

DEMOGRAPHIA

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Livability: The How-It-Never-Was Illusion

Both the smart growth movement and especially its new urbanist component frequently talk about “livable cities,” and imply that, over the past 50 years, America has developed cities that are not livable. This will come as news to the unprecedented millions of Americans who live a life style that is the envy of billions around the world.

Nonetheless, the smart growth movement bases its judgment on foggy notions of how things used to be in the American small town. There was a greater sense of community. People used to sit on their front porches and spoke to passersby on the sidewalk. They gathered around the cracker barrel at the corner store, to which they could walk every day to get their daily provisions. And, most of all, they had no need to use cars, because virtually everything was within walking distance. Much of this was true. For example, the older eastern and midwestern cities had Catholic churches so close that mothers could easily fulfill a daily obligation without a car, and usually without a streetcar or bus. Livability congers up visions of the physician living in a large house in the middle of the block flanked on either side by bungalows rented by the blacksmith and the custodian.

New urbanism seeks to re-establish this livability, albeit without the church. But the “Livability Agenda” misses some crucial points; most notably that things were never as they seem today.

Technology, from the automobile to low cost long distance telephone service, to the Internet and air conditioning has redefined community. People did not spend more time with their neighbors than their geographically distance friends or relatives because they preferred their neighbors; rather technology had not made longer distance communities feasible. Nowadays, much of community is more a function of specialized common interest than proximate geography. Community still exists, but in many respects people operate in multiple communities, local and remote, the latter made possible by telecommunications and information technology.

People did not sit on their front porches and speak to passersby out of a sense of community --- there was also the matter of getting out of uncomfortable non-air conditioned houses. People walked by on the sidewalks for the same reason. Doubtless

these activities were more rare in the frozen dead of winter, say in Cleveland, than during the sweltering summers. A sense of community is not dependent upon the season.

Now people maximize their leisure time and standard of living by traveling to the discount department stores, the supermarkets and specialized “big box” stores that have done so much with their more favorable economies of scale to improve the affluence of people, especially those with lower incomes. Changing tastes now have people traveling by car mega-churches in the suburbs, rather than walking or driving to nearby churches. Or, they are even more likely to the lake, mountains or other recreational locations. And, generally, the income based spatial discrimination that places the residences of the wealthy away from those of the less affluent operated then as now. Such a pattern persists virtually everywhere that people are allowed to choose where they live. It is not a well-known fact, for example, that the core of Paris, with its affluent core so different from the US model houses its minority poor in suburban ghettos. Minorities make up a large percentage of the population in Stockholm’s Stalinist apartment blocks.

And then there is the fact that by no means everyone lived in the mythical small towns that populate new urbanist minds. Millions lived in large cities. Millions did not have front porches and many of them were able to fulfill their community hailing obligations by sitting in upper story windows, where the wind performed the same function as on the front porch. Many others didn’t even have windows that faced outside, much less the street.

Perhaps the ultimate illogic of the livability thesis is the proposition that consumers have been seduced by automobile advertising and marketing of suburban living to accept a style of life so diametrically opposed to their own best interests. This absurd notion, that people buy cars because General Motors or Toyota advertises them is akin to arguing that without the self serving advertising of refrigerator companies, people would face daily spoilage of food or that without advertisements for air conditioning, people would bake ignorantly in the summer, all the while stashing away the excess income not spent on these conveniences. Such errant thinking is perhaps best illustrated by the oft-repeated phrase to the effect that Americans have a “love affair with the automobile.” By the same standard Americans have a love affair with refrigerators, air conditioning and adequate public health, a love affair that seems to have infected virtually every nation not too poor to afford it.

In fact, the American consumer is not duped. Nor are the millions of suburbanites who have left the cities of Europe to settle in the auto-oriented suburbs. People tend to do use their resources to purchase the best life styles they can, General Motors and Toyota to the contrary notwithstanding. Finally, one wonders why the many millions spent on transit marketing campaigns in the last 30 years have not found a similar dupable consumer. The reason is simple (the latest US Census reported that fewer people used transit to get to work in 2000 than in any of the four previous censuses that included the survey question). People are not in the market for transportation that is generally unable to take them where they want to go, and when it does, much slower than by car.

Genuine livability is evidenced by the choices that people make. People buy cars because they satisfy both their needs and desires, and they buy houses in the suburbs for virtually the same reason. They make these choices because they are more livable than the alternatives. It should come as no surprise that the smart growth movement has, with its definition of livability, turned semantics on its head, just as it has with "smart growth." itself. The so-called livability agenda needs to be exposed for what it is --- urban planners, architects and other urban elites who are not content to live their own lives, but must also control how others live. No one should object to development of a misnamed "livable" community freely chosen and paid for by its residents. This is consistent with the Lone Mountain Compact statement to the effect that absent a material threat to other individuals or the community, people should be allowed to live and work where and how they like. But such a measure of freedom offends the self-appointed elites who want to control everyone else. In Marxian terms, they would have a dictatorship of the busybodies.

The livability thesis is based upon a revisionist, doctrinally enhanced misreading of history. The architects of livability seek to design a "back to the future" that never was and has even less chance of sustainability than Robert Owen's New Harmony or any other of history's many failed utopias.



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**Demographia is "pro-choice" with respect to urban development.
People should have the freedom to live and work where and how they like.**

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