

# The Public Purpose

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## **“FIDEL GIVES US CANDY”: OF CHARETTES, VISIONING AND CONTRIVANCE**

By Wendell Cox

During the 1960s, after the communist revolution in Cuba, a story circulated in the United States about one of the ways that the dictator Fidel Castro attempted to ingratiate himself to elementary school students. Teachers would instruct the children in the class to close their eyes and ask Jesus for candy. Of course, no candy arrived. Then, they were told to close their eyes and ask Fidel for candy. Of course, at that very moment the candy arrived at the classroom door. Virtually every student reaches the same conclusion as to Fidel's superiority, whether unwitting or under the social requirements of "groupthink." The story may or may not be true, but its point is important. What can appear to be choices may very well be the result of manipulation or contrivance.

This reminds me of some of the "visioning" processes that occur in urban development and regional planning exercises. A meeting (sometimes called a "charette") is called. High paid consultants and agency staff explain to the participants how a vision will be developed about alternative futures, with respect to neighborhood design, urban planning or some other issue of concern. Invariably, the consultants will trot out a slide program purporting to show the choices that are available. Do we want the new development to look like Levittown or the pristine, nostalgic small American town of 1900 in which there was never any disappointment, much less conflict. The slides are carefully chosen --- indeed the choosing of the visual images is perhaps the most powerful manipulation that goes on in such processes. Of course, the participants shun the very thought of the "ticky tack" houses of the past or the American suburbs that no-one would want to live in and which, according to William Howard Kunstler, will soon fall of their own weight. The clear winner? --- How things used to be (but, of course, never really were).

But there are problems with this approach. Contrivance is just the beginning, but a very important beginning. For example, this article has its own little visioning process. The two pictures below offer alternative views of urban development, an exaggerated example, to make the point very clearly.

**Figure 1: Typical Suburban Street Scene:** The first is a suburban neighborhood in Toronto (yes, urban planners, there are suburbs in Canada). Suburban neighborhoods are the bane of urban planners, the wasteful scourge that the American home-building industry has forced most people to live in. They are also where virtually all growth has occurred for decades in high-income world urban areas from Japan to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Western Europe (see the **Urban Tours by Rental Car** website, at [www.rentalcartours.net](http://www.rentalcartours.net)).



**Figure 1: Typical Suburban Street Scene**

**Figure 2: Typical Urban Street Scene:** The second is a suburban street in the Rio de Janeiro Rocinda favela. Here, one might argue, we have sustainable densities and a width of roadway that may be too narrow even for both New Urbanists and the cars which have done so much through history to impoverish populations in the uniquely selfish societies of the West. I have been in Rocinda. The sense of community here is indisputably more intense than in the suburb in Figure 1. Of course, people live in Rocinda because they prefer to, having rejected the more comfortable, but distasteful life, that within their reach in the Toronto suburb.



**Figure 2: Typical Urban Street Scene**

Of course, neither picture is representative of the norm. They are rather, representative of choices made by the visioning process designer to influence the views of participants in a particular way.

Doubtless, in the present visioning process, a majority of the internet attendees will choose Figure 1 over Figure 2 --- demonstrating the clear will of the entire community that suburban living is preferable. And, of course, it will be deemed to be preferable for all, since we will wish to take other choices away from people or make them very difficult, consistent with current thinking in urban planning.

Analytical reports from Washington to Vancouver and further will refer to the indisputable preference for suburban living, just as today's smart growth reports use the non-scientific and non-representative outcomes of charettes and

visioning processes as proof that people want to live next to and on top of one another.

How this operates is illustrated by what is perhaps a leading report in Canada, which relies on the visioning processes conclusions as a principal justification for “smart growth” (perhaps because the other reasons for prohibiting people from doing what they want are so unconvincing).

Which brings us to perhaps an even more important point. These processes are not representative. They are, in fact, elitist and anti-democratic. The public meetings do not attract a representative cross-section of the populace. Indeed, public meetings and hearings seem to attract the same people over and over. Often these are people much more interested in controlling the lives of others than in living their own. It is what I have called the “dictatorship of the busybodies” in a previous article. The Los Angeles County Transportation Commission meetings and hearings that I attended, virtually without absence, for more than eight years makes the point. At every meeting we could expect to see the same people, and I don’t mean the hordes of paid consultants and employees representing local bureaucracies, vendors or the press. There were the interested citizens. If we had made the mistake of believing that the views expressed by these attendees, Los Angeles might today have a rapid transit system based on ski-lift cable technology or hovercrafts operating in the usually, but not always, unflooded bed of the Los Angeles River (and other periodic waterways in the region).

Of course, the contrived visioning processes and charettes routinely exclude experts who might posit alternative views. I suspect that the Cascade Institute’s John Charles, who probably knows more about urban planning in Portland than anyone working in Metro headquarters, is not a routine, equal-footing presenter at visioning processes in that community. But that’s not surprising, considering the politically correct urban planning agenda that is being advanced. The views of John Charles or Randal O’Toole are at odds with the urban planning catechism and they are as welcome as a Mormon theologian at a Baptist prayer meeting. This is not to criticize either Baptists or Mormons. It is simply to place in its proper category the theology that operates under the guise of urban planning.

The visioning processes routinely exclude those who will pay the price --- the low-income and lower-middle-income households whose housing and product prices will invariably be driven upward by the attractive designs of the consultants and the decisions of the participants who haven’t a clue about how their elitist visions will make life more difficult for others. Here is a world without economic consequences, in which the few tell the many how to live --- in a world where very few would ever turn their lives over to others, whether religious clergy, urban planning theologians or busybody neighbors.

A further difficulty is that much of what is considered in these visioning processes really has no place in the arena of public discourse. That will be the subject of a later piece.

In the end, the outcomes of often contrived visioning processes and charettes should be given no more weight than “man on the street” interviews in an agenda driven Public Broadcasting System production.

Now close your eyes...



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