

NEW COMMUNITIES
AN ALTERNATIVE
TO UNPLANNED SUBURBAN SPRAWL

Since World War II the private land development and home building industries have converted hundreds of thousands of acres of raw land into homes. They have not only met the pentup war time demand, but that resulting from the continuing high rate of formation of new families. A surge of urban growth has swept out from the old cities and suburbs into wooded and agricultural land. Millions of homes have sprung up on former farms; millions of families have acquired a home in the new suburbs.

The development of new suburbs was, in fact, determined by the location of the basic raw material of the home builders--land. It was also destined because so many Americans dream of the privacy and spaciousness of an individual home on an individual lot.

But the process of developing new housing in the suburbs is becoming increasingly beset with troubles, and the new suburbanites are becoming aware of some disturbing dissatisfactions. A University of Michigan study has revealed that one out of five people living in the suburbs longed to move further into the "unspoiled" country. Not revealed by the survey was the strength of the "return to the city" reaction to disappointment in suburban life, supported by the new and convenient living offered in redeveloped neighborhoods.

Some suburban problems are felt most intensively by the land developers and the builders, others by the local governments and other public jurisdictions and all of them directly and indirectly affect the new home owner. The suburb has much to offer him in terms of privacy and a comparatively more pleasant living environment for his family. It is also beginning to cost him much more than he bargained for as local taxes rise, and he is beginning to sense some of the intensifying problems of rapid and disorganized urban development--rising costs, in time and money of the journey-to-work; the loss of open-space land, and the lack of convenient and adequate recreational opportunities, shopping, and community and cultural facilities.

Probably the most pressing problem facing the builders is a land shortage. There is still a large amount of undeveloped land surrounding many growing urban areas. But the spreading suburbs have already consumed much of the best land and there is a real and increasing dearth of reasonably priced, developable land that is accessible and close-in to employment centers and that can be serviced readily with municipal sewer and water lines. There is a dearth of land that can be acquired in large enough chunks to permit the most efficient production at a price that the builder can afford or that allows a housing price range that will meet a mass market. Land prices have been increasing in most urban regions.

The suburbs themselves have added to the builder's troubles by reacting to mass building, with acreage zoning. Suburban towns and villages, disturbed by the loss of open space and the flood of new families have enacted such restrictive zoning regulations--requiring two or more acres per family, for example--that only the cream of the housing market can meet the requirements. Acreage zoning thus increases the pressure on, and the price of, undeveloped land and adds to the builders' problem of getting land. It's a vicious circle of an increasing demand creating a decreasing supply.

Another common reaction of suburban communities is a tightening of regulations governing land development. The developer must meet higher subdivision standards for streets, utilities, and parks, and he is often required to provide them at his own expense. Although some requirements may exceed reasonable criteria, by and large the result is better development at less cost to the general taxpayer. But higher land and site development costs require a large investment by the developer and tie up his capital for long periods, thus reducing his capability for buying more land for future development. The rising cost of buying land and constructing site improvements is creating a heavy financial burden on the home builders, especially the smaller operators.

Higher land prices and development costs are reflected in higher home prices. Every increment added to land costs, in fact, prices suburban living beyond the economic reach of substantial numbers of potential home buyers. These families have no choice but to seek better housing within older areas of the central city.

Because of this squeeze on land the developers and the builders have had to take their land where they can find it. High priced land is leap-frogged; where other land at lower prices becomes available, it is developed, no matter the shape or size. The resulting checkerboard pattern of development precludes any attempt to plan and create urban orderliness. A community of human interests and an attempt to plan interrelated urban activities is lost in the disorderly arrangement of people, their homes, and their jobs.

Racing for developable space, the developers often outrun the community services and facilities that support good land development. Lacking convenient connections to the municipal water and sewer lines, the builder resorts to individual wells and septic tanks. It has been estimated that about 23 million suburban dwellers have well and septic systems. These systems eventually prove inadequate and dangerous to the public health, and must be replaced with public systems at a double expense to the home owner.

The municipal plumbing is only one of the public facilities and services that must be provided and maintained by the suburban communities.

Every new subdivision adds to the municipal budget for public facilities and services. There are new highways, parks, playgrounds, schools, fire stations. There is demand for additional police, firemen and sanitation workers. These new public costs are not soon returned by the tax income from the new subdivision.

Urban sprawl has added to these high public costs of developing and serving suburbia. It's much more costly to provide services to a sprawled development than to a well planned development of higher densities. A study for Fairfax County, Va., estimated that the sewer costs for 465,000 people concentrated in satellite communities would amount to \$20 million, while the same money would provide public sewer services to only 200,000 people in urban sprawl. Similar unnecessary increases could be expected in the costs of most other community facilities and services.

"Satellite cities"--one of a number of alternatives to uncontrolled urban sprawl--have another stated advantage. A study of the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. area concluded that they could be designed to reduce peak hour travel by as much as 20 percent--thus saving personal travel costs and the public investment in transportation facilities.

Projections of future urban growth create grim pictures of things to come for the land developers, the home builders, the suburban governments, and home owners, present and future, if urban sprawl continues to be the predominant pattern of growth. Our urban population will grow from the 125 million people in 1960 to a probable 193 million in 1980 and perhaps to 279 million by the year 2000. The present 21 million acres of urbanized land will have to be expanded by an additional 11 million acres by 1980 and another 13 million acres by 2000. Where most of these people will live and where the land must be found to support them is obviously in the suburbs yet to come. Even now, the suburban population growth rate is seven times that of the central cities. Between 1690 and 1980 one million new homes will be needed in the San Francisco Bay Region. If the present sprawl trend continues, urban development in that nine-county area must spread out over a 5,000 square mile area, six times the area now urbanized. More than 75 percent of the land would be developed and practically all farm land would be gone. It has been estimated that the Baltimore-Washington, D.C., urban region will almost double in population by 1980 and spread over 5,060 square miles.

If suburbia has had its troubles in the past, just wait for the future.

The individual home owner and taxpayer is and will be most directly and severely affected by the troubles of suburbia. It is he who must pay the costs of high land prices, inefficient development patterns, and increasing municipal budgets. And the return on his investment is increasingly

less attractive. Pressed by the urgency of building schools and providing additional services, to keep up with the burgeoning population, suburban governments have been forced to defer action on some of the expendables.

The new suburbanite is lucky indeed to enjoy the luxury of a convenient library. He sees valued open spaces gradually disappearing, while congested highways and deteriorating public transportation are consuming more of his time and money for the daily journey-to-work.

It's an overly simplified accusation to blame the troubles of suburbia on the present methods of land development, yet this is generally true. One wonders why the "crisis" is not much more critical than it is when the present process of urban growth is examined. The process is under some public constraints of planning and zoning, but these are as numerous as the numbers of governments--rarely do they make anymore than limited sense in terms of the whole urban area. Such planning and zoning have negative rather than positive values. Essentially, urban form is the product of thousands of uncoordinated public and private decisions--by land owners, developers, home-buyers, and governments--influenced by a whole host of variables--land prices, costs of facilities, individual tastes and desires, economic conditions, prejudices, politics, and the rest.

There are only two kinds of significant development today that can truly be said to conform to planning--planning in the sense of preconceived objectives, designs, and timing. One of these is urban renewal; the other is the "new town."

Briefly, a new town, consisting of several thousand acres, is developed by a single owner in accord with a single development plan. It offers the advantages inherent in any planning, whether it be architecture, engineering, or urban planning, that can design and develop the whole product. The residential, commercial, and industrial areas can be better related to each other, the highway and street system can be designed in its entirety, and sites for public facilities can be chosen to provide maximum service. And all of this can be done at great savings in costs when contrasted with present methods of development. The new town approach to development promises better housing, a more convenient and healthful urban living, at a cheaper price.