

Sustainable Urbanism And the Future of Santa Barbara

*“Diseases desperate grown
By desperate appliance are relieved’d
Or not at all.”*

--William Shakespeare

Santa Barbara is not just another internationally famous tourist resort town nestled between ocean and foothills with a world-class architectural heritage; it also stands on the threshold of being a national leader in the sustainability movement. In October of 2007, through the efforts and encouragement of a local coalition of environmental, architectural and “green building” associations, Santa Barbara became the first city in the nation to adopt the “2030 Challenge.” This is the highly laudable goal articulated by Edward Mazria, architect, educator and author of “The Passive Solar Energy Book” who, in his visit to Santa Barbara in September of 2006, outlined specific stages and phases occurring over a 21 year period, leading to that day in which each new building constructed or remodeled would be capable of producing all its own energy needs. However revolutionary and path-breaking as this architectural evolution will be, it is only one phase of the remedy needed to address the global environmental and public health maladies our city and our way of life have helped to spawn. Though buildings themselves contribute more than 40% of a typical city’s CO2 emissions, the way people, goods and services get to and from those buildings contributes another 30%. Even if an individual building achieves the lofty goal of “carbon neutrality”, if it is not located in an integrated urban fabric in which walking, bicycling and public transport are viable options, many believe it cannot be considered truly “green” or “sustainable.” We must change not only the way we design and build, we must also change where and what we build. In just a few weeks, on March 15th, another internationally known architect, educator and author comes to challenge Santa Barbara’s sustainability efforts in a complementary way. Stefanos Polyzoides has been one of the foremost contemporary voices in the U.S. advocating for and promoting sustainable town planning, otherwise called “the New Urbanism” or “Sustainable Urbanism.” Among his other achievements, he is co-founder of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) a national organization which has been leading efforts to promote walkable, neighborhood-based development as an alternative to suburban sprawl. CNU has also been instrumental in helping to establish standards and rating systems for third-party evaluation of how buildings perform in relation to their urban context. It has adopted a holistic perspective on the problem. As stated in it’s charter (www.cnu.org/charter <<http://www.cnu.org/charter>>) it views the “disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness,

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and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge.”

Since mid 1940, the predominant template for planning, zoning and land use regulation in the United States has been animated by the idealized image of suburban bliss: each four-person family having their own, fenced-in piece of the good earth upon which a cozy single-family home and adjacent slice of grassy knoll would provide all the privacy and comforts needed to raise the young, to retire to after a hard day's work and to enjoy the benefits afforded by leisure time. New Urbanists assert that this “one size fits all” model is not only flawed, but lethal. Among other abuses, it has led to the complete reliance upon the automobile and the wasting of vast vital natural resources and open spaces. It has also helped to foster an increased sense of individual isolation, a lack of neighborhood or community solidarity and the stratification of economic class based on home location and land values. In order to support the sprawl model, the bulk of the money spent on transportation infrastructure gets directed to automobile facilitation: fixing and widening streets, building more and wider highways and public parking lots. The problem is, many case studies have shown, that increased automobile accessibility does not solve gridlock; it promotes and encourages it. According to a 2006 study by the U.S. Department of Transportation, from 1977 to 2001, the number of miles driven every year by Americans rose by 151%—about five times faster than the growth in population. Six months of a typical American life span is now spent in jammed traffic. Even if carmakers and consumers bear the considerable cost of switching to a fleet of cars that meets or exceeds 35 miles per gallon by 2020, as recently adopted by the Bush administration, this will not result in a significant reduction in U.S. petroleum consumption, cut CO2 emissions, or help to solve our public and environmental health epidemics, if we continue to keep driving more and more miles.

If we are to begin to address the immanent onset of global warming, peak oil, accelerated environmental degradations of all sorts and the rapidly changing demographics brought on as the baby-boomers become elders, many believe this inexorable “spreading out” that has characterized American life since World War II needs to come to an end. Typical suburbia as we have come to create it, is both a sterile model to continue in endless extrapolation on our own soil and a frightening example we have set for developing countries worldwide.

Sustainable Urbanism is in some ways, a return to an ancient model of neighborhood planning, city design and land use. It undertakes to confront these enormous public challenges of our time: reversing or reforming the basic conceptual framework of city and neighborhood Master Planning to encourage the reduction or elimination of dependence upon the automobile, to return safe

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streets to the pedestrian and bicyclist, to preserve open spaces, natural resources, human and environmental health and to foster a more integrated, vibrant and meaningful sense of community through reformation of the built environment. Venice and Copenhagen are the most well known contemporary European examples of very successful, automobile free, urban/tourist centers offering a high quality of life due to the adoption and consistent application of Sustainable Urbanism. In recent decades, however, new communities have arisen and Master Plans have been rewritten in the U.S., exemplifying the possibilities of a wiser and more enlightened regulation of what and where we build.

The City of Santa Barbara is in the process of preparing to update our General Plan. With that update is the opportunity to revise the land use model, zoning laws, circulation and transportation guidelines that can either stultify or greatly enhance progress towards a built environment that is sustainable. It is with the aim of educating our citizens, policy makers, builders and developers regarding the aims and practical economic, social and environmental benefits of the principles of Sustainable Urbanism that a partnering of local non-profit groups has invited Stefanos Polyzoides to come to Santa Barbara and share his experience, vision and insight as to how our city may truly evolve toward a greener and healthier future for all.

Place: Victoria Hall Theatre, March 15th, 2008, 10:30 am to 12 noon

Kirk Gradin
Member, Institute of World Culture

Institute of World Culture
March 15, 2008