AT HOME, OR ON THE ROAD?

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Introduction

Some sports teams actually play better on the road. I’m not sure the same applies to the rest of us. I recently saw a photo of a sixteen-mile traffic jam in China that froze at least six lanes in either direction. It probably does not matter whether your car is a three-wheel Isetta, a hybrid, or a Mercedes -- in such a situation you are going nowhere, and fast. And for this we came down from the trees, then out of the caves?

This paper intends no little exposition, though opinion is my object. Don’t look for links or footnotes. There is growing pressure on urban areas, and I have serious doubts the institutions, designs, planning procedures, or political will exist in the year 2100 or even next year, to allow the human race to accommodate changing lifestyles, tastes, demographics, and availability of resources (at any price).

My Master’s thesis, prepared at the University of Colorado-Denver, showed a strong relationship between urban land values and the juxtaposition of office work space, retail outlets, and residential land uses. No value judgment regarding the relative density of the latter two was offered, though it has long been clear to me that spread is dead, in property and on our waistlines. If we can live and work within walking distance (my thesis was prepared before nearly everything fell onto an I-Pad and long before the onset of the “Great Recession” of 2008), and also meet most if not all our material, educational, and entertainment needs close by, to what else might we aspire?

The Shortest Distance Between Two Points is Under Construction

According to the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, the world’s urban population is predicted to grow from 3.5 billion in 2010 to 6.2 billion in 2050. Land-use traditions and purposes may differ in what we now term “developing” countries, but the challenges faced there are similar to those we have already faced in the “developed” nations. To travel from “A” to “B” in Washington, DC, is not really so different from getting around in Paris or Dublin or Kuala Lumpur, though the scale of the problem may seem different. I know of no place more difficult to secure a parking place on the street than Boston. Public transit is used by at most two per cent of commuters in the typical American city. It may be more difficult to measure the toxicity of our minds there than of the air.

Modes of transportation that move lots of people in a small amount of time, and also a small amount of conveyance volume per person, would seem to be sine qua non for any community. What the City of Phoenix, Arizona, set out to do at approximately the same time as a
network of automobile freeways was constructed there at least suggests a route toward the “promised land.” More about that below.

Before I retired I thought I spoke “developer.” I worked in economic development, regional planning, market analysis/economics, and as a commercial real estate appraiser. I have professional experience in 62 urban concentrations on three continents and one-third of the counties in the USA. To speak “developer” was once thought to mean one listened to “the market[s],” and it was hoped property interests did the same. But it has always been apparent to me that when “the market” needed four office buildings nine were built.

Perhaps recent experience has largely changed that. But in most places citizens may resist “top down” land organization decisions; hence, some principles guiding future “bottom up” processes might be in order.

The Geography of Practically Everything

The successful city will have multiple “attractants” in the near and distant futures. Employment, “quiet enjoyment,” safety, resource services (think water, refuse removal, ventilation, electricity, etc.), and connections will all mean plenty. It is no easier to get a latte from your cell phone than it is to get your hair cut by it. But tomorrow’s city will benefit from scaleable advantage -- from the electron to the soccer field, and beyond. Green space will always be essential. In the face of climate change it may become problematic to supply it, but bringing a little country into the city has more value than bringing some city to the country. Ask anyone who lives in the latter.

It is not important whether man caused climate change or is making it worse; the key is discovering whether the suite of phenomena we have observed for more than a decade and misidentified as “global warming” (some places will not be hotter) is cyclical or “structural,” to use the economist’s terms. Cities in harm’s way -- think beyond Venice to Miami, Mumbai, Hong Kong, etc. -- should be not only planning but already building the systems and infrastructure that will preserve and protect citizens and property. Because so many are likely to show up at the urban “party,” we must do all we can to be prepared. And we must do it now.

A sensibly organized city or urban region probably ought to move forward with a development scheme that recognizes the power of sprawl. Either we defeat it, or the opposite will occur. But is the nemesis of sprawl pure “density,” or might it be effective organization of variance?

What if an urban region were laid out as not just a polycentric pattern (every development wants to be “the center”), but a reproducible multi-node network of interdependent sub-cities? Each neighborhood in Chicago once had its own grocery store. Most had a druggist, a barber shop, and, yes, a bar. Can we imagine larger neighborhoods and integrate hills and valleys not topographic but density-based? Connect all of these with streets that welcome, not repel. Streets are places, too.
The more a type of land use is applied, the greater should be its distribution among a region’s sub-cities. We’ve done it with strip retail centers; why not intensify these kinds of land-use choices in the interest of focusing community interactions, services, and movement of many kinds? What this may mean is there may not be a full-service hospital in every sub-city, but there should certainly be a grocer, a druggist, a hair styling salon, and a brew pub, for starters.

Flexibility is the Mantra

How do we keep economic obsolescence from ruining this scheme? After all, there is little if anything to prevent everyone from rushing to the “in” sub-city while abandoning the “east side.” Residential tenure can furnish some answers.

Some of us will always want to rent our homes. Others will never rent. Most do either at one time or another. While I applaud concepts such as cohousing, it’s not for everybody. If stability is the aim, what institutional factors or practices might support it?

I think that somehow we need to embrace intergenerational housing in western cities, and to preserve it in many Asian and other places. Does that mean that grandma must have a bedroom or suite within your house? Not necessarily. Many elderly resist sharing a roof. But the concept of a carriage-house “nanny suite” design execution has a certain appeal. Think of the long-dormant “rumble seat” on some automobiles. I say dormant, for their return is not forever precluded. In similar fashion, one’s mother-in-law need not “come to visit,” but she also need not necessarily replace the maid. Multigenerational residential agglomerations recommend themselves to me because (1) no one needs to go anywhere to look after the immediate family; and (2) it is my experience that the longer one lives in a place that is otherwise satisfying and functional, absent economic upheaval or natural disaster, the longer one may remain there. I know that the older I become the less I want to go anywhere.

There is more. Whether you subscribe to environmental determinism or not, I believe there are ways to build our environment so that it adapts to us at least as much as we to it. I live in a small city where the community mall has died. It took nearly a decade to expire, and it was built in the mid-1980s. A vigorous debate has surfaced over whether its replacement (if a mall at all) should be an “indoor” or “outdoor” mall. People who have lived in Buffalo or Minneapolis have heard this before. The problem as I see it is, assuming a redevelopment is prosecuted in favor of current (perceived) tenant wishes, what is to be done when retailer preferences change? Note I did not say “if.” And the shift might not take fifteen years next time. Even fifteen years is not long enough to wear out the improvements. In Internet-catalog land, who’s to say the new mall can last even ten years?

My suggestion involves constructing buildings that can readily be “re-enclosed” and joined later. And they could be separated once again even later, if design is properly executed. Door location, structure orientation, common-area setbacks, all could be delineated and defined to permit indoor or outdoor with but a few weeks of effort.
The grand plan for the City of Phoenix, circa 1985, was to create a dozen or more “urban villages” not sprinkled around the valley but arranged like pearls on a string -- that is, oriented toward major intersections and (mostly future) limited-access freeway interchanges. While the idea looked good on paper, it nevertheless continued a predisposition to arrival at and use of expansive parking lots. Someone at city hall should have visited downtown Tempe, just northwest of the Arizona State campus. There is a slightly more enlightened “mixed/multi-use” development concentration that chose to apply shared parking. There were offices and retail by day and theater, coffee shops, and more by night. Here is a valuable lesson and question regarding implementation of any new macro urban layout idea. The first word any city councilman or alderman learns, even in the cradle, is “jurisdiction.” Each suburb or county inholding or enclave has usually been inclined to do things its own way, thank you very much. How tidy it would be if urban problems honored any kind of boundary.

In today’s fiscal environment it should be more easily recognized and accepted that it is more cost-efficient to administer urban or city services over a broader scope and scale in any event. There is a political element to everything, and unfortunately the “south forty” can effectively control the rest of the ranch. An agglomeration is what it is called, and to fix only a part of any one is to eventually ruin the rest.

Why not extend a flexible approach to the full suite of land uses? Excluding such things as special facilities (think prisons, and the like, though some hotels I’ve used might qualify for a medium-security conversion at any time), many improvements are quite similar to some others. I am certain any reader who gets around has seen office uses in industrial space, as well as retail -- even restaurants. Adaptability needs only a little ingenuity in terms of window lines, access, perimeter prescription, and signage to list but a few. If “the market” moves down the road, or even to another sub-city in the region, reconfiguration need not include demolition.

What Our Thinking Requires

I can almost hear the shudder from a few zoning authorities. Many of these hate “mixed-use” designations almost as much as some developers. In the latter case I believe that management challenges deter a few. In the former, I’m sure it’s probably only a lack of education in the topic. Resort communities (assuming these survive) are especially prone in my experience to use segregation and singularization.

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Not every geography can benefit from all of these approaches and strategies. And one size does not fit all. But every city has a reason for being where it is, and its attributes can be
preserved and enhanced by enlightened urban design, intelligent permitting, and, most of all, flexibility.

Sports teams do win on the road. Those who do it consistently usually become champions. Our task is to engage both the property development sector and public land-use authorities so that all city dwellers can also win at home. It may be the only way to attain lasting urban tranquility and opportunity for all citizens.