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PARADISE LOST, ALIENATION IN AMERICA

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In cities, all across America, and especially in the newer cities of the south, growth is occurring in the heart of the city. By some estimates, nearly 150,000 people live in the in-town neighborhoods, those within two miles of the city center in housing that was not there 10 years ago. When asked why they chose this urban environment over the traditional subdivisions or apartments in the fast growing suburban cities most people say that they were looking to live in a place where they can reconnect with people. "I wanted to be able to walk down the street, buy a newspaper and cup of coffee or I wanted to be able to go out my door and walk to numerous different restaurants." Others are attracted to the breathtaking views of the skyline or cultural activities which are typically located in these in-town neighborhoods.



What we are hearing in these comments is a need to see and communicate with other people, if it is only to sit on a bench and watch them walk by. This connection provides a human scale to the neighborhood and gets people out of their house to interact with others.

Andres Duane, the architect and town planner, is often saying that one needs a center from which one can both leave and return. A center is a place in a community where different activities take place simultaneously. Carmel, California will not allow its residents to have their mail delivered. So six days a week, everybody goes to the post office. Here, they see old friends, converse with strangers, combine the trip with a stop in a nearby shop or lunch date. This simple ordinance has created a need for activities and resting spots around the post office which forces the community to interact and has created a vibrant center.

Most of the cities in the south have a mild climate for seven months out of the year. Even January and July have beautiful 70 to 80 degree days. Prior to air conditioning, buildings were designed to take advantage of the shade and breezes providing outdoor places to sit and live as part of one's house. Sleeping porches, dog trots, breezeways and window awnings were architectural designs adapting man to the southern climate. A house was designed for the shelter and comfort of people. The horse and carriage were provided for in a separate building. When the automobile became prevalent in the 1930's and 40's, most people still used outbuildings or the barn as a stable for their cars.

However, beginning with the post-war building boom, where there was a pressing need to provide affordable housing, builders began to change the style of the houses adapting them to air conditioning and the automobile. Most houses were built without an architect. As a result, front porches became smaller and eventually disappeared and those on existing houses were enclosed. The automobile created the need for a garage, carriages and horses largely disappeared. It was cheaper to attach the garage for the automobile to the house, so the need for having separate outbuildings diminished as well. The disappearance of the front porch and attachment of the garage to the house along with governments' belief that they needed to control growth through zoning have combined to have a profound negative impact on our society over the last fifty years.

Even in neighborhoods which were built 60 years ago, the enclosure of the porch and attachment of the garage to the house, has all but destroyed the ability to maintain a community. People no longer have a reason to be outside where they are able to converse with their neighbor. Months can go by when neighbors never speak, because once the garage door closes, they never have the opportunity to see their neighbors. Six-foot privacy fences block the simplest efforts at communication. For those without children at home, it is only the happenstance of retrieving one's newspaper at the same time or walking a dog that allows momentary glimpses or quick chats.

The front porch was a way to entertain safely without bringing someone inside the sanctity of the home. It was there to catch the breezes and be a place where one could find a community spirit willing to spend time with those who lived nearby. As a functioning livable place, it is now mostly gone in the post-war neighborhoods except in "experimental" communities like Celebration, Prairie Crossing, or Big Sky, Texas where it is a requirement of the building code.

As southern cities grew, each (except for Houston) became convinced they needed to hire planners to regulate what uses went where. Master plans which were blueprints for growth ensured that haphazard growth could not occur. Thus, road networks, shopping districts, office districts, and housing became regulated and separated. Rather than having the foresight, like Olmstead, to preserve large tracts as parks and malls at the heart of city, planners allowed this necessary resource to be relegated to ballparks, soccer fields and flood plains. Equally important, there was no ability to create a center of high density mixed uses where people can walk. As a result, neighboring cities which have appeared out of nowhere in the last 30 years have no center, no place for the elderly to congregate with the young on a green space or park just a few blocks from their urban home.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Plano, Texas which sits on the rolling plains of North Texas 20 miles north of Dallas. Once part of the 23 million acres of tall grass prairie naturally managed by itinerant Buffalo and wild fires, by 1960, Plano was a small farm town of 3,700. It boasted a railroad, interurban and US highway, where people grew row crops like cotton and onions. The booming northward growth of Dallas reached Plano in the 1970's and by 2000, it will have 225,000 residents and less than 10% of its 70 square miles will be undeveloped.

Plano was not allowed to have a center. The downtown was to the east and growth went west. City planners hired during the last two decades have made it a perfectly homogenized quilt of shopping centers, subdivisions and apartments. Every mile there is an intersection with the same looking shopping center all connected by the automobile. The density of development is nearly uniform and one would be hard pressed to differentiate one's neighborhood from another by its defining characteristics.

Where in Plano can one walk to connect to other people? How can you meet your neighbor when you can't see their car, don't know whether they are at home because they rarely have a reason to come out in the front yard. This is a virtual wasteland for singles and older people providing no opportunity for a chance to visit. Who is there to help when you need to reach out?

Plano is not alone. This controlled growth and need to build efficiently with conformity has permeated the entire society. Appraisers and realtors value houses by the square foot that is air conditioned; so, why should a builder construct a porch for which the appraiser won't give him credit and the lender will not recognize as having value? The irony is that the big front porch is the very thing that makes the typical American farmhouse such a classic and romantic image.

Americans seem to have a need to recognize the familiar. Every out of the way refuge now sells T-shirts and hats that look like those of every other town. We take comfort in knowing that a Big Mac in a McDonald's in Seattle will taste the same as one in Alabama, but at what price? Do we want our houses to look like the three models being offered by Pulte or Centex which were designed to generate the highest profit but not to fit on the land or use traditional building materials for the area?

Today, the demand from people who want to live in the older neighborhoods where the density and architecture is diverse allowing people to walk on the streets is coming from those very people who lived in the Planos of the world. These people recognized that something was missing. This is especially true for single people and those without children. When the kids leave home and a spouse leaves due to death, divorce, or just a business trip, the suburban home becomes a very lonely isolated place. Many of these urban dwellers realized that they could never be at home in such a place. I am reminded of countless newspaper stories where someone discovers that their neighbor had died (of natural causes); but, it took two weeks to discover them. This goes to something deeper than architecture, it is our need to belong to a community where we can interact with other people, exchanging ideas, being part of a fabric where one's life is woven together with those of others.

For more than 60 years, well meaning planners, government officials, builders and investors have alienated millions of people by building cookie-cutter cities where people are lost between the lot lines and privacy fences having no front porch or other way to reach out to others without breaking the norms of that society.

Recognizing this as a problem is a first step. Correcting it will be a long-term challenge that should start with the abolition or overhaul of the zoning code. Only then can cities seek their own density, creating centers in which people can live, work and play.

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