THE NEW METROPOLIS

Can "new urbanism" be applied to urban America? **By Jim Kling**

AHEAD OF YOU, the line of automobiles stretches off to the horizon, immobile, glinting in the early morning sun. It is rush hour, and work is 20-odd kilometers away in a gleaming tower in the center of the city. Glancing at your dashboard clock, you realize that you cannot possibly make your first meeting of the day. In front of you and to the right, meanwhile, a truck maneuvers onto the shoulder, spitefully blocking a stream of drivers trying to slip by to the nearest exit ramp. As nasty epithets and the sound of car horns fill the air, your blood pressure starts creeping upward, and you wonder for about the thousandth time if it is always going to be like this.

A vast federally funded interstate highway system, advances in automotive technologies, financial incentives to buy homes, and other factors contributed mightily to what became known as the "good life" in postwar, middle-class America. Unfortunately, as we enter the next millennium, the hidden costs of those years of plenty are becoming all too obvious, from the traffic jams that frustrate commuters to the clouds of smog that accumulate over metropolitan areas. Across the country, municipal officials are confronting the effects of an urban and suburban sprawl that not only has put more distance between workers and their workplaces but also has consumed farmlands, forests and fields and left many cities with decaying infrastructures, shrinking tax bases, and deep divisions between races and classes.

Lately some cities have rebounded, thanks to lower crime rates, tax windfalls from prospering economies and soaring tourism. Still, the underlying problems of sprawl remain, compelling planners and professors to contemplate a design for better urban living.

The good news, says Anthony Tomazinis, professor of city and regional planning at the University of Pennsylvania, is that advances in architecture and structural engineering give urban designers a lot to work with. "We are daring to ask: Can we design the ideal city?" he says. The issue is much more than an intellectual flight of fancy. In 2006, for the first time, more than 50 percent of the world's people will live in urban areas, according to the United Nations Population Division.

A high-profile civic and architectural movement in the U.S. seeks to begin redressing the problems of sprawl through a return to the smaller, centered communities of yesteryear. The movement's champions extol the virtues of mixed-use neighborhoods and closer-spaced homes, which could let residents do more bicycling and walking than riding. Expanding on the movement's basic tenets, architects such as Johannes Van Tilburg, based in Santa Monica, Calif., see buildings whose ground floors feature street-side services like restaurants, hair salons and retail stores, with offices placed above and residential units topping them all.

The movement, known as new urbanism, has its share of critics. They refer to it snidely as new suburbanism, because the handful of communities in the U.S. that were built in accordance with new urbanist principles were actually constructed far from urban centers—thus tending to contribute to sprawl rather than mitigate it. But instead of giving up on the credo, at least a few adherents are taking another look at it. In effect, they are trying to find out how cities themselves can benefit from new urbanist ideas.

URBAN TRANSFORMATION

Making new urbanist havens out of decaying, sprawling metropolises would require several remarkable developments, not least a reversal of the decades-long, postwar exodus of the middle class from the inner cities. As a first step in that direction, some city planners are revitalizing downtown areas and placing hard limits on how far out development can go. "Vacant lots will be built up, historic structures will be restored, and aging buildings will be modernized to become home to a growing urban population," says James A. Johnson, former chairman and CEO of Fannie Mae in Washington, D.C. "If it's done properly, cities will get more interesting and exciting," Van Tilburg adds.

SLIM FILMS

Mixed-use buildings constructed with advanced materials and engineering techniques could let people live, work and play in a small geographic space, drastically reducing the time and energy spent commuting.

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Like their real-life counterparts, most cinematic notions of utopian communities are based on the premise that with appropriate design people can live closer together and thus far more efficiently without missing their sprawling lawns. Many of the exterior shots in the recent motion picture *The Truman Show* were filmed in Seaside (*left*), an actual new-urbanist village on the Florida coast. In the 1936 sci-fi classic *Things to Come* (*right*), the toga-clad residents of Everytown in 2036 lived even more closely together in a brightly lit Moderne-style edifice dug into the hills. Production designer Vincent Korda supervised the creation of the sets for the remarkably prescient movie, which was based on an H. G. Wells novel.

Portland, Ore., is the shining example of a metropolis at war with sprawl. In 1979 the Oregon state legislature decreed that the metropolitan area surrounding Portland could expand only to within certain limits. By sticking to those limits, regional officials have preserved a high quality of life in the area despite a population increase from 978,000 to 1.2 million in the greater Portland metropolitan area between 1980 and 1997. "In-fill and redevelopment [of urban centers] are emphasized consciously and openly," says Robert B. Textor, emeritus professor of anthropology at Stanford University. Textor, who retired to Portland, served on a citizens' committee that drafted a statement on urban development in the city's metropolitan area that covers the next 50 years.

Urban-growth **boundaries** and redevelopment can **save us from sprawl,** but the price may be a **less diverse population.**

In some places, the division between urban development and countryside is downright stark. "You can go to Beaverton [a suburb of Portland], and there are roads with housing on the right and open fields on the left," Textor notes. "That is the urban-growth boundary. [Developers] fight it, but it's much better than places like Akron, Ohio, where you can't tell where the city ends and countryside begins, because on outlying roads you have McDonald's and auto supply stores going on and on," he adds.

But Portland's success in controlling sprawl has come at a price. As development is restricted, land and housing prices climb inevitably higher. If this upward spiral is allowed to continue, in time only the affluent will be able to afford to live in the city. Setha Low, professor of environmental psychology and anthropology at the City University of New York, argues that such an eventuality would be a major blow to the function of cities. "I think the biggest challenge facing cities right now is the integration of different kinds of people," she says. Balancing concerns about diversity with those regarding excessive growth is one of the key dualities in limiting sprawl, Low concludes.

One solution may lie in an old maxim of real estate—as the price of the land grows higher, so do the buildings. The islands of Manhattan and Hong Kong, with their signature skylines, are the most celebrated examples. It is possible, and perhaps even inevitable, that in a space of self-imposed limits the mixed-use mantra of new urbanism will be applied vertically.

In fact, at least one architect has been working on such a plan for almost three decades. Paolo Soleri initiated his Arcosanti project in 1970 near Phoenix to build and work out the details of daily life in tall buildings. In his conception, those buildings would also be mixed-use, with environmentally friendly industries occupying the ground level, topped by services and finally residential units. Some floors could be dedicated to indoor gardens, he explains, but the vertical city dweller craving the great outdoors would need only take the elevator to the ground floor, because the surrounding landscape would be preserved.

Will such a vision ever become reality? Low is pessimistic. "As long as there's open country people can move to, it will be hard to get them to change their American ideal of a little plot of land," she says.

She may be right. But to many of those motorists driving to work every day, a commute by elevator may sound like a pretty good idea after all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JIM KLING is a science and technology writer in Bellingham, Wash. His daily commute is pollution-free, taking him from his kitchen through the foyer to the home office.

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