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# What the Experts Want to Do to Make Our Cities Livable

by Edward Dodson, Cherry Hill, NJ

Harvard Magazine recently brought together six nationally-respected professionals - experts in architecture, planning, urban design, and environmental regulation - to talk about the changing landscape within and around U.S. cities. Cities are experiencing net losses in population even as parts of the cities are rebuilt and revitalized. Alex Kreiger, a professor of urban design observes, interestingly, that the city is "showing appeal for the three-quarters of the population who no longer live there. The suburbs are the norm - what people are accustomed to." More than that, people are expressing a degree of boredom with life in the suburbs. As always, people in America seem to be on the move, always in search of a better life expressed in very individual terms. Another planner, Michael Sorkin, observed that the conventional wisdom in the planning community today is that the suburban model needs to be brought into the cities. And so, when urban land is cleared of old buildings what is increasingly arising is single-family detached housing set back from the sidewalk with off-street parking for automobiles.

There are some exceptions, of course. Note is made of New York, where people continue to move into former industrial neighborhoods and convert empty warehouses into residences. Mr. Sorkin remarks how "pathetic" it is "that great urban transformations like that have, essentially, been contrary to the official planning framework." And, in New York much of this activity is technically illegal but ignored by officials for practical reasons. The housing shortage is so acute in parts of New York City that most single-family homes have basement and/or attic apartments, two-unit properties have illegal third units, and so on. Banks and other providers of mortgage financing have had to ignore the fact that such added units are illegal uses of the property because the practice is so widespread and has broad market acceptance.

In almost every metropolitan area there are battles over the construction of stadiums for professional sports teams, battles over if and where they will be constructed, and battles over who will pay for them. David Lee, another planner, finds it ironic that civic leaders and elected officials are eager to incur public indebtedness so that suburbanites can periodically drive into the city, park at the stadium, watch a game, climb back into their automobiles, clog the highways and return home, with minimal economic benefit to city-based businesses (other than the stadium concessionaires and team owners). Ironic because at the same time, in some cases, "the school system is in receivership."

The cities of the United States are not all equal, of course. John DeVillars, until recently an administrator with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, brought up the fact that Buffalo, New York has a population today less than it had in 1900. Most of the area's public investment has been made in the suburbs. Then, there is Boston, which is

experiencing a remarkable resurgence, even in the face of skyrocketing land, housing and real estate prices (my observation, not that of Mr. DeVillars). Public investment is targeting neighborhoods to improve the general quality of life, with federal funds going to a massive clean-up of the Boston harbor and the Charles River. Not surprisingly, the \$4 billion spent on the "increased real estate values, brought people to the city, made it a more desirable place," observes DeVillars. OK. So, did the landowners who benefited by these increased values pay their fair share of the \$4 billion bill? A study of what happened to assessments - of vacant land versus improved parcels surrounding the harbor area - would prove enlightening I should imagine.

These planners all concur that the vitality of place depends on neighborhoods having mixed uses, with some residential, some commercial, some entertainment and some office or even light manufacturing combined. And, yet the market works against diversity and against the economic diversity of residents in particular. This is what is happening in the long-ignored neighborhoods of Manhattan, including an increasing part of Harlem. Market values are not yet high enough everywhere to cover the cost of rehabilitating a gutted building; however, a \$200,000 price tag for a two-unit home, or \$300-\$350,000 for a three-unit home is not that unusual these days. Community development corporations, supported by public funds (generally about \$40-50,000 per unit), are doing the work and the homes sold at market price. In many cities the subsidies approach \$100,000 per unit because the market prices people are willing to pay to live in those neighborhoods are so low.

Preserving the historical character of neighborhoods is an important goal of housing preservationists these days, and planners have joined in on the crusade, including trying to design in-fill housing that matches the housing that already exists. This is no small challenge when one realizes the cost of labor to reproduce the elaborate exteriors of nineteenth century Victorian homes.

So, what did this group of experts have to say about land costs, the supply of land and the public policy challenges associated with bringing land into development? Cathy Simon, a San Francisco planner, commented that her city had "tremendous potential to go in several directions because of the amount of open land that's still there." San Francisco's immigrant communities are under great economic pressure from the young professionals coming from Silicon Valley, she adds. At Mission Bay - one of the largest areas of vacant land now being developed - 1,200 of 6,000 new housing units will be set aside as permanently affordable housing. What this generally means is that the purchasers are restricted to those whose incomes are no greater than some percentage of the median for the Metropolitan Statistical Area. The tradeoff for lower income households is: we will provide some decent housing for you at a cost you can afford, but this is shelter and not the opportunity to gain from land ownership

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(although none of the housing and planning experts specifically focus on the land market and the fact that when the combined price of a house and lot rises what is rising is the price of land). As I mentioned in a recent article, community land trusts are more direct about removing the land cost component from housing by removing land parcels from the market forever.

David Lee was the only person participating in this discussion to bring up the "t" word. Oops! He was talking about the battle over whether to tear down what is there or tune it up. One problem identified by Richard Yaro, a New York City-area planner, is that city governments are not very accessible to residents. He noted that citizens are able to get suburban governments to be far more responsive to citizen pressure. City amenities tend to be distributed in the greatest concentration to the highest income, highest profile neighborhoods, while many neighborhoods are almost entirely ignored. People live in these latter neighborhoods because they have no other choice.

What these planners are also seeing is the deterioration of the older suburban neighborhoods that ring the cities. As development occurs further and further from the city core, and as single and childless professions move back into the Central Cities, these Inner rings are suffering. Cathy Simon expressed the thought that if the inner suburbs could be torn down, the cities could be once again surrounded by green belts, agricultural land and parks. To this Robert Yaro injected a note of reality: "I don't think you write off any place or any community. This country is going to add 60 million to 70 million new residents in the next few decades." Establishing outward growth limits is now seen as the one effective means to turning development inward. The politics of public spending is also being influenced by pressure from those in the older suburbs, at least in the East and places that have always had their own business centers and parks. "The equivalent neighborhoods in southern California," noted Cathy Simon, "have no public life, no public amenities. They're just housing and shopping centers served by freeways, with the occasional school thrown in."

Silicon Valley gets a dishonorable mention for its unbelievably high housing prices. Cathy Simon recommending getting rid of all of surface parking lots and corporate campuses, building houses on the land and putting the cars underground. "There is only so much land. Let's use some of this land more effectively," she argued. And, GroundSwell readers would agree with her on that point. Unfortunately, she had nothing to say about how to get developers and landowners to use land to its highest and best use. John DeVillars feels that local governments have a very limited capacity to plan for their future and to keep pace with private development decisions. Few communities have master plans in place or update them on a regular basis.

I have to ask: where have these experts been while much of the country's activist community has been exploring, debating, advocating and implementing the tax policy changes

long endorsed by Common Ground U.S.A.? We have long known what to do to achieve compact development and curb sprawl, while simultaneously improving the quality of life for urban residents. And, the growing list of cities and towns across the United States who are looking to land values as a primary revenue source (instead of housing units, apartment buildings and buildings of all types) the statistics are accumulating: investment in new construction and the rehabilitation of existing structures in urban neighborhoods as well as downtown centers increases significantly. We would like the above experts to know about these important results; so, Common Ground is sending Harvard Magazine complimentary copies of GroundSwell. We hope they take the time to learn just how powerful the land market is in determining the social and economic future of our communities, and just how powerful the shift in taxation from improvements and land to land only is proving.