

The Demand-Side of Urbanism

*It is demand-side pressures that
forge the shapes of cities.*

IN A FAMOUS essay titled “Urban Civilization & Its Discontents,” Irving Kristol pointed out that in terms of the quality of people’s lives, it no longer much mattered where they lived. “For the overwhelming fact of American life today,” he wrote, “whether this life be lived in a central city or a suburb or a small city—or even in those rural areas where something like a third of our population still resides—is that it is *life in an urban civilization* [emphasis in original].” In the forty years since Kristol made this observation, its truth is even more obvious. Encouraged by the Internet, mobile phones, videotapes and DVDs, e-shopping and personal computing, the urban

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civilization that he described is firmly established. Incidentally, the spread of an urban civilization should not be confused with urbanization. Most countries around the world are urbanizing, but this does not necessarily mean that their civilizations are urban, far from it. Indeed, in many African and Asian cities, life is distinctly rural and un-urban.

“Urban,” in this context, can be defined as access to amenities and entertainments such as current movies, shows, and sports events, which today—even more than when Kristol made his observation—are available on cable, DVD, and the Internet. In the past, urban implied the way of life and culture of *big* cities. Big cities had skyscrapers, nightclubs, and excitement; small cities had sleepy Main Streets. In the United States, big cities predominated, both culturally and demographically. As late as 1961, when Jane Jacobs published *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, more people lived in big cities than in small ones. Even a decade later, this was no longer true. In 1970, when Kristol wrote his essay, slightly more people lived in small cities (between 25,000 and 250,000 inhabitants) than in big cities (larger than 250,000). By 2006, the total urban population of the United States had increased by more than 60 percent since 1960, but the proportion of the urban population living in big cities has steadily declined, while the percentage living in

small cities steadily increased; more than half again as many people lived in small cities as in big. The preference for small cities was confirmed by a recent Pew poll that found “not a single one of the 30 [largest] metropolitan areas was judged by a majority of respondents as a place where they’d like to live.”

The new small cities are in different places than the old big cities. They are predominantly in the South and West, rather than in the North and East. Climate has become an important urban attribute, whether it is the temperate Northwest, sunny Southern California, or air-conditioned Texas and New Mexico. The Pew poll found that the major metropolitan areas that appealed most to people—Denver, San Diego, Seattle, Orlando, and Tampa—all shared “warm weather, a casual lifestyle and rapid growth.” In fact, all of the highest ranked cities in the Pew poll were in temperate climates, seven in the West and three in the South.

The new cities are, on the whole, less dense than the old; simply put, they are horizontal rather than vertical. This form is the result of two factors: the prevalence of the private automobile as the chief means of mass transportation (compared to the railroads, streetcars, and subways that guided the growth of the old cities), and a preference for detached single-family houses (compared to the flats, apartments, and rowhouses that were the most com-

mon form of housing when the old cities expanded). The notable exception is Los Angeles, which is a horizontal city that also has extremely high density, thanks to large households and the predominance of multi-family housing. Another characteristic of the new cities is—paradoxically—the proximity of natural amenities such as beaches, lakes, mountains, and deserts. As David Brooks puts it, “These [favorite cities] are places where you can imagine yourself with a stuffed garage—filled with skis, kayaks, soccer equipment, hiking boots and boating equipment. These are places you can imagine yourself leading an active outdoor lifestyle.” Industrial cities did not need beautiful settings; post-industrial cities do.

DEMAND-SIDE URBANISM

Cities have come into existence through many mechanisms: by royal edict, by centralized plan, by government regulation, even by the individual initiative of do-it-yourselfers, which is how large parts of the megacities in the third world are built. In America, we have largely consigned community building to entrepreneurs. (It was thus from the beginning; most of the Founding Fathers dabbled in real estate.) With rare exceptions, such as the construction of large city parks in the nineteenth century, and the Great Society

urban renewal programs of the 1950s and 1960s, decisions about where and how to build have not been guided by bureaucrats or planners but by market demand. A market economy in a large and varied country that spans a continent inevitably provides many choices. You don’t like one neighborhood, you can always move to another. City schools don’t suit you, move to the suburbs. Want a bigger yard and are willing to commute farther, move farther out to the exurbs. Hate winters, go south; love hiking and skiing, go west. That means that the answer to the question “Can we design or construct places that are better suited to deeper human needs and purposes?” is complicated. We certainly can build such places, but will people come?

It is easy to guess wrong about what people want. For example, in the 1950s, planners decided that cars and people were incompatible in city centers and experimented with various innovative solutions to separating pedestrians and vehicles: plazas, decks, skywalks, underground promenades, pedestrian malls. Time showed most of these solutions to be distinctly unsuccessful. Downtowns with skywalks and underground tunnels usually managed to kill what little street life remained; pedestrian malls became deserted as stores migrated elsewhere. Most pedestrian malls have since been opened up to cars again, and the most

successful downtowns—San Francisco, Chicago, Boston—have mixed pedestrians and cars in traditional streets-and-sidewalks (the exceptions are pedestrian malls in warm climates such as Florida and Southern California, and in college towns such as Ann Arbor and Boulder).

Entrepreneurs have made mistakes, too. In the 1980s, the combination of shopping and entertainment was touted as the formula to breathe new life into the venerable shopping mall, resulting in megamalls surrounding amusement parks, water parks, and theme parks. But shopping-as-entertainment turned out to be a short-lived fad. Instead, malls struggled with declining attendance as shoppers abandoned department stores for the convenience and low prices of big box stores. Another failed experiment was the attempt to import the suburban mall into the city in the form of the multi-storey urban shopping mall. It turned out that people didn't like going up or down more than two floors, and they didn't much like parking garages, either.

The latest stumble has involved what is popularly known as the Bilbao Effect; that is, the perceived ability of distinctive and unusual architecture—so-called iconic buildings—to attract visitors and tourists to a city. The Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain did manage to put this old industrial city on the tourist map, but the phenomenon

has proved difficult to replicate. A series of startling-looking concert halls, museums, and libraries, which have ended up with budgetary over-runs and less than stellar attendance records, suggests that “the Bilbao Anomaly” might be a better description.

So, what do people want? What are the ingredients of successful urban design?

WATERFRONTS

The most successful urban projects of recent years have one ingredient in common: waterfronts. Starting with such early developments as San Antonio's Paseo del Rio and San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf, waterfront festival marketplaces spread to Boston's Faneuil Hall, Baltimore's Inner Harbor, Chicago's lakefront Navy Pier, New York's riverside South Street Seaport, and Miami's Bayside Marketplace. Waterside residential developments have appeared in New York, Toronto, Vancouver, Seattle, Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco.

As the citizens of London and Paris have known for a long time, nothing is as pleasant in the center of a city as a riverside promenade. Much like parkland, an urban waterway provides a spatial release from the density of the surrounding buildings. The 1.2-mile Esplanade alongside the Hudson River at Battery Park City

Figure 1: Esplanade alongside the Hudson River at Battery Park City in Lower Manhattan



in Lower Manhattan is a good modern example (Figure 1). The design includes all the necessary ingredients: comfortable benches, wide walkways, and shade trees. Although the river view is the main attraction, the details of lamps, balustrade, and paving enhance the experience.

Waterfront developments have taken three chief forms: retail and entertainment centers (Fisherman’s Wharf, Navy Pier), residential neighborhoods (Battery Park City), and parks. Say urban parks and most of us think of Frederick Law Olmsted’s creations in New York, Brooklyn, Chicago, Montreal, Buffalo, Louisville, Atlanta and many smaller cities. Created in the second half of the nineteenth century, city parks, with their Victorian bandstands and wrought-iron benches, were considered a quaint throwback to the past. No lon-

ger. There has been a renaissance in large urban parks, especially waterside parks, with new parks built or planned in Seattle, Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, Toronto, Dallas, and Los Angeles. One of the most unusual examples is Brooklyn Bridge Park, currently under construction. The park, which stretches over a mile beside the East River, is built on six disused piers that are being turned into meadowland, picnic areas, and playing fields.

Modern urban parks are more active than their Victorian counterparts, and Brooklyn Bridge Park will contain tidal pools for wading and a still-water basin for kayaking, as well as jogging trails, bicycle paths, and courts for handball, tennis, and basketball. The park’s eighty-five acres, planned by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, will also include non-recre-

ational uses such as apartment buildings and a hotel, whose development will generate revenue that will be used to maintain the park. The juxtaposition of urban density with nature sounds odd but has been a feature of American urban parks since Olmsted and Calvert Vaux laid out Central Park.

Parks demonstrate another feature of recent city building. We have learned that while city administrations are good at building infrastructure, such as parks, they are not so effective at executing development projects, so the implementation of the commercial parts of the Brooklyn project will be left to private developers. This combination of public and private participants is an important feature of contemporary urban design.

HISTORICAL LAYERING

The attractions of waterfronts are multiplied when, as in Brooklyn, they are combined with a sense of the past: the Brooklyn Bridge is a historical icon, of course, but the past is evident in the industrial waterfront whose gritty industrial aesthetic is reflected in the design of the benches, park structures, and playgrounds, and in the recycled materials used in the park. A real city, as Jane Jacobs pointed out long ago, must consist of new and old buildings to provide opportunities for

diverse experiences. It has taken architects and planners, who are understandably fascinated by what is new, far too long to appreciate this simple fact. The most successful urban places today are a combination of new and old, recycled old buildings adapted to new uses, preserving the many layers of the urban past.

The Yards in Washington, D.C. is another example of historical layering. The site is in a part of the city known as the Near Southeast, along the Anacostia River (water again!) on what was once a navy yard. This is a public-private partnership; the owner of the land is the General Services Administration, the agency responsible for managing the federal government's buildings and real estate, and the developer is Forest City Washington, which specializes in large urban projects. The forty-acre master plan, by Robert A. M. Stern Architects, Shalom Baranes Associates, and SMWM, reintroduces the streets and sidewalks that were there before the navy yard was created. The old industrial buildings are being preserved and converted into offices and condominiums; a machine shed will become shops. Although a single developer oversees the project, individual buildings are designed by different architects. New buildings, in an architectural style that could be called industrial chic, will be roughly ten stories high, in accord with Washington's height restriction. The residential density of the Yards is about

200 persons per acre, much denser than most residential neighborhoods outside Manhattan. Most of the blocks, whether they contain offices or apartments—or a mix of both—will have retail uses at sidewalk level, like a traditional main street. At the same time, the river’s edge houses a six-acre park (which opened in 2010), a boardwalk, a boat dock, and a large lawn for public events, as well as restaurants and a marketplace.

Immediately to the north of the Yards are 700 units of affordable housing, financed by a federal housing assistance program (HOPE VI) and built by private developers. An old public housing project has been replaced by a mix of social and

workforce housing with 900 units of market housing, as well as commercial and retail uses. A new park provides recreation space.

MIXED - USE

The chief public space of projects such as the Yards is the traditional street, provided with wide sidewalks and shade trees. Stores open directly onto the sidewalk; cafés and restaurants spill out onto outdoor terraces. The rediscovery of the main street model owes a debt to a pioneering real estate development, Reston Town Center (Figure 2), located in the Virginia sub-

Figure 2: Reston Town Center



Figure 3: Stapleton



urbs outside Washington, D.C. Started in 1978, this development is almost complete today, and will have a daytime population of 80,000 workers and shoppers, as well as 6,000 residents. Reston, planned by RTKL, combines twenty-story office towers and tall apartment buildings with lower retail buildings, a large hotel, and a central square. It is all new, of course, but the mixture of building sizes and styles—this is not a themed development—creates the impression of a busy downtown. Not exactly what Jane Jacobs had in mind, perhaps, but close.

Smaller-scale versions of Reston Town Center, sometimes referred to as lifestyle centers, have sprung up around the country. Some are in built-up cities such

as Dallas and West Palm Beach; others are part of entirely new communities. Stapleton, another Forest City project (Figure 3), is a seven-and-a-half-square-mile development on the site of what had been Denver's main airport. Some lifestyle centers look like Hollywood film sets from *It's a Wonderful Life*; the architecture of Stapleton's neighborhood center has a fresh modernity that could be Dutch or Scandinavian.

The common ingredients of successful lifestyle centers are vehicular streets that allow short-term parking, off-street parking in rear lots or garages, broad sidewalks that encourage uses such as café terraces, and sufficient population density. The latter is commonly achieved by introduc-

ing both offices and residential buildings above the retail spaces. Office workers populate the streets and restaurants during the day, while residents populate them in the evening and on weekends. Mixed-use has become a mantra for developers. The advantages are obvious but there are two chief disadvantages. Mixed-use buildings are more expensive to design and build than single-use buildings, so they work best in strong markets. Second, they require more management expertise since the owner must deal with a variety of tenants, which is why the most successful mixed-use developments have tended to be large, since the economies of scale in the design, construction, financing, marketing, and management of such complicated projects tend to favor large development organizations.

DENSIFICATION

Densification is the next great challenge for smaller American cities, not only the densification of downtowns, through urban infill projects such as the Yards, but also the densification of residential neighborhoods. A heightened population density promotes walkability, allows more use of mass transit, supports a greater variety of amenities, and produces more active cities. But most newer American cities in the South and West have been built to sub-

urban densities (three to five persons per acre). Denser residential neighborhoods—fifty persons per acre would be the upper range—will have to include low-rise apartment buildings and townhouses, as well as detached single-family houses, which is still the first choice of most Americans. Detached houses don't have to be built on sprawling lots, however. Traditional neighborhood development, or New Urbanism, has shown how single-family houses can be placed on relatively small lots—one-tenth of an acre rather than one acre. Houses facing pedestrian walks and a common green court, rather than sidewalks and streets, likewise increase density, at the same time reducing the surface of street paving.

If densification in large cities such as Washington, D.C. implies projects such as the Yards, what about small cities? In small cities in the Seattle region, the Cottage Company has pioneered developments consisting of clusters of cottage-like houses (Figure 4). In the Greenwood Avenue

Figure 4: Greenwood Avenue



project in Shoreline (population 53,000), eight houses sit on a 0.8-acre parcel. The small (less than 1,000 square feet) houses are grouped around a common green space that gets rid of streets entirely—cars are parked in common lots or garages. According to developer Jim Soules, it is the sense of community as much as anything else that attracts buyers to his developments. And fostering community is what urban design is ultimately about. Cottage clusters, like green courts, lifestyle centers, walkable downtowns, urban redevelopment projects and city parks, are all strategies with that end in mind.

CONCLUSION

We have learned a lot about building urban places in the last three decades. Bright ideas are all very well, but in urban design it is the market that has the final say. It is best to harness private and public resources, since private developers are better at understanding the market and delivering built products, although public bodies are better placed to tie individual projects into the city at-large and deal with large-scale infrastructure issues. Urban vitality is assured by well-designed streets and sidewalks. Single-use zoning has its place, but vital downtowns are the result of mixed uses: shops, offices, and residences. Density is important, and in most cities

the key to successful urban development is densification. Waterfronts and parks are essential ingredients in creating an urban sense of place. So is history. The most vital urban places are those that provide a sense of the past, preserving and adapting old buildings to new uses. In city building, adaptation—of ideas as well as buildings—is always better than invention.

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