

## Environmentalists, meet Developer

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The future of environmentalism is about the future of real estate development.

That

bit of news will seem counterintuitive to many environmentalists, given the mileage the movement gets out of bashing developers. But if environmentalists are serious about reframing their arguments to be more in line with values they claim to profess, and if they intend to link those values with strategies that can broaden their base, then partnering with environmentally aware designers of human habitat should top the new agenda.

It's all about us

The trouble with too many pleas on behalf of the environment is that they flunk the test of environmental science. They claim to be informed by an empirical method but appear anchored elsewhere, in anti-scientific romanticism or, eerily, in a variation of fundamentalists' reading of the Book of Genesis.

While

the sciences increasingly point to webs of connectivity from the sub-atomic to the cosmic levels, many environmentalists remain enthralled by arguments that imagine nature distinct from human life: Nature is out there in a world apart from us, a world that purred along in perfect harmony before our species intruded. Now it needs to be saved. From us.

This view has appeal. It inspires empathy. It provokes a sense of urgency. But is there any wonder that foes have found traction in the argument that to be an environmentalist means picking salmon over growing food and choosing owl habitat over jobs?

The

counter from environmentalists is that by saving forests and streams, we're really saving ourselves. It's a nod to the principle of interdependence. But it's half-hearted. And it always begins with other species and other places. Save them first.

In the long run, the connectivity argument will prove itself, perhaps tragically so, regardless of where we begin counting connections. But it's going to take a very long time before all the evidence is in, before there's no avoiding the consequences of decades of bad choices.

In the meantime, to most folks, the save-the-earth argument seems abstract and excessively long term while it calls for sacrificing what seems important in the here and now. That makes it not so compelling, especially when opponents mirror the either-or perspective of earth-firsters with their own: It's the owls or us. It's open space or homes for a growing nation.

Given a "them or us" choice, it's going to be "us" every time.

But what if the argument for interdependence started with us? What if environmentalists argued that we can save salmon and trees by doing our own species a favor? What if the strategy called for advocating patterns of human development that not only produce positive environmental outcomes, but are also capable of inspiring private investment and of pleasing human consumers in the here and now?

Over the last two decades, New Urbanism has created precisely that opportunity. Even as some environmentalists carped from the sidelines.

The pattern is the problem

New Urbanism is a design movement based on the old urbanism of places humans love, cities created before sprawling suburbs became the development model of post-World War II America. Instead of segregating residences, workplaces, and shops in monocultures, New Urbanism insists on the reintegration of human life in mixed-use patterns. And instead of allowing the accommodation of automobiles to become a priority, New Urbanist planners design environments from a pedestrian perspective.

From its beginnings, New Urbanism satisfied the three-part test of sustainability. It's environmentally conscious, borrowing its highest principles from ecological models of connectivity and habitat

diversity. It's socially responsible, creating communities that encourage civic engagement. And it's economically viable, as affirmed over and over by developers responding to a growing segment of the housing market.

New Urbanists have proven that, given choices, a substantial number of homebuyers, enough to make a difference in the way a region consumes space and energy, are — literally — at home in sustainable development patterns. Neighborhoods where citizens are within a few minutes walk of everyday destinations such as home, work, shopping, schools, dining, and entertainment are valued more than neighborhoods where a car is necessary for every trip. In places where residents have easy pedestrian access to attractive parks, squares, and other public places, they are willing to settle for more compact private places and higher densities. Such is the demand for these places, in fact, supply can't keep up, and prices rise, often before New Urbanist developers get structures out of the ground. Market research suggests that 30-50 percent of the housing built in the next decade or so will be in New Urbanist neighborhoods, provided developers are free to address the pent-up demand.

The fact that so many people are eager to live in denser communities, perhaps even in smaller homes, should be good news for environmentalists. Higher density translates into lower energy use per household, whether from car trips not taken or from more efficient electricity grids. Mother Jones recently collected environmental factoids from other publications. A key one, gleaned from earlier reports in the New York Times and the New Yorker: "If it were a state, New York City would be 51st in energy use per capita."

But instead of celebrating urbanism, lots of folks who like to think of themselves as environmentalists oppose its realization. What they don't like is that urbanized areas are too urban, too paved over, too crowded. Instead of urging design that makes density appealing, they argue for spreading the buildings and greening the avenues. They want symbolic forests and isolated wetlands downtown, even if they're disconnected from systems of ecology that define vitality in nature. They call for open space everywhere. And for fewer people.

If we know anything about the natural world it's that life is dynamic. Growth and change is inevitable. So when we make it impossible for a growing population to feel comfortable in progressively denser surroundings, it disperses. Environmentalists who oppose density are blind to the irony. They trumpet their love of nature, yet forfeit their best chances at environmental protection by exiling unplanned development to the real open spaces where landscapes and ecosystems are truly at risk.

## Beautiful losers

### Too

often, the density debate is manipulated by opposing extremes. The property rights ideologues, who oppose governmental limits on private development, are the most obvious enablers of suburban sprawl. They're noisy, but their air supply depends upon a supply of space in which the consequences of sprawl patterns aren't yet obvious. As that space diminishes, as congestion escalates and ugly structures multiply, pressure builds on local politicians for rules.

### The build-up

takes time. Frustration has to peak, then spill over. By the time local bureaucracies respond, emotions run high, creating opportunities for the other set of extremists — the no-growth NIMBYs who use pseudo-environmental arguments to urge regulations that zone away the advantages of density. The places humans most love to live, the great cities of the world, including great cities in America such as Savannah and Charleston, would be illegal under conventional zoning regulations.

### Though

they would resist the suggestion, the property rights folks and no-growth environmentalists are brothers in arms. Even with apparently opposite philosophical positions, they produce the same result — environment-threatening sprawl. And they're both losers. Local governments almost always bend to citizen pressure and enact development restrictions over the objections of property rights advocates. And despite the opposition of the no-growth coalitions, growth always happens, consuming nature and open space at an accelerated space in areas beyond the restricted zones. Their only consistent achievements are frustration and anger.

If they can't win, what attracts people to these arguments?

Maybe it's the romance of victimhood.

### Behind

every plea of property rights absolutists and earth-firsters is the assumption that they're on noble but impossible missions. They are guerrilla fighters in the struggle against Big Government or Evil Development. They are heroes just for showing up. If their demands approach acceptability they escalate them beyond any potential for compromise to protect their status as leaders in a lost cause. Most important of all: Because they're victims of forces they can't control, or even influence, they are not accountable for outcomes.

It's a fail-safe, success-free strategy.

## An Invitation to Design

What

the environmental movement needs is a taste for accountability. Instead of conspiring in a process that embraces ineffectiveness, they must commit to one that leads to a plan.

The very act of planning announces an intention to influence events. If it produces victims instead of positive results, it's either a lousy plan or it's burdened with lousy strategies. In either case, those who devise and execute the plan can't duck the evidence of outcomes. They can fiddle with their approaches to get better results, but they can't escape accountability.

So what's the big, new plan environmentalists are willing to be held accountable for?

Some

are suggesting that it should be an all-out effort to reverse global climate change. That seems noble enough. And it's certainly in keeping with the movement's tradition, since it requires selling an abstract concept about problems that aren't yet apparent to billions of people distracted by more immediate worries.

The same goes for another recent proposal to tie environmental goals to racial and economic justice. Again, noble. And, again, with great potential for celebrating victimhood.

Why not focus on something that threatens just about every community and yet has implications for the sustainability of the planet? What not invest the energy of environmentalism in reversing suburban sprawl and advancing a human habitat that acknowledges and respects a relationship with all of nature?

Now, to be sure, lots of environmental organizations endorse Smart Growth, the public sector interpretation of New Urbanist principles. And some

groups — the Sierra Club, for instance — have been among the leaders of efforts to integrate concern for the environment and a commitment to reverse destructive development patterns. But in a hierarchy of priorities in most organizations, Smart Growth initiatives rank somewhere between recycling motor oil and spaying cats. We’re arguing for a new focus.

## The City, the Region, the Planet

The greatest environmental problem in the world may be the all-consuming lifestyle of the American middle class. And we’re exporting it to all the world. Since we abandoned the community-honoring principles of the old urbanism and embraced the glorification of the individual liberated by the automobile, we have allowed a nature-devouring pattern to become the default setting for human habitat. And it is unsustainable.

We can attack this problem, as so many environmentalists advocate, with nagging policies and with punishing regulations. But Americans are notoriously resistant to rules. Restrictions, especially ones that are not very well thought out, often invite the opposite of what they intend. Take, for instance, what’s happened in Portland, Oregon, a community justifiably proud of its commitment to environmentally responsible development. Yet its attempt to protect its rural environs with an urban growth boundary has had all sorts of unintended consequences, including helping to inspire a statewide property rights backlash.

The very existence of an urban boundary line invites strategies to manipulate it, especially when the stakes are high. And the stakes can be very high. Property owners inside the line can subdivide and sell their tracts to maximize profit; those outside can’t. Hence the property rights revolt and the success of a 2004 Oregon referendum that challenges the ability of governments to restrict almost any kind of development.

There are unintended consequences inside the line, too. Oregon environmentalists were more focused on protecting open space than on encouraging sustainable development patterns; so residents in newer neighborhoods inside the boundary have been saddled with the strip malls and traffic congestion that comes with rapid growth and little consensus on ways to channel it.

Sprawl specialists exploit the open-space debate through symbolic mitigation. Take Wal-Mart’s “Acres for America” campaign, in

which the most famous sprawl developer in the world is pledging to set aside an acre of wildlife habitat for every acre of new Wal-Mart construction. It's a public relations strategy that has won the company applause. But it's pure bait-and-switch. It's as if a surgeon removed the lungs from a healthy patient, then argued no harm was done because another set of lungs in another location would be preserved in the patient's name.

Because of the power of patterns, the impact of a single Wal-Mart shopping center is many times its real estate footprint. Big box development on greenfield sites inspires a suburban driving and building template that replicates itself for miles beyond the parking lot of a single store or the mall it anchors. The pattern stifles urban vitality for decades, then leaves a community stuck with decaying strips along congested roads when the big boxes and the commercial development they attract leave for the next ring of newer suburbs in greener fields.

To change the template, we need a perspective that's comprehensive and inclusive. Nature is not an array of isolated elements; it is a system — a system of systems, actually. It connects us all, from microbes to megafauna. And it exists on a continuum from the heart of wilderness to the heart of the city.

To best protect beautiful, remote places where humans alone are least likely to thrive, we should be making ever more beautiful the places where humans together have their best chances for success. We have to create great cities — and hamlets, villages, and towns — that are designed to grow denser and more engaging. We have to make it easier to live closer together.

This is not a sentence. It's a rescue. Our species seeks to affirm a buried-in-the-DNA desire for connectivity and habitat diversity. We long for community. We need to be engaged with one another in neighborhoods and towns. The key is to design away barriers that inhibit those impulses and design in patterns that honor them. It is the best — and the most winnable — strategy for reinvigorating the enveloping environment that sustains all life.

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## Andres

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