POINT OF VIEW

The Future Doesn't Work

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I have seen the future and it doesn't work. In recent visits to Southern California, Texas, and Florida and points north, I have visited residential, commercial, and industrial projects notable for their sensitivity to environmental values, attractive building and site design, and resounding success in the marketplace. Yet, in all these areas, growth has become a nasty word and developers are being pressured as never before to slow down and scale back their proposals. As a recent headline in the *Orange County Register* (California) put it: "Growth: OC Voters Say They Have Had Enough."

What is going on here? The answer heard in most places is traffic congestion, which is surfacing as the development issue of the 1980s—as wastewater treatment was the issue of the 1970s and environmental quality was that of the 1960s. Development is being shut down or threatened with curtailment in many communities because of clogged streets and highways, and perceptions, at least, of incipient gridlock. Not all of these occurrences happen in California, although certainly Proposition M in San Francisco, Proposition U in Los Angeles, and dozens of initiatives in smaller California communities have swept away millions of square feet of building rights in only one year. Closer to my home, citizens in two of the fastest-growing counties in the Washington metropolitan area—Fairfax in Virginia and Montgomery in Maryland—have declared war on development that breeds traffic, effectively dampening development fervor.

The traffic crisis is not imaginary in these places. Traffic flows from well-designed street systems in high-quality projects into arterial streets and highway systems and congeals, in one community after another. Freeways in Orange County, California, Dallas, Salt Lake City, Boston, Northern Virginia, and many other places become elongated parking lots for several hours each day. State and local governments have been slow to increase highway capacities not only because funds are short, but also because new highways seem to fill up almost before they are finished.

Ironically enough—and this is my principal thesis—most communities are trying to overcome the traffic crisis in ways that actually perpetuate it. Most projects being planned and developed in fast-growing areas build in automobile dependency, which leads to congested arteries, which results in cries to reduce densities of development, which in turn creates greater dependency on automobiles.

Recent developments that I have toured in rapidly growing suburbs, however pleasant in appearance, erect barriers to the use of transit and pedestrian mobility that ensure the overuse of automobiles even for short trips. Individual buildings and large complexes surrounded by huge parking lots, single-use areas stretching for miles, property lines treated as uncrossable boundaries, four- and six-lane collector streets leading to mega-lane arterials—even the beautiful streetscapes so beloved by site designers—conspire to thwart any but auto mobility.

Consider Tysons Corner, the prototype development horror story usually cited by Washingtonians. About 20 years ago, an office park or two and a regional shopping center were developed in this

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Northern Virginia location next to the Capital Beltway. Traffic increased, roads were improved, then improved again, and more office buildings and shopping areas sprang up. For at least 15 years now, area residents and workers have known Tysons Corner as a traffic nightmare. The solution, depending on who is talking, is either more highway improvements or less development. The nature of the development—single or clustered buildings amid a sea of parking bordered by densely trafficked roads—resists any solution but an automobile one.

Traffic congestion has surfaced as the land development issue of the 1980s. Development is being curtailed because of clogged streets and highways. *(photograph by Dan Rosen)*

One frequently voiced reaction to this all-too-common state of affairs is to reduce the scale of development and "make it prettier." The image most people have in mind is similar to the commercial area in Westlake Village, a planned community north of Los Angeles. In this area, only about a half mile from the Ventura Freeway interchange, the nicely designed buildings are generally one-story high and surrounded by verdant landscaping, which also borders the four- and six-lane streets that act as the "four corners" center of the commercial district. They are very pleasant to look at and are easily accessed by automobile. But to walk from one building cluster to another requires crossing some 40 or 50 feet of planted area, a wide street with bike paths and turning lanes padding out its width, and another planted area—an experience not likely to attract many pedestrians. One can walk to the shopping center along lovely landscaped pedestrian walkways, but hardly anyone does because so few people live within walking distance in this largely single-family residential enclave.

I am not singling these areas out as particularly poor examples of development, but as illustrative of hundreds of other projects and areas across the country that attempt to adapt people and buildings to the needs of the automobile, rather than the reverse.

The solution most often advanced by planners is simple: group uses closer together and build at densities high enough to generate ridership for transit systems, especially in commercial and employment centers. With more options for travel modes and with less need to travel long distances, goes the argument, traffic congestion will decline as the bogeyman for development. But this is where the politics of growth comes into play. People are suspicious of high densities, they fear schlock development, and special interests work to save environmental resources, open space, historic buildings, "neighborhood quality," and the like. Almost always, density is voted down in favor of pretty suburban settings that are transportationally dysfunctional.

The problem here—and this is my second thesis—is that no one has a decent model for what constitutes a higher-density center in a suburban context. Is the quintessential suburban activity center a piece of Manhattan, a quaint village center, or something in between? Surely it is more than the mixture of high buildings, a shopping mall or two, leftover strip shops, and parking lots that constitutes the typical suburban center. Is it high density, parking structures, and concrete; or medium density, parking decks and lots, and plenty of green spaces? Is it similar to the downtown of a moderately sized city, and if so, which one?

Planners and others concerned with community development have not developed a vision of what these centers should be and, beyond that, how they might be created over time. Left to the push and pull of the marketplace, it seems that most suburban centers develop incrementally and never manage to become cohesive: each building or complex with its quota of parking spaces remains separate from all other buildings and their parking spaces. In older suburban commercial areas undergoing redevelopment (Bethesda, Maryland, and Pasadena, California, come to mind), consolidated parking garages may be introduced, along with street plantings and enlivened open spaces. But no one has a clear idea of what the finished product should look like or how it should function.

We need such a vision (or visions), if only to allow more reasonable discourse about the future of our suburbs. We need a better sense of what our options are in building cities. Just as important, we should understand much better than we do now how higher-density complexes can be developed over time to function smoothly and economically.

Without such a vision, we are doomed to be dominated by the needs of our automobiles, which are dictating how land is developed. We should learn that the only traffic solution is ultimately a land use solution.