

New Urbanism and High Density Mixed use Developments; Issues and Opportunities

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Low density land use creates Urban Sprawl. Vast supply of single family homes, shopping malls, shopping strips, commercial and industrial office parks all are because of Low density land use. Escalating traffic congestions, increasing air pollutions and carbon dioxide emissions contributing to global warming, mounting economic losses due to delayed travel time, frazzled motorists and ever increasing cost of fossil fuel are just a few effects of automobile dependent communities and the urban sprawl.

According to the U.S. department of Agriculture: the “loss of farmland and other open spaces to development has - more than - doubled in recent years.” (1) Linda Hikichi of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee writes “loss of agricultural land and open space is a consequence to a less mixed-use of residential neighborhoods and more single family homes on larger lots.”(2) Various reports on population increase indicate that the increase in percentage of land use has been, widely, larger than the increase in percentage of population. According to Sierra Club “sprawl destroys more than two million acres of parks, farms and open space each year.”(3)

It is inevitable that we need to employ a rational (and practical) design approach that can support the efforts to protect our limited resources of land, water and atmosphere. Controlling Urban Sprawl as a measure to save rural farmlands is not a choice, an option, or a preference; it is an absolute necessity. Any proposed design methodology must utilize tools and practices that can comply with land use regulations, improve air quality, increase “community connectivity”, and, conceivably, inspire “sense of community” in our neighborhoods.

New Urbanism, a unified effort by architects and planners, challenges the automobile dependent Urban Sprawl. In its wide variety of approaches such as infill projects, transit oriented developments and creating walkable communities, etc... New Urbanism has provided plausible solutions to many of the issues related to Urban Sprawl.

The critics of New Urbanism, however, perceive this movement as “controlled Sprawl” and charge that New Urbanism replicates design philosophies and principals of the early 20th century design practices. Some critics view it as “nothing more than conventional sprawl dressed up with superficial stylistic cues.” (4) They emphasize that high density development requires an efficient



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transit system to succeed as a sustainable development. From a political perspective, also, critics “view New Urbanism as an example of capitalistic excess, aligned with forces of greed and racism that would purge residents of underclass from their historical neighborhoods by raising property values far beyond their pre-urban renewal rates.” (5)

References:

- (1) Sprawl guide, planners website
 - (2) New urbanism and Transportation; Linda Hikichi, CE 790 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee December 2003
 - (3) Sierra Club
 - (4) (2001) *New Urbanism: Comprehensive Report & Best Practices Guide*. Ithaca, NY: Robert Steuteville.
 - (5) Plan Obsolescence," Reason, June 1998: <http://www.reason.com/news/show/30660.html>
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