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The Landscape of Housing: Suburbia, New Urbanism, and McMansions

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

When I first visited Seabrook, Maryland, the home of a college friend, I felt like Gertrude Stein describing Oakland, California. “That can’t be a town,” I said, “because there is no there, there.” Seabrook was off the Beltway surrounding Washington, D.C., about 12 miles east of the city. Primarily residential, Seabrook was developed during the 1950s to provide housing for employees in government agencies, such as the Goddard Space Flight Center and the National Security Agency, where my friend’s father worked. I came from a different residential experience. I grew up in a university town, Ann Arbor, Michigan, which definitely had a “there, there,” and I was less accustomed to using the car. I walked to high school in good weather, to Burns Park, to the Food and Drug Mart (a small grocery/convenience store), the Ann Arbor Bank (for my Christmas Club account), and the Dairy Queen, all important destinations. In all honesty, mothers with five children in the 1950s (as was true for my mother) were probably more willing to let their children wander a far distance from home than they would let them today!

When my spouse and I bought our house, we looked for a place where we could walk downtown. More than 30 years later, we still live in that house on Elm Street in that small town: Mystic, Connecticut. Settled in the 1650s along the banks of the Mystic River, Mystic has one main street (Main Street) and about 4000 residents, according to the 2000 Census. Mystic is not actually an independent municipality; rather, it sits within the towns of Groton (west of the Mystic River) and Stonington (east of the Mystic River). Despite its inclusion in two different towns, Mystic has a definite and integrated sense of place. Long before I understood the intellectual and planning implications of my need to live in a walkable small town such as Mystic, I understood it on an emotional level.

When we first moved to Mystic, the downtown had a shoe repair shop, a bookstore, a number of drycleaners, a post office, at least two independently owned pharmacies, an A&P grocery store and liquor store, a sporting goods store, many other independent retailers, and a variety of restaurants. Today the shoe repair and sporting goods stores are gone, and the pharmacies vanished when CVS took over the A&P location after the A&P built a much larger grocery store about a mile away. The post office and A&P liquor store are still there, and an independent bookstore is holding on. Many independent clothing retailers are also holding on, although these are different businesses than they were 30 years ago.

A portion of the residential area surrounding downtown is part of a historic district, with strict guidelines about what modifications can be approved (e.g., the Historic District Commission takes a dim view of plans to eliminate decorative trim and replace it with aluminum siding). Despite its age, Mystic might be considered the model for one of the important current residential trends in this country, new urbanism or neo-traditionalism.

The urban planning concepts of new urbanism, neo-traditional design, and traditional neighborhood development, terms often used interchangeably, emerged in the 1980s with the work of Peter Calthorpe, Peter Katz, Robert Davis, and the team of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. These architects and planners talked about an alternative to urban sprawl that might provide the kind of spatial arrangement that could foster a sense of community. Perhaps the defining feature of new urbanism is its goal of creating walkable communities. The implications of a walkable community are many. Among them is the need to have destinations that can be reached on foot, including work, or at least a transit stop to take you to work. New urbanism also promotes mixed use of functions (i.e., not exclusively residential), neighborhoods with higher densities than one sees in typical suburbs, and streets that bring neighbors into contact with one another. New urbanism is one reaction to the sprawl created in post-World War II America.

Neo-traditional design refers to neighborhoods that emphasize compactness, traditional street patterns, the role of the front porch and stoop, and walkability. Essentially, this is what is meant by new urbanism. And the final term, traditional neighborhood development, usually abbreviated as TND, describes a

comprehensive planning system that includes a variety of housing types and land uses in a defined area. The variety of uses permits educational facilities, civic buildings and commercial establishments to be located

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within walking distance of private homes. A TND is served by a network of paths, streets and lanes suitable for pedestrians as well as vehicles. This provides residents the option of walking, biking or driving to places within their neighborhood.¹

This definition from the home page of The Town Paper, a Web site that promotes traditional neighborhood developments, also features images of Celebration, Florida, and The Kentlands, Maryland, two communities almost always given as examples of new urbanism. In this chapter, the term new urbanism is used for the kind of developments that emphasize a spatial arrangement intended to promote walking, contact, and in turn, community.

But there is an enormous difference between living in a small town that has evolved over time and a community that has been planned and built essentially at one time, as is the case with many new urbanist developments. Creating “Mystic” is a difficult if not impossible planning challenge for reasons explained in this chapter. Yet communities surrounding Mystic are trying to do just that. Recently an article appeared in the local newspaper about a floating zone that proposes a mixed use of shopping and housing in Groton, which is contiguous with Mystic. A floating zone is legitimate, but its existence may not have been included in a formal zoning map.² The idea of a floating zone is useful when a development is proposed for a location not specified in advance. The article dealing with floating zones began, “Imagine the village feel of Mystic and Noank – where people live, shop and do business all in one place – transported to other parts of Groton.”³ The use of a floating zone as a planning tool is getting more popular nationally. Two other terms are important to understand in our discussion of development. Greenfield development refers to development in unoccupied areas (e.g., agricultural areas), typically at the perimeter of a community. Infill development refers to development occurring in core areas where structures already exist.

At the same time the physical core of Mystic is being preserved, new residential areas are being built at its perimeter that include houses that might euphemistically be described as “large.” Some would call them McMansions. The McMansion stereotype is that it is a very large house, offers little variety within the context of its neighbors, and often sits on a plot

¹ <http://www.tndtownpaper.com/neighborhoods.htm> (para. 1).

² <http://www.co.tompkins.ny.us/planning/vct/tool/floatingzones.html>.

³ Warchut, K. (2007). In Groton, “floating zone” proposal envisions mix of shopping, housing. *The New London Day*, p. B2.

of land where all the original vegetation has been cut. Recent research⁴ addresses the extent of McMansions in the United States and the degree to which communities have tried to regulate the impact of such housing. Using newspaper articles as a data source, research indicates that between 1998 and 2004, at least 40 communities had taken the step of creating policies to address some aspect of McMansions, for example by controlling house size or lot coverage. Further, by surveying the 50 largest cities in the United States, the authors found that more than 60 percent reported the development of McMansions. In other words, McMansions are not an isolated phenomenon.

As I look at home sale prices in the Mystic area, I see that there are comparable residential choices, in terms of price, for both well-preserved homes in the historic district of Mystic and in developments of McMansions on the perimeter of the community. In the new homes, the square footage is often greater, and these homes frequently include what is called a “bonus” room (often unfinished) over the garage. Many historic homes in the Mystic area have no garages in the formal sense and thus no opportunity for such bonus space. For example, my own home has a barn/shed that is used as a one-car garage. There are many choices in the centrally located historic home and the less centrally located McMansion. A fair number of people, though certainly not all, seem more eager to embrace the new rather than the charm, history, and walkability of houses in the core. School choice, often related to housing prices (a better school system is associated with higher housing prices), is essentially irrelevant in these decisions. The middle school and high school are the same for both residential types in the Mystic area (on the Groton side of the Mystic River). What does the existence of these two kinds of residential choices say about us as a culture? Who selects which option, and why?

In the United States there are currently a number of residential trends. My goal in this chapter and in the book is to understand the forces that have shaped our built landscape, from our houses to our hospitals to our malls. Often these trends have to do with size, and in particular an increase in size. The core of Mystic represents smallness, especially in house size and proximity to neighbors, and the prototype of what is being called new urbanism. The McMansion represents bigness. These two forms reflect as much about the immediate area surrounding the house (i.e., the proximity of neighbors) as they do about the actual form of the residence.

Why are many people trying to find alternatives to suburbia, to return to a spatial sense of community linked to the traditional neighborhood form

⁴ Nasar, J. L., Evans-Cowley, J. S., & Mantero, V. (2007). McMansions: The extent and regulation of supersized houses. *Journal of Urban Design*, 12, 339–358.

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in America at the beginning of the 20th century, to find new “Mystics,” if you will? Who is attracted to new urbanism? Who buys a McMansion? What does research tell us about the effects of living in such places? What do these types of residences say about American design and about Americans?

I’M FROM THE GOVERNMENT AND I’M HERE TO HELP YOU

To understand why the new urbanist movement and an emphasis on smallness and community exist when the trend in America has been to “build big,” we need to look at the developments in the highway system and housing during the early to middle parts of the 20th century. The interstate highway system and decent housing for Americans, essentially in the form of suburbs, seemed like good ideas in the early 20th century and put millions of people to work, but today we are overwhelmed by our highways and suburbs.

A short history might help explain how we arrived at this predicament and why new urbanism exists. In 1994, when Philip Langdon, senior editor of *New Urban News*, wrote his book *A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb*,⁵ he reported that more than 95 percent of Americans lived in metropolitan areas. Of those, more than two-thirds resided in the suburbs. This distribution was a world apart from the turn of the 20th century, when about one-third of the U.S. population lived on small, family-owned farms.⁶

A confluence of what seemed like good ideas is largely responsible for the suburban predicament in which we find ourselves. This predicament involves spatial isolation and loss of community in the suburbs, longer commutes to work, a reliance on the automobile, and a paucity of mass transit options. From the beginning through the middle of the 20th century, the federal government passed several pieces of legislation dealing with transportation and housing that had profound effects on the shape of our communities and the way we lead our lives.

Our Roads

First, let’s consider roads. Many contend that the 1956 legislation during the Eisenhower administration had a profound impact on our roads, homes, and cities. The Interstate Highway Act of 1956 was responsible for creating

⁵ Langdon, P. (1994). *A better place to live: Reshaping the American suburb*. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press.

⁶ Kunstler, J. H. (1993). *The geography of nowhere: The rise and decline of America’s man-made landscape*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

more than 41,000 miles of roads in this country that established the interstate highway system and linked cities of at least 50,000 with beltways around them. At an initial cost of \$26 billion in 1956 dollars, the federal government covered 90 percent, with the states contributing 10 percent.⁷ One justification for this system, initiated during the cold war, was the movement of troops and material (as well as citizens) in the event of a nuclear strike. Prior to the Interstate Highway Act, there were fewer than 500 miles of freeways in urban areas.⁸ With these transportation acts, the government moved “toward a transportation policy emphasizing and benefiting the road, the truck, and the private motorcar.”⁹ As Andres Duany, an influential designer in the new urbanism movement, notes, “money spent on roads is called ‘highway investment,’ while money spent on rails is called ‘transit subsidy.’”¹⁰ Thus, we *invested* in our highways, a positive connotation, but we *subsidized* our transit system, with the negative connotations a subsidy suggests.

At least one author argues that the outcome might have been different if there had been support for a form of public transportation, the streetcar, when both the electric streetcar and the automobile were introduced from 1890 to 1915.¹¹ Instead, federal dollars went to the automobile, the streetcar had no public funding, and ultimately the support of highways, and by default of automobiles, with tax dollars contributed to reliance upon the automobile and to suburban sprawl. Although an urban myth blames General Motors for the streetcar’s demise, General Motors was hardly responsible for the change in our transportation system. For the interested reader, a careful deconstruction of this myth, its origins and permutations, is provided by Cliff Slater in an article in the journal *Transportation Quarterly*.¹² The reasons for the change in our transportation system are described in architecture and planning critic Jane Holtz Kay’s book *Asphalt Nation*.¹³ As she explains, funding ratios discriminated against mass transit. In the case of railroads, for every dollar spent on railroads, 20 were spent on roads. Lower densities in residential neighborhoods were

⁷ Jackson, K. T. (1985). *Crabgrass frontier: The suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 249–250.

⁸ Kay, J. H. (1997). *Asphalt nation: How the automobile took over America and how we can take it back*. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, p. 232.

⁹ Jackson (1985), p. 191.

¹⁰ Duany, A., Plater-Zyberk, E., & Speck, J. (2000). *Suburban nation: The rise of sprawl and the decline of the American dream*. New York: North Point Press, p. 96.

¹¹ Kunstler (1993).

¹² <http://www.lava.net/cslater/TQOrigin.pdf>. ¹³ Kay (1997).

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associated with the dominance of the roadway system, and there was (and is) an intimate connection between the development of the road system and the development of the spatial character of our communities.

Another impact of this country's roads on the formation (or lack) of community is the width of streets. Duany and his colleagues argue that wide streets promote speed, called "unimpeded flow."¹⁴ Twelve-foot lanes (24-foot total width) are typically required for new streets. One explanation for the width of streets was the cold war; wide streets promoted timely evacuation in the event of a nuclear strike. Fire trucks also play a role, as streets are supposed to be built wide enough to enable fire trucks to turn around without using reverse, and cul-de-sacs are paved to a width of 30 feet to accommodate this maneuver.¹⁵ Another explanation for wide streets is offered by planner Michael Southworth, who focuses on the impact of what seem to have become inflexible engineering standards.¹⁶ Widely adopted standards from the Institute of Transportation Engineers were ostensibly aimed at livability, but the prescriptions emphasized traffic control at the expense of functional accessibility, according to Southworth. Today's street standards prescribe wide streets. As the early work of researchers Donald Appleyard and Mark Lintell¹⁷ demonstrated, streets with substantial amounts of traffic, often a function of synchronized traffic lights, make neighboring behavior more difficult.

Two groups particularly impacted by sprawl in a negative way are teenagers and the elderly, both of whom struggle with autonomy in suburbia. Duany et al. talk about "the child who lives as a prisoner of a thoroughly safe and unchallenging environment."¹⁸ Without nearby neighborhood facilities, such as the kind of corner store I experienced growing up, children and young teenagers in suburbia have few places to visit on their own. In a sense, suburbia stifles the emergence of independence in children. Children are prisoners of the carpool at the same time that their mothers are imprisoned in the role of chauffeur. For the elderly in suburbia, driving becomes increasingly challenging as their visual acuity and mental sharpness decline. When they are unable to drive, they become prisoners in their own homes without walkable destinations, as is true of children and young teenagers.

¹⁴ Duany et al. (2000), p. 65.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁶ Southworth, M., & Ben-Joseph, E. (1995). Street standards and the shaping of suburbia. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 61(1), 65–81.

¹⁷ Appleyard, D., & Lintell, M. (1972). The environmental quality of city streets: The residents' viewpoint. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 38, 84–101.

¹⁸ Duany et al. (2000), p. 116.

My Interstate Highway Experience

In the summer of 2006, my daughter and I drove more than 2000 miles of these roads on I-80 from Mystic, Connecticut, to Palo Alto, California, where she began graduate school. A number of things struck me about the drive and my own family experiences. My older brother went to college in California in 1963. My family of origin lived (and still lives) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. My parents, with their five children, put my older brother, the eldest, on the train and sent him to California by himself with his footlocker. Parenting has changed since the early 1960s, as has outfitting a dorm room. Most families today, if they are able, find a way to personally deliver their offspring to college (and beyond). Thus it was that I drove my daughter to graduate school. It was not an easy drive, and with a used Subaru that had been purchased for the trip and graduate school and a lack of mechanical skill, the two of us were nervous about the adventure. But we made it.

It was a long trip; America is a vast country. Many parts of this country remain uninhabited relative to the coasts. I think the worst day for me was leaving Rawlins, Wyoming, in the morning, determined to make Reno by dinnertime. When we passed through Salt Lake City around noon and I saw the road sign that said “Reno, NV 500 miles” I wanted to give up. We did make it to Reno that “day,” helped by gaining an hour when we passed through a time zone, but dinner turned out to be around 9 p.m. that night. What I remember of that day was the relative density of Salt Lake City compared to its outskirts; the emptiness of the Bonneville Salt Flats; and the casino in Wendover, Nevada, essentially in the middle of nowhere as soon as you passed the state line leaving Utah (no legal gambling) to enter Nevada (plenty of gambling). On the last day of our trip, a Friday, most striking was coming out of the mountains from Lake Tahoe in the early afternoon and hitting bumper-to-bumper traffic that seemed to have no explanation, such as an accident or too many merges. There were cars as far as the eye could see. This bumper-to-bumper situation was the first bona fide traffic jam we had seen since day 2 of driving, when we tried to get around Chicago, a nightmare with all of its road construction.

Yes, this country has employed millions of workers constructing roads and residences, but the products have handicapped us in many respects. During the New Deal, upward of 80 percent of that period’s expenditures involved “roads and construction.”¹⁹ In the decade 1930 to 1940, there was a doubling in mileage of surfaced roads to more than 1.3 million.²⁰ And

¹⁹ Kay (1997), p. 199.

²⁰ Ibid.

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a concept called induced traffic suggests that building more lanes only increases traffic volume.²¹

Some smart person said, “You get what you reward.” What that phrase means here is that by rewarding the building of roads, however laudable some stated reasons may be (such as national defense and employment), what we got was more roads. With more roads came houses that were farther apart because the land was available and cheaper at the perimeter. Now, couple what happened to the road system with what was reinforced in terms of housing development.

Housing Policy

In her influential book *Asphalt Nation*, Kay argues that building highways and taking homes through the urban renewal process was a disaster for this country. In addition to the legislation creating the interstate highway system and other roadways, the government heavily invested in housing during the 20th century and provided opportunities for private developers to do so as well. The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) created in 1933 addressed urban housing ills, provided self-amortizing long-term mortgages, and set up the mortgages with uniform payments spread throughout the length of the loan. With the HOLC came mortgage guarantees, although discrimination came as well. Neighborhoods judged risky, typically those in inner cities and those that housed low-income families and families in racially segregated neighborhoods, were those in Category D. Category D was at the bottom of the A (green), B (blue), C (yellow), D (red) classification, hence the term redlining for discrimination involving those areas judged least worthy of support. “The lasting damage done by the national government was that it put its seal of approval on ethnic and racial discrimination and developed policies which had the result of the practical abandonment of large sections of older, industrial cities.”²² Moreover, banks and savings-and-loans also practiced this kind of discrimination based on location.

Prior to the Depression, you needed a down payment of between 30 percent and 50 percent to purchase a house, and a long-term loan was 10 years. With the Federal Housing Administration established by the National Housing Act of 1934, and the addition of the GI Bill of 1944, creating the Veterans Administration, came an impetus for private developers to build homes because the loans were guaranteed. A small down payment

²¹ Duany et al. (2000), p. 89.

²² Jackson (1985), p. 217.

(not more than 10 percent) sufficed, and the loan length could be 20–30 years.²³ With the Housing Act of 1949, which promised a “decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family,”²⁴ came urban renewal as well. For example, when the Cross Bronx Expressway was built, the homes of some 5000 people were taken, and 113 streets and 159 buildings were sacrificed.²⁵

A passing reference to Robert Moses seems in order when talking about the transformation of the American landscape, at the crossroads of highway and housing policy. When you look around New York City today, you see his imprint on the infrastructure, on bridges such as the Triborough and Verrazano Narrows, on parkways such as the Henry Hudson, and on expressways such as the Brooklyn-Queens and the Cross Bronx. You also see his imprint on recreational and civic developments, such as Jones Beach and Lincoln Center. His additions were said to include as many as 658 playgrounds and 17 swimming pools to the New York City park system.²⁶ His reach was vast, and he held up to 12 positions in municipal offices at one time.²⁷ In a sense Moses embodied the dominance of the automobile over other forms of transportation seen nationwide, although his domain was New York City. It has been argued that *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*²⁸ by urbanist Jane Jacobs was a challenge to Moses’s contention that the city was the domain of the automobile and traffic. For Jacobs, the primary planning concept was the neighborhood and its functional diversity.²⁹ She initially became involved in her battle with Moses over his desire to put a four-lane road through Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village. As has been noted, “In taking on Greenwich Village, Moses had found his Opposite.”³⁰

²³ Jackson (1985); Kunstler (1993).

²⁴ Anderson, M. (1964). *The federal bulldozer: A critical analysis of urban renewal, 1949–1962*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, p. 4.

²⁵ Kay (1997), p. 230.

²⁶ Goldberger, P. (2007, February 5). Eminent Dominion: Rethinking the legacy of Robert Moses. *The New Yorker*. http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/skyline/2007/02/05/070205crsk_skyline_goldberger.

²⁷ Purrington, G. (1999, June 30). Robert Moses: A tribute to the man and his impact on the borough. *The Queens Gazette*. http://www.qgazette.com/News/1999/0630/Feature_Story/.

²⁸ Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. New York: Random House.

²⁹ Jackson, K. T. (2007). Robert Moses and the rise of New York: The power broker in perspective. In H. Ballon & K. T. Jackson (Eds.), *Robert Moses and the modern city: The transformation of New York* (pp. 67–71). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

³⁰ Fishman, R. (2007). Revolt of the urbs: Robert Moses and his critics. In H. Ballon & K. T. Jackson (Eds.), *Robert Moses and the modern city: The transformation of New York* (pp. 124–129). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, p. 124.