtaining permits. The worst consequence of the status quo is that it actually makes good development much harder to achieve than bad development.

Because many citizens have been unhappy with the model of development that zoning gives them, they have turned it into an adversarial process. They have added many layers of procedural rigmarole, so that only the most determined and wealthiest developers can withstand the ordeal. In the end, after all the zoning-board meetings and flashy presentations and environmental objections and mitigation, and after both sides' lawyers have chewed each other up and spit each other out, what ends up getting built is a terrible piece of sprawl equipment -- a strip mall, a housing subdivision. Everybody is left miserable and demoralized, and the next project that comes down the road gets beaten up even more, whether it's good or bad.

No doubt many projects deserve to get beaten up and delayed, even killed. But wouldn't society benefit if we could agree on a model of good development and simplify the means of going forward with it? This is the intent of the traditional town planning that is the foundation of the new urbanism.

Human settlements are like living organisms. They must grow, and they will change. But we can decide on the nature of that growth -- on the quality and the character of it -- and where it ought to go. We don't have to scatter the building blocks of our civic life all over the countryside, destroying our towns and ruining farmland. We can put the shopping and the offices and the movie theaters and the library all within walking distance of one another. And we can live within walking distance of all these things. We can build our schools close to where the children live, and the school buildings don't have to look like fertilizer plants. We can insist that commercial buildings be more than one story high, and allow people to live in decent apartments over the stores. We can build Main Street and Elm Street and still park our cars. It is within our power to create places that are worthy of our affection.

Illustration by Robert Crawford