Sprawl Is Dying. Will Smart Growth Be Next?

F. Kaid Benfield

For the last 15 years or so, the school of thought and practice we have come to call “smart growth” has been primarily concerned with the physical shape of our built environment, and particularly of our neighborhoods, cities, suburbs, towns, and regions. We have made a difference—a big difference, in my opinion—in pursuing these issues to create a more sustainable world. But we are now well into the 21st century, and what qualified as leadership 15 years ago has become mainstream. New issues and applications have surfaced. Along with unquestioned successes, we now also have places that contain exactly what we have been advocating but have turned out to be deficient in one way or another.

Russell Square in London, England (photo courtesy of the author)
Our thinking and practice must evolve or risk becoming irrelevant.

In particular, I believe we must move from an agenda focused mainly on avoiding the environmental, social, and economic harms associated with suburban sprawl to an agenda more ambitiously focused on making truly great places for people and the planet. Sprawl is all but dead, severely wounded by economic forces that are only going to become stronger over time. It may be reasonable to continue to devote a portion of our resources to fashioning non-sprawling, more walkable places, but “non-sprawling” is not the same thing as “great,” and neither is the 1990s urbanist formula based on density, mixed uses, and transit.

More than anything else, smart growth was—and remains—about a more deliberate and sensible allocation of land and development. That has been important: we now have oodles of research quantifying the benefits. If we build this way, we know that we will reduce carbon emissions, air pollution, land consumption, and water runoff compared to a continuation of the sprawl paradigm that shaped our landscape in the last half of the 20th century. We have to do this.

And yet. Something has been nagging me about smart growth for years. I believe that, at least for those of us in the policy world, the smart growth agenda has become a bit formulaic and even clinical. We tell ourselves and others, for example, that we must increase settlement density, which we measure in dwelling units per acre or the ratio of building floor space to lot space; that we must reduce driving, which we measure by vehicle miles traveled; that we must reduce carbon emissions, which we measure by metric tons. And so on. If we’re looking at a growth scenario, we may measure these things on a per-capita basis. It’s a cold aspiration.

We judge potential policy measures by how well they will produce these outcomes. When a new government action, or a private one for that matter, allows us to project the numbers favorably, we rightfully applaud it. Often, I'll be among the cheerleaders.
But, as I have opined before, the fact that we are increasing dwelling units per acre, reducing vehicle miles traveled per capita, and reducing tons of carbon emissions compared to sprawl does not mean that we are making a great habitat for people. Unfortunately, we now see that one can do exactly these things while making mediocre places without respite, without opportunity, without nourishment. We worship the word “vibrant” as if human beings do not also need solitude, spirituality, safe places for kids to play, nature. Yes, Columbia Heights in Washington, DC has become a revitalized urban neighborhood worth celebrating, if an expensive one. Yes, Bryant Park in New York City is a wonderful public space if you like your parks busy and lively. But urbanism cannot be our only model if we are to create a world I want to live in.

It is time to focus more on the quality of what we are building. Ethan Kent of the Project for Public Spaces has put it this way: “Having less impact is noble, but aspiring to have a big impact, to create the world we want starting in the place where we live, work and play, is a transformative agenda.” So what, exactly, is the world we want? We are going to live in it, and so are our aging parents, our growing children, and an increasingly diverse population. Shouldn’t that mean that we need a diverse set of strategies?

To an extent, we have become slaves to measurable outcomes. In the nonprofit world, our sources of funding demand it. Increasingly, so do our managers and never-ending strategic planning exercises. But what if we produce urban density that saves land and reduces carbon emissions but overwhelms people with its scale, looks mediocre and, by the way, creates hotspots of environmental impacts? Should we still be applauding? To my eye, that is exactly what has happened in some places in the name of smart growth.

We are producing some places that qualify as transit-oriented development, for example, but I wouldn’t want to live there, and I predict they will not age gracefully. I can think of one in particular that is frequently held up as a success story. It added some 10,000 workers and residents over a 20-year period around a major transit station, while maintaining automobile traffic at a reasonable volume. But it’s a high-rise canyon without soul, in my opinion. Some of the most visible buildings are downright ugly to my eyes. Not one is inspirational, as buildings with living walls are in London and Japan and as Berlin’s Sony Center is with its hybrid indoor/outdoor design. Instead, we have concrete or brick boxes. We should be joyful about this?
Care to guess how much public park space was added to serve those additional 10,000 people? Almost none. What I find particularly troubling is that this district is now being held out as a model by planners, developers, and smart growth advocates for more transportation-oriented development in the region. It’s certainly easy to see why developers like it: they can build more or less as much density as their market will bear, while not worrying much about silly things like sensitivity, nature, and legacy. But since when have developers’ aspirations been sufficient to guide advocates?

Let’s take another example, this time from the world of urbanist public spaces. Let’s say we think a public square would be a good way to anchor a walkable neighborhood served by good public transit options. But let's not just make a public square that works for pedestrians and call it good enough: let's make it greener. Let’s make it of locally sourced, sustainably harvested materials; in places where it rains a lot, let's incorporate green infrastructure to filter stormwater. If there’s a fountain—and I love fountains—let's make sure it recycles its water; if there is lighting, let's make it energy efficient. Let's take advantage of opportunities to bring more nature into the neighborhood with plantings of native species. And so on.

In my opinion, smart growth shouldn’t be considered smart if it doesn’t include green buildings and green infrastructure, if it doesn’t show respect to our historic buildings and local culture, if it doesn’t foster public health, if it isn’t equitable. And these are just the more familiar topics that I know best. My colleagues in the smart growth world don’t disagree with me about these things, but I find it disheartening that, after they nod their heads in a meeting, so many of them go right back to work on urban density and transportation issues, because that is what they know how to do—because that is where we as a movement have placed the overwhelming portion of our emphasis and resources. But it leaves out three-quarters of the 21st-century sustainability discussion, which is now also about health, food, water, resilience, local economic development, opportunity, and so on.
Certainly some smart growth advocates are promoting these things but, if so, they are doing so in addition to what we call smart growth, not as a central part of the smart growth agenda. Don’t believe me? Take a fresh look at the hallowed “ten principles of smart growth.”

1. Mix land uses  
2. Take advantage of compact building design  
3. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices  
4. Create walkable neighborhoods  
5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place  
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas  
7. Strengthen and direct development towards existing communities  
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices  
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective  
10. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions

For a long time, I thought the right approach was to reform smart growth from within, adding the concerns that weren’t at the forefront when the movement was founded. But I don’t think that works. Even if we add some neglected categories and tweak some others, we’re still stuck in a box that makes it all about defined issues and, to a great extent, measurable outcomes. We remain fixated on things that can be accomplished through policy initiatives and, to an extent, urbanist architecture and planning. That remains vitally important, but I don’t think it’s enough.
The truth is that the process of creating a better, more sustainable world—anchored by better, more sustainable places—is as much art as science.

Our communities of the future must not only reduce carbon emissions, save land, and encourage use of transit, walking, and bicycling. They must also contain beauty, warmth, and places of solitude and reflection. They must be significantly more dense than sprawl typically is, but also sometimes forego additional increments of density in order to maintain light, limit noise, provide privacy, and respect a human scale. They must be conducive to engaging the intellect and the spirit. When we pursue these things, we are out of the realm of smart growth *per se*, and into the realm of placemaking. I have become convinced that the two overlap but should not be mistaken for the same thing. In other words, sustainability in our built environment requires both smart growth *and* great placemaking.

If that’s too mushy for you, I’ll give you a more strategic reason. Those of us who are advocates of smart growth—and I’ve been one for almost 20 years—often make our case with numbers: amounts of pollution avoided, dollars saved in infrastructure expenses, acres of land conserved, and so on. Our opponents don’t do that, at least not much (in part because the numbers are not on their side). They appeal to emotion: do you really want, they ask the public, to live in or amidst tall buildings? Don’t you want a big yard for your kids or dog? Don’t you want to keep the freedom that your car gives you?
Those are not unreasonable questions, and we had better stop being dismissive of them. (While we are at it, we should lose the thinly veiled anti-car attitude, too.) If our preferences don’t aspire beyond good places to great ones, beautiful ones, lovable ones—places that comfort rather than threaten people in a setting that is sustainable—we lose the argument. And maybe we deserve to.

We need to stop thinking of smart growth as a goal. Instead, smart growth is one of several useful tools to achieving the more demanding goal of creating better, greener, more sustainable habitat for people. And where the two agendas conflict, the latter is more important than the former. If we don’t focus on that more ambitious goal, our movement may eventually become just as passé as sprawl is becoming now.

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