

Dysfunctional Cities: Where Did We Go Wrong?

BY LEE HARDY

Our cities are deadzones, warehouses for those too poor to leave. With streets mean and shabby, stores boarded up, and schools closed, they are permeated by fear and despair. Why have we given up on public space, both urban and suburban? Must we choose between deteriorating urban cores and degrading suburban landscapes?

In 1990 I spent a sabbatical year with my family in the German city of Cologne. Despite all the things that make living in a foreign country difficult, it was for us a year of unalloyed urban joy. We did not own a car. But that didn't matter in the least. I rode a bike to the university. The church we attended was but a four-block walk from our apartment. The elementary school my children attended was similarly close by and required no bus. The main street of our neighborhood, three blocks away, offered all we needed on a daily basis—a grocery store, a bakery, a flower shop, a newsstand, a stationery store, two bookstores, and several restaurants. The *Stadtwald*, a ten-mile-long semicircular park that rings the western edge of the city, was just a ten-minute walk along a canal, putting playgrounds, tennis courts, tearooms, lakes with boat rentals, a petting zoo, and ice-cream vendors within our family's pedestrian reach. On weekends we often took the bus downtown. On the plaza before the great Cologne cathedral there was always something free and festive going on—church choirs, street musicians, sidewalk artists, magicians, mimes, and acrobats. There were no neighborhoods to avoid. There were no slums. German society may have its share of problems, but putting together humane and coherent cities is not one of them.

How painful to return home and be reminded of the sorry state of our cities in North America. So many have been abandoned and converted into deadzones, warehouses for those too poor to leave. With their streets mean and shabby, stores boarded up, and schools closed, their atmosphere is permeated by fear and despair. As a member of the American middle class, of course, I did not have to deal with those urban realities. I was to return to

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my home in the suburbs, driving everywhere I needed to go along gritty commercial thoroughfares and featureless arterials, past junky strip malls, gas stations, big box retail, and fast food joints, hunting for advantageous parking spots in paved lots large enough to accommodate an entire European village. Granted, our four-bedroom single-family detached house was nice, larger than any Ger-

man family's we knew. Most of them lived in apartments. But why have we in America given up on public space, both urban and suburban? Must we choose between deteriorating urban cores and degrading suburban landscapes? Where did we go wrong?

The answer to that question is, of course, long and complex. Part of the answer, written from a sociological perspective, can be found in Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, a study of the post-World War II fate of Detroit, poster child of urban abandonment. The story I want to tell takes a different tack, focusing on the policy decisions and cultural ideals that led to the development of the deeply anti-urban physical form of the suburbs, especially those built since the 1970s.

UNCLE SAM'S INVISIBLE HAND

It is tempting to think that the current disposition of our built environment is the simple result of pristine market forces. But such is not the case. Since the 1930s the federal government has skewed the housing market in favor of suburban home construction. In an effort to prevent foreclosures on homes during the depression, the Roosevelt administration created in 1933 the Home Owners Loan Corporation, which refinanced over a million short-term home mortgages with fully amortized mortgages stretched over twenty to thirty years. In the year following, President Roosevelt signed the National Housing Act, thus creating the FHA (Federal Housing Administration). The FHA was designed to stimulate the housing market by insuring

long-term low-interest private home mortgages, mortgages that made the purchase of a home cheaper, in many cases, than renting. But the FHA was not about to insure mortgages indiscriminately. It had guidelines. And these guidelines clearly favored single-family homes of recent construction. The FHA did not insure loans for the repair of existing homes; nor was it interested in supporting the construction of multifamily units; nor did it smile upon classic urban row housing. Even for the construction of new single-family houses it had definite ideas, specifying suburban lot sizes and setbacks for any home it would consider an ideal candidate for an insured mortgage. And the home industry built accordingly – especially after the Second World War when the 1944 GI Bill of Rights authorized the Veterans Administration to guarantee zero down payment home loans for sixteen million returning GIs.

New Deal measures for putting the economy back on track not only shaped the style of postwar residential buildings, they also promoted social separation by race, class, and ethnicity in the name of sound investment. The Home Owners Loan Corporation rated residential areas for risk at four levels, color-coded on secret “Residential Security Maps” in green, blue, yellow, and red. The highest rating (green) was given to newly constructed neighborhoods populated by white middle-class professionals. If such residential areas were “infiltrated by Jews,” they were automatically dropped down to the next rating tier. The worst rating (red) was invariably given to black neighborhoods, making it unlikely that anyone could obtain a low-interest federally insured home loan there – hence the term “redlining.”¹ In its appraisal system for determining housing value, the FHA downgraded traditional urban neighborhoods that were old and dense and that incorporated nonresidential elements such as offices and retail establishments. It also downgraded neighborhoods harboring “inharmonious racial or nationality groups.”² Until 1948 the FHA’s *Underwriting Manual* advocated the use of restrictive covenants to prohibit the sale of homes in predominately white neighborhoods to black families.³ Federal housing policies virtually guaranteed that the middle class would abandon urban neighborhoods. They promoted socially segregated middle-class residential neighborhoods made up exclusively of detached single-family homes. And that’s what we got.

IN EVERY GARAGE A CAR—NO, MAKE THAT TWO CARS

We associate the suburbs not only with low-density single-family residential development but also with the exclusive reliance on the private automobile for transportation. Again, we might think that the relative lack of public transportation in vast reaches of our built environment is the simple result of pristine market forces. But once more we would be mistaken. Our disproportionate use of the automobile has been encouraged by federal spending priorities since the Second World War, along with some very clever market strategies on the part of the automobile industry.

Cars need good roads if they are to be an attractive transportation option. Automobile manufacturers would be happy to supply the cars, if only the government would supply car-worthy roads. In the 1920s America's road system was not in good repair. Most Americans moved by rail. Two hundred fifty thousand miles of heavy rail were in use across the nation; extensive inter-urban lines served regional travel needs; and within the cities electric streetcars were the principal form of conveyance. At the time, American public transportation was second to none. During the depression era of the 1930s, however, FDR had already envisioned a federal job-making project of constructing six interstate highways, three running north to south and three running east to west. A version of that project was aggressively marketed by General Motors in its stunning Futurama exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair, designed to sell America on a glorious vision of a nation crisscrossed by fourteen-lane limited access superhighways. Once the Second World War got underway, the project was bumped up the federal priority list, given the eminent need to employ millions of returning GIs once the war was over. Funding, however, was a problem. When President Dwight Eisenhower came into office, an Advisory Committee on a National Highway System was formed. Eisenhower appointed his war colleague, retired general Lucius D. Clay, to head the committee. Clay, as it turned out, was a member of the Board of Directors for General Motors. It should come as no surprise that the committee found effective means of financing the interstate highway project. The federal government would pay ninety percent of the cost through a hidden gas tax. In 1956 Eisenhower signed the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways Act, authorizing the construction of 41,000 miles of roadway, the largest peacetime public works project in the history of the world.

In the meantime, while Europe was wisely rebuilding its rail systems, our rail systems received little support. In fact, they had been under attack for some time. In 1921 Alfred P. Sloan, president of General Motors, had become convinced that the automobile market was saturated. Sales were stagnating. Although only one in nine American households owned a car at that point, demand was limited by the extensive use of electric railway systems that served our nation's cities. In 1922 Sloan formed a special task force within GM dedicated to replacing the local and regional passenger railways with cars, trucks, and buses. By 1936 GM had acquired New York Railways and run it into the ground. In the same year it formed, together with Firestone and Standard Oil, National City Lines, a holding company that proceeded to acquire and dismantle one hundred urban rail systems in forty-five cities across the country. In 1949 GM was found guilty of criminal conspiracy for its actions by a U.S. District Court in Chicago – and fined a token \$5,000.⁴

The dramatic downgrading of our public transportation systems, together with the construction of the interstate highway system, did much to fuel

the suburban boom of the 1960s. That boom turned into an explosion in the 1970s when combined with two other factors: functional zoning and the street hierarchy. Both of those factors have their roots in the early twentieth century. Zoning ordinances are powers of municipal and county governments to abridge the property rights of some citizens to protect the property values of others. For the most part they limit land use. First invoked in the United States by New York City in 1916, zoning codes were in wide use by most localities by the late 1920s. Initially land use restrictions were used to keep heavy industry out of residential areas, which makes perfect sense. Since then, however, they have gotten completely out of hand in many cities and towns. Residential areas are separated not only from heavy industry, but also from commercial, office, and civic land uses as well. In addition, zoning ordinances separate residential areas according to different residential typologies (single-family, duplex, multifamily, and so on). It is now illegal to build an apartment over a retail establishment, an office next to a duplex, or a duplex next to single family home. Mixed use is taboo.

Since the various land uses are now separated into distant and distinct areas, or “pods” as they are called, it is no longer feasible for us to move among them by walking. We have to use the car. This is where street hierarchy comes in. Invented by Ludwig Hilberseimer in the 1920s, the street hierarchy was intended to prevent automobile through traffic in developed areas. Rather than laying streets out in a grid pattern (with variations, of course), the street hierarchy envisions a dendritic system of major arterials flowing between discrete

land use pods, the pods themselves being serviced by cul-de-sacs that empty into collector roads that in turn empty into the major arterials. The suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s were usually laid out on a variation of the grid pattern. They allowed for some embedded civic land uses such as churches and schools, and they were oriented to the center of town as a place of

employment, entertainment, and administration. Since the 1970s, however, we have embarked on a historically unprecedented form of human settlement: the “exurb,” a centerless sprawl that has made the private automobile the only viable mode of transportation, where various land uses — residential, commercial, office, civic, and industrial — are scattered across the countryside, and where most commutes are no longer between edge and center,

We are embarked on an unprecedented form of human settlement: the “exurb,” a centerless sprawl that makes the private automobile the only viable mode of transportation.

We no longer commute between city edge and center, but from edge to edge.
