Shifting Perspectives
Planning Communities for Full and Frugal Lifestyles

The global challenges that are confronting the United States are enormous and include the new fiscal reality, climate change, global social and environmental inequities, shrinking resources, aging population, and environmental degradation, and unemployment, access to care, global health, and resource shortages.

I believe it was Einstein that said the problems cannot be solved with the same mindset that created them. I believe we need a change in perspective with more focus on lifestyles that embrace living locally with less, frugal innovation, rediscovering community and collaborative problem solving. We need to rediscover the connections between conservation and development, the economy, right livelihood and authentic community. This perspective could redefine planning as a profession and process; placing new emphasis on the diverse social, civic, technological and physical infrastructure required to accommodating more diverse and resilient lifestyles.

Community Design might emerge as a more holistic planning approach to Regional, City and Town planning than urban design; a profession that has taken on increasing importance in the last decades. Integrated community design solutions will be multi-dimensional and holistic with plans addressing physical infrastructure (buildings, transport and utilities), social infrastructure (health, education human services), green infrastructure (ecological services provided by open lands, farms and forests), technological infrastructure (communication and information systems) and civic infrastructure (diverse platforms to support community collaboration and cooperation).

The focus of planning and design needs to shift from development to conservation. Conservation policies, social programs and internet technologies will shape the built and the unbuilt environment more significantly than capital projects or development codes. Restoration, reuse and recycling of buildings, and infrastructure will conserve of materials, time and space. Planners will be focusing less on increased capacity and more on managing demands; and this will require much more attention to be paid to the temporal and virtual solutions. Strategies, policies and pricing will need to address the built environment (materials, energy, natural resources) as well as the immaterial aspects of community (relationships, heritage, societal values, and institutions).

It is possible that frugality and incrementalism will prevail over bold new redevelopment visions. Rather than building to accommodate growth, planners will focus on reconfiguring our built environment to use what exists more intensively and efficiently. Rather than calculate density of land use by addressing area of building per
measurement of land we might begin to calculate intensity of use; number of people occupying space on an hourly basis and calculations of efficiency per capita per square foot per hour. The metrics could also address the productivity to the land and structures considering how much energy and food are produced? How much carbon is sequestered? And how the earth community benefits? We might begin to think about productivity and lifestyle much more broadly; considering livelihood, health, and longevity.

If we adopt this approach, we might find that this shift will change our ideas regarding “sustainability”. Perhaps we will find that in rural or even suburban places and lifestyles can be equally or more efficient, productive and sustainable than the cosmopolitan urban lifestyle currently being promoted by many people and organizations as most responsible, desirable and sustainable. Perhaps the definition of “choice” as a smart growth principal needs to be expanded to embrace local living, local economies and new lifestyles. Perhaps our sustainability metrics need to address more variables.

As a simplistic example, compare the following lifestyles:

A professional couple lives in an urban dwelling (1000 SF), each maintaining an allocated office space in their employers offices (600 SF), they travel each week; each spending an average of 2 nights a week in a hotel (1000 SF). The residence sits vacant 40-60 hours a week during working hours, and another 16-20 hours while the professional is traveling. The allocated office space sits site empty evenings and while they travel. If you add children or elders into the scenario, more space and resources are consumed in care facilities that may sit empty evenings and weekends. Their home is small yet how much built space, land and energy is this lifestyle consuming per person per hour?

Alternatively, a professional couple lives on a rural property with aging parents and children in a larger home. The residence and land is used intensively. The professionals work from home and employ 2 or 3 others in their home based offices. They travel infrequently with extended family sharing elder and childcare responsibilities. As a result there are people on site using the land and building 24 hours of the day. They do not require offices off premises, stay in hotels or travel. Less or no resources are expended to heat and maintain unoccupied office spaces evenings and weekends, vacant hotels rooms throughout the day or unoccupied residences during working hours. The land is used for gardens, food production, habitat preservation and aquifer recharge. Considering the travel reduction and the amount of square footage that is occupied each hour of the day on a per capita basis, is it possible the second scenario might
represent a more efficient and less consumptive lifestyle? What would the calculations reveal if the metrics considered the eco system service benefits?

The above scenario is not completely academic. It actually has some parallels to a lifestyle shift that was thrust upon me. Due to the economy and a corporate acquisition I lost my professional position in a large international consulting firm.

I now live on much less. I own almost an acre of land, with a residence, an ADU, a garage and a shop. From this location my husband and I run 2 consulting businesses and a guest house with two rental units. We provide several service and professional jobs, host local and international travelers, and are engaged in restoration of buildings, the land and the shoreline. We are involved in our community and neighborhood professionally and socially. Potentially our place will evolve to a supportive community where we can age in place with friends and family who share our values and vitality. We envision shared gardens, homes, shops, and studios as well as shared cars, bicycles, kayaks, meal preparation and perhaps even caretakers.

We now live more fully on much less; less money, travel, consumption, and employment. We grow herbs, flowers, and vegetables that I share freely with guests, employees, and neighbors. I am less mobile and no longer own a car as I can bicycle, take the bus or borrow or share a car for trips to town. I no longer have commuting expenses or time. I rarely spend nights in hotels, log airline miles or dine out. I spend more time with my husband, sons and my aging mother. I am healthier and happier than I have been in years. I appreciate daily access to nature, views of the sound, mountains, forest and wildlife.

As a result of my new lifestyle I have contemplated what needs to change and offer the following:

- We need to live more frugally and more fully
- We need to expand lifestyle choices and allow and encourage a wider variety of lifestyles including a variety of live work formats in urban, rural and suburban neighborhoods
- We need to repurpose single family neighborhoods and incorporate new living and working formats including, home based businesses, co housing, multigenerational households, guest and traveler accommodation and non-traditional families. New homes need to be designed for more flexibility in use over time as lifestyles change. Homes should have the ability to “flex” and “morph” as places of residences, care, business and production
• We need technological improvements in small site or neighborhood waste water treatment and health department approval to allow rural lands to be used more efficiently yet insure the environment is protected.

• Landscape codes need to encourage productive landscapes

• We need to reassess our metrics for measuring sustainability, our definition of choice, and our assumptions of what suburban or rural lifestyles are and might be.

• Metrics should address patterns of production and consumption and the efficiency with which people rather than structures use resources.

• And most importantly, we need to recognize that living with less and sharing more is not a “sacrifice” but rather life enriching experience.

If selected, illustrations and graphs will be developed to support these ideas.