

In Brent Ryan's ambitious and well written article, "The Once and Future Neighborhood" [Spring 2009], the author is correct in calling for a wider array of neighborhood models than the suburbs have offered to date. Infusing uniform and homogeneous housing tracts with new uses, hybrid building typologies, and higher density can, among other strategies, contribute to creating a more varied urban fabric addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse populace. While design innovation can contribute to addressing the search for a new multifarious urban order, the challenges of realizing this vision are not insignificant, as serious hurdles associated with property rights and outdated zoning regulations need to be overcome.

Yet the current financial crisis highlights the need — and opportunity — for generating new solutions to the "suburban problem," the focus of many recent articles in the popular press by David Brooks, Paul Krugman, Allison Arieff, and Bruce Katz, among others. As large patches of suburbs from Charlotte, North Carolina to Las Vegas are boarded up and decaying (see "The Next Slum?" by Christopher Leinberger in *The Atlantic*, March 2008), malls and retail centers are failing at an alarming rate (see www.deadmalls.com). Richard Florida notes in his recent *Atlantic* article ("How the Crash Will Reshape America," March 2009) that these symptoms reflect a deeper shift in the country's spatial-geography resulting from fundamental and historic changes in our nation's underlying social and economic structure. With over 50 percent of the populace living and working in suburbia, the success of the country very much depends on the suburb's economic, social, and environmental health. To survive as a country, we need designers to take a leadership role in addressing these issues, as the transformation of suburbia is the design frontier worthy of the most innovative talent.

As Rahm Emanuel recently noted, "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." The stimulus package, with its emphasis

on infrastructure, green building, and development of renewable energy sources coupled with design innovation, can help transform this crisis into an opportunity to regenerate a new, more varied and sustainable (sub)urban metropolis.

Paul Lukez AIA

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Your panelists on community-institutional relations ["Them and Us," Spring 2009] were correct in their belief that a new, more constructive era in "town-gown" relations is possible. This hope is based on an increased appreciation that great institutions exist in stable, diverse neighborhoods, and likewise that residential communities benefit from healthy, engaged institutions.

For our part, Fenway CDC — no stranger to town-gown struggles — has turned the page, making the pursuit of institutional partnerships a centerpiece of our strategy to advance our vision of a diverse, vibrant community where institutional and community interests are balanced and synergistic. But this endeavor is a two-way street. While institutions recognize that they benefit when they exist in stable, pleasant neighborhoods, too often that recognition is trumped by their insatiable appetite for property. Such encroachment undermines the viability of the residential communities and destroys trust between the institution and the community.

Until the institutions and city government, which serves as referee in these interactions, prioritize viable communities and mutually respectful community-institutional relations over unfettered expansion, it's premature to declare that a new era for town-gown relations has arrived.

Carl Nagy-Koechlin

Fenway Community Development
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In "Them and Us," Steve Cecil comments that "We have to make sure that the focus is on the neighborhood and what makes a great neighborhood."

Unfortunately, the focus in North Allston and North Brighton for the last decade has emphasized designing a great future campus for Harvard University, and this has often been in direct conflict with having a great and vibrant neighborhood today. Harvard has purchased hundreds of acres, has gone to court to evict a major tenant, and has established a real estate monopoly and an abundance of vacant and under-utilized property far beyond the borders of its 50-year master plan. The Boston Redevelopment Authority and Harvard frequently remind residents about the eventual renaissance of our community, but those vague promises stand in stark contrast to the blighted property that Harvard has mothballed.

Also in that article, Rebecca Barnes stresses the importance of trust and transparency, and Omar Blaik notes that "the administrative structure of most institutions has never been designed to engage with the community." Harvard's Allston Development Group is responsible for obtaining zoning permits, but it isn't clear if anyone at Harvard is dedicated to building a relationship with its neighbors based on common interests. The ingredients of an enlightened town-gown relationship make so much sense, which makes Harvard's narrow self-interest and the BRA's acquiescence all the more perplexing for community leaders in Allston and Brighton eager to support a mutually beneficial Harvard expansion.

A recent letter by Mayor Thomas Menino to Harvard President Drew Faust suggests that making a great neighborhood may soon become a priority. My neighbors and I hope that Harvard and the City jointly embrace this notion in a sustained and meaningful way.

Harry Mattison

Allston, Massachusetts

“Hipsters in the Woods” indeed! David Fixler’s article [Spring 2009] provides a good overview of the several communities of Modern houses that went up outside Boston in the immediate post-WWII years. We hardly felt like hipsters, but we were eager to get to work and, endowed with the zeal of the Modern movement, we were terribly eager to imbue everything we touched with our new-found identity.

The stars seemed to be beautifully aligned: land close to town was plentiful, construction costs were reasonable, mortgage rates were low, and there was in the Boston area a market (although limited) of well-informed potential clients (many forming new families and with limited budgets).

Today, land availability and costs of almost everything are drastically different. But one can still ask where is the zeal in the profession and the market for this sort of thing, this “adventure,” if you will. The single-family house on its own plot of land, still a potent vision for Americans, may be less viable (at least in the crowded Northeast), but the tenets of Modernism can still be applied in more dense configurations: closer scrutiny on how people want to arrange their lives at home, more sensitivity to the features of a site — privacy, views, and in this latitude, orientation.

There are factors that get in the way of *objective* planning and design (among Modernism’s tenets). When it comes to how they choose to live, Americans are very conservative. And developers (who dominate the market) do not stray very far from this perception. Still there are signs that things could change: life in these times might become more modest, municipalities are becoming more sophisticated in how their land might be developed, and developers are beginning to understand that a more sophisticated market is there to be satisfied.

Walter S. Pierce FAIA
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David Fixler’s “Hipsters in the Woods” told an inspiring story about citizens who saw the value in putting their energy into creating communities that would improve their quality of life. That there might be a

renewed interest in homes that are smaller (and therefore more environmentally sustainable) and better designed than the feature-laden “products” that glut the new-homes market now is heartening.

However, I worry about glorifying the model of the single-family home on half-acre lots. Although the houses themselves may make “a minimal touch on the land,” the wide sweeping roads that must connect them do not. The miles of utilities that must stretch throughout these rural settings are not an efficient use of our resources.

The word “community” was often used in describing these developments. How a sense of community was provided was not demonstrated. Are there places for neighbors to come into contact outside of their cars? Are there worthwhile destinations for non-driving teens? Are there places for the non-driving elderly to meet and socialize?

Another trait these developments shared in common was that they served a very distinct slice of society. Knowing that people who live in demographically homogeneous neighborhoods are less tolerant of those who are different from them, can we in good conscience promote a neighborhood development pattern that serves a single economic bracket, a single education level, a single version of the nuclear family?

I hope that society does find a renewed appreciation for the thoughtful design of the houses in these developments as well as the attempts that were made to preserve the natural topography, but I hope we can recognize which qualities are unsustainable, which qualities do not contribute to the health and well-being of our communities, and which should not be emulated.

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