The American city developed gradually and methodically, along transportation corridors and various bodies of water. These city plans used the ancient grid-pattern for regularity and efficiency. In addition to the physical plan, early planners allocated large areas for permanent open space at regular intervals. These open areas designed for parks and plazas are an essential and necessary ingredient in the design of cities. In older city plans of Savannah, GA, New Orleans, Los Angeles and New York City, you can experience these notable planning efforts in real-time. The conscious planning efforts of the old masters created housing prototypes, plazas, squares and streets with adequate space to accommodate vehicles, trolleys, green space and pedestrians. Some cities now attempt to reclaim the lost town square and urban parks in hopes of capturing the life and flare of the old city.

Around the world, cities that are successful urban spaces possess many of these forms. We know what successful city planning can do. What’s more, we know what happens to urban environments when city and regional planning policies lack insight and develop without looking to anticipate changes in the future. Presently, the current suburban
development that has moved well beyond the primary suburban ring of the 1950’s and 1960’s and further beyond the secondary suburban ring of the 1980’s and 1990’s, needs to be studied (see Fig. 1). The new suburban developments are moving to rural and forested areas bringing limited planning expertise and developed with an emphasis on 1960’s and further beyond the secondary suburban ring of the 1980’s and 1990’s, needs to be studied (see Fig. 1). The new suburban developments are moving to rural and forested areas bringing limited planning expertise and developed with an emphasis on maximizing profit and land use. The question for market-driven planning policies in suburban development design is how to design housing and at the same time, implement modern standards of comfort and usage for residents living in the new millennium.

This paper will discuss problems encountered with the new suburban model in contrast with the prototypical suburban models of the past and identify what modern notions of city and regional panning can do to create viable cities for the future.

1. The Primary Ring

As city populations grew and prospered, planning developments adapted. In some cities,
existing parks and urban spaces were compromised and reclaimed to serve the changing needs of a growing city. The automobile replaced the trolley and there was a need for parking space, business offices grew vertically and the need for housing expanded. When addition demands were placed on the central city, the city spread outward. The first and most primary suburban ring developed in a rational way, adjacent to the central city.

In response to social transformations and changing market conditions in 20th century living standards, a new housing type developed (see Fig.2). The new primary suburban housing type and neighborhood plan maintained much of the old city quality and services in the form of green space, parks, and most streets were designed to include sidewalks, lawns, and large backyards. City planners followed the rules of past successful planning strategies and understood people needed open space exercise and recreation.

2. The Secondary Ring

The secondary ring and especially the latest rural suburban development is planned without adequate sidewalk, lawn or outdoor recreation facilities. Some developments place homes within such proximity that windows are eliminated from an entire side elevation, thus losing one of the most valuable human aesthetics-daylight in

Figure 3: Homes without side windows
habitable space (see Fig. 3). These new suburban and rural suburban designs are often planned in response to market and land values. In this type of development neighbors are compelled to be more aloof and anonymous as they live so close together. Valuable solar light from even clerestory windows is missing in this design. Ownership and use of an automobile is therefore mandatory and necessary.

In addition to missing amenities, urban developments from New Jersey to Kentucky to Montana and Texas are creating plans similar in appearance and architectural design and some fail to show nominal intents to incorporate responsive planning strategies in design. Are we unknowingly creating communities that discourage human interaction? The front door of typical suburban homes is set far from the street and is without a small window or sidelight. You have to open your door to see who is there. The garage is placed in front of the house blocking valuable daylight and the view from the door. Meanwhile, obesity rates are rising among the population and among younger children the rise of obesity-related diabetes is unprecedented. Residents who wish to jog, stroll or simply walk to the grocer are unable to do so for lack of sidewalks and safety. Cities must adopt zoning practices that promote designs that approve higher standards and healthier lifestyles.

3. Our Electronic Lives

Walking through your neighborhood and knowing your neighbors by name are activities that promote healthy social relations and afford the opportunity to become familiar with people in your community. Knowing your neighbor lowers anxiety and fear among residents.
We should know the name of our neighbor’s child walking down the street at dusk. Neighbors should also be familiar with the adults and parents by who live nearby. But everyone is busy rearing, sleeping, driving, working, and recovering. When we notice one another it is often times through an act of nature.

When the electrical power stops and we lose the irresistible power of our cell phones, text messaging, computers, laptops, TVs, and music pods-only then do we become civil again. We quietly walk to the door or window and wonder. We finally open our door and hope we see our neighbor. Is your power out? We ask shyly. And then, for the first time, you engage in an actual conversation with fellow residents for more than one minute. For the first time in years you go beyond the small talk of sports and weather. We become civil toward one another as a result of losing our “electronic lives”.

The new suburbs must be designed to encourage interactions, conversation, walking and exercising. The planning strategy must not encourage mandatory use of automobiles for every trip. The new plans must go beyond the defensive designs of cul-de-sacs and the ubiquitous dead-end maze-making streets. The new suburb must be open and easily accessed by law enforcement, policing, fire and rescue services. Exercise space and walker-friendly sidewalks for residents must be part of the new design strategy from the onset and not something we try to implement later. Zoning practices must limit the
number of houses on each street or land area and allocate sufficient area devoted to open space and parks within each development (see Fig. 4).

In addition to individual requirements for residents, a site master plan that is flexible to accommodate future expansion and unforeseen changes is necessary. There should exist with each planning proposal a conceptual idea of how the plan will grow and change in the future. For example, how do these new communities address the idea or requirement to implement mass transportation that may move to their area? And how will these communities accommodate these corridors and transit stations in proximity? If the infrastructure or the planning allotments are not specified or considered now we will find ourselves resisting this type of change due to planning systems of the past.

4. The Short-Term City

There are modern suburban designs that have successfully designed workable spaces for residents. Demands for healthier amenities, jogging and walking trails have arrived. But there are more points to consider. Where are the parks? Where are the sidewalks for residents to walk and to exercise? Where is the space for the pets to do the necessary? How do you see passers by? How do you keep an eye on your children? We need more
plans with more daylight regardless of proximity (see Fig. 5).

In many designs the two-car garage door is the main feature facing the street. The backyard is also underutilized and the topsoil is removed and sod must be installed at an additional price. The backyard is uninviting and the only amenity is the notion of a “friendship fence”. The “friendship fence” is installed with alternating panels. Once one of the panels becomes compromised or in disrepair, the side with the visible frame is yours to repair. In this design each neighbor provides the repair cost to their particular portion of the fence and everyone knows their piece to maintain -- you don’t need to speak to your neighbor with this arrangement. The fence is also designed six feet-high so neighbors can’t see each other (see Fig. 6). Some neighbors purchase small step stools in order to each other. In the interim, we don’t complain, we simply drive home, raise the garage door and go inside. Many neighborhoods have become anonymous and singular place for residents in the urban landscape.

5. The Community Future

We live in an era similar to the Middle Ages where the only safe place was behind the great castle enclosure wall—a safe place from the unruly chaotic and noisy mass of the strangers in the city. The problems of the “central city” have yet to be conquered. Are
schools improving? Do we feel safe behind walls and gates? Do we see residents taking active roles in the state of their community? Are we busy working or too distracted to notice these subtle changes. What will happen to our cities in this new Millennium? In the next 50 years places like Chicago, Detroit, Miami, Houston, Los Angeles, Cleveland, New Orleans, and Houston may be quite different. They will solve their urban problems or move toward that goal or these cities will become places of chaos and the new suburban ring will be designed without any constraints.

The latest trends show people moving back to the city for many of the reasons mentioned. But to move back you must have a six-figure income to afford most of the new town homes and condos. The new urban renewal “buzz” word is called mixed use or mixed income planning strategies. These new communities are replacing single-family residents with double and triple densities on the same block. We have come full circle with planning and design approaches for the American city.

6. Conclusion

Exercise, fresh air and a friendly environment are basic necessities in community design. Additionally, mandates that addressed problems of crime, poverty and quality education remain unsolved after many years of costs and proposals. The problems of the city will expand yet again if they are not solved in the near future. These problems will be part of the new suburban life. In the past the suburb was not a place we would anticipate chaos- suburbia was a paradise and refuge from the city. A new round of old anxieties and fears will arise if problems of the city move to suburbia. How will we police the myriad of gated communities and the labyrinth of streets? What will be the response time? What is
our strategy if these new communities fail and become as a central city. What happens if there are food shortages or water shutoffs and the only source is at the suburban mall? We may see food, fuel and water shortages at the same time. These are questions planners, designers and architects must ask if of the new American city.

Figure 7: The new housing type

“When the city ceases to be a symbol of art and order, it acts in a negative fashion: it expresses and helps to make more universal the fact of disintegration.”

-Thomas Mann

William Batson
A & M University
References


