nowhere now here

The 19th century American landscape used to be small communities, containing finely integrated walk-able cores. These centers were strong with identity, diversity, intimacy, civic order and human scale. In general, however, post-world war development has been acutely lacking in this character and vision. Traditional pre-war development is responsible for such concepts as villages, hamlets and main streets, whereas contemporary development has produced subdivisions, strips and sprawl.

Development is the resultant combination of many forces. Today, growth is shaped by circulation systems, overzealous zoning ordinances and the formulaic economies of developers; not humanistic needs. The contemporary built environment is becoming largely devoid of most forms of community. They are less a community than a conglomeration of tracts, plazas and office parks connected to one another by threads of asphalt, not by the fabric of human life. This sprawl tends not only to confine people to their cars, houses and end destinations, but to discourage walking, mingling and participating in civic life. This is even more conspicuous now that most people spend more time privately in front of televisions, computer screens and hand-held electronics, than in the communal realm.

The automobile, instead of human beings, has become the contemporary form giver. In this high speed, self-mobile world, the car is the glorious agent of dispersion. The environment can no longer be understood as rural or urban, but as a regional network or roadways lined with buildings similar to electronic circuitry. Americans have driven themselves into being privatized nomads without place, forfeiting the pedestrian for the vehicular.

Zoning regulations have a drastic effect in forming the built environment. In the 1950's through 70's zoning ordinances were written to dictate mainly two criteria; the rigorous segregation of uses and a relatively low density of buildings. The principles that once created the public realm are no longer allowed. Zoning has been written to decentralize, making it illegal to build the integrated communities that were cherished and are still admired today, and have eliminated the clarity of rural verses urban by encouraging sprawl.

As opposed to current planning, which separates its various elements (residential, commercial, schools, retail) the traditional town wove them together with connections that were integral, walk-able, close and direct. Such a system is practical. Commercial centers benefit from the increased exposure created by trips to civic and recreational facilities. Parks and public buildings are better utilized when located at hubs of activity and within walking distance of residential areas. A fundamental reassertion of community over isolation, of Main Street over anonymous strips, of place over mobility is needed to reestablish the cherished traditional neighborhoods of the past.

The sad state of urban America, from the small town to the metropolis, has sent a terrible message to the public, which is that America is inept, that every attempt to build anything new results in some kind of failure and disappointment, and worse, that this is to be expected as the absolute norm. Modern planning, which isn't actually planning but the enforcement of abstract zoning laws adopted by political legislators, is de-civilizing our surroundings.

It doesn't seem to matter that all this is unattractive and eating up our natural landscape, as long as it is convenient. Few seem to care, the automobile is king, and there is an overwhelming tolerance for bad taste, inadequate planning, irresponsible land use and ecological waste.

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