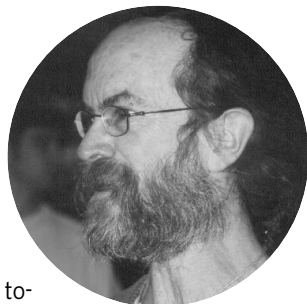


Suburban Renewal

Detaching ourselves from a painfully flawed idea

A recent *EW* article titled "Retrofitting Suburbia" (11/16) addressed a fascinating and timely land use issue: reinventing suburbia. And it missed a number of key points.

The article nicely described the physical setting of my Suburban Renewal Project in River Road, such as food growing all over, chickens and some human interest. It did little to explain why someone would devote a great deal of time over a half dozen years and spend a fair amount of money towards a fundamental makeover of a quarter acre chunk of suburbia.



Half of all Americans live in automobile-dependent suburbia. The amount of resources – energy, financing, foreign policy misadventures, environmental disruption and human potential – lost to keep it all going is beyond calculation. Suburbia does fit perfectly into the demands of an economic system with its number one purpose to promote buying, selling and consuming.

In its early years, suburbia was endowed with a variety of government housing policies to unfair advantage over more sensible ways to meet residential needs. Indeed, much of suburbia can trace its roots to creating jobs for the unemployed in the severely depressed construction industry in the Great Depression. Later, the Interstate Highway System became another huge public subsidy to suburbia.

Today, those early artificial supports are joined by an increasingly shaky framework of mortgage financing and economically motivated foreign policy doctrines and military adventures to keep the cheap oil and resources coming. Suburbia can take credit for extensive air and water pollution, neighborhoods short on social cohesion, declining public health and countless hours stuck in traffic.

To continue building single family detached houses as we know them provides a perfect example of how our best interests of public health, clean environment and global security are hostage to economic interests dictated by market-based global capitalism.

Suburbia is at the core of countless jobs and services. It is at the epicenter of our economy and way of life and, at the same time, is a poor choice of monumental proportions to satisfy human needs. There is not likely any thoughtful, ecological alternative that can come close to replacing the economic wealth created by cars and suburbia. Just because it perfectly fits into a highly flawed economic system and is all we know does nothing to ensure its viability nor its desirability.

There is no easy exit. A downsizing of our personal and collective material expectations is a vital beginning to an exit strategy towards global and personal peace and ecological survival. Companion to material downsizing would be upsizing and manifesting our personal and community positive potentials. To our disadvantage, material downsizing as civic policy is politically unacceptable in conventional terms. Meanwhile, talk of sustainability, with high mileage and alternative fuel cars, smart growth, turning down the thermostat a couple of degrees, recycling a bit more packaging, are distractions from necessary deep changes in the way we live.

An increasing number of people are turning to mutual assistance networks along with downsizing and localizing. Meanwhile, until global resource and political trends, already under way and well understood by many paying attention, clearly manifest and show suburbia and the automobile are at a dead end, we can expect an increasing scale and frequency of tragic headlines that already make us numb.

Within this context, I began six years ago to make best use I can of this small suburban property. The primary goal is to reduce my ecological/ political/ global affairs footprint. It is substantially a boycott and could not be more political as it creates opportunities to avoid participation in an economic system and way of life that defies common sense and our own best interests.

Adapting on-site assets, such as grass to garden, concrete reassignment, water catchment, passive solar redesign, increasing residential density and creating a beautiful and practical place to live, are all primary elements of this Suburban Renewal Project. It is a real part of replacing the existing system with a downsized more local, peaceful and closer to home way of life.

Suburban renewal can be combined with other positive land use tools, both urban and rural. Valley crops can transition towards local use for food, fiber and energy. Parking lots can be converted into higher residential density mixed-use centers aided by greatly improved public transportation. Travel between towns can shift to more convenient bus and rail while becoming less necessary. Urban agriculture, block planning and permaculture are key allies in joining suburban renewal for a healthier and more peaceful future.

I strongly encourage others to make similar choices with their properties and lifestyles. It's smart, fun and positive.



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