

RADICAL URBANISM

The Case for Mom and Pop

by **Matthew Frederick RA**

“You can’t decide ahead of time what activities you want to see. Economic life is full of surprises, and if you decide what you’re going to base your economy on — what do you have to think about? Things that already exist. You’re ruling out innovation right away, and yet innovation is of the essence for a live and prospering economy.”
— Jane Jacobs

It is easy to believe that we live in an enlightened era of urban planning. The arrogances of 20th-century Modernism are behind us, the suburb has become everyone’s favorite whipping boy, and the cityscapes on our drawing boards are humane and engaging. We have developed a remarkable array of resources to promote and safeguard the urban condition. From historic-district protections to smart-growth policies, architectural review boards to community-development block grants, Main Street Programs to affordable-housing regulations, and the Gateway Cities Program to whatever comes next, there seems little reason to doubt that we are on our way to realizing the rich urbanism in our mind’s eye. It is one of walkable streets, human-scaled architecture, charming sidewalks, and mixed-use vitality. We have come a long way from towers-in-a-park to this.

And yet our sophistication may be leading us away from asking some essential questions about the urban problem. Such as, why are we beholden to so many costly programs and regulatory procedures when nothing of the kind was needed to build our favorite urban centers in the first place? (The Main Streets that the Main Street Program emulates, for example,

were not products of a Main Street Program.) Why are new projects built in our downtowns nearly always inferior to their predecessors — over-scaled, under-inspired, and easily written off with what-else-can-we-do resignation? And why can’t Mom and Pop find a meaningful place in the new mixed-use city?

The answers are not flattering, for they suggest an urban planning establishment that has become invested in a dysfunctional process that forbids mixed-use urbanism from emerging organically, begetting the need for top-down, professional intervention. This has perhaps done a lot to advance urban planning, but it has done very little to advance urbanism.

Urbanism, interrupted

At the intersection of Washington and High Streets in Haverhill, Massachusetts, lies an important clue as to what went wrong with American urbanism decades ago. Here, as in many neighborhoods in New England, a not-quite-realized urbanism has been preserved in a state of arrested development for nearly a century. The landscape is familiar: unprepossessing one-, two-, and three-family houses, scattered apartment blocks, walkable if not fully hospitable streets, and the occasional corner store. At Washington and High, the Kwik Market and Benedetti’s Deli, located on the ground floors of two houses, provide the commercial punctuation marks.

Because the mixed uses here are so modestly developed, their unglamorous origin is apparent: some local citizens opened businesses in houses. The originator of the Kwik Market perhaps first opened a tobacco shop in his living room; later, he added comestibles and took over the entire floor. Maybe the owner of the two-family house opposite couldn’t find a renter, so his brother-in-law opened a food business in the first-floor apartment. Decades later, both establishments continue to thrive.



Whatever the particulars, the lesson is near-universal: mixed-use urbanism naturally arises when citizens turn living rooms into stores, dining rooms into hair salons, kitchens into taquerías, and garages into cabinet shops. Historically, as home-based businesses have pushed toward the sidewalk with additions and display windows, mixed-use streets and even downtowns have emerged. This ad-hoc model allowed citizens of even quite modest means and difficult life circumstances a natural path to economic success and self-actualization. A frustrated desk clerk could get a rent-free shot at owning a secondhand bookstore in his garage. A woman laid off from the factory could hang out a sign and sell muffins and coffee to her neighbors the next day. A high-school dropout could generate income by mending clothing for her neighbors in the family basement while caring for her newborn daughter.

Around the turn of the 20th century, emerging health, building, and zoning codes began to change this landscape. Few would-be entrepreneurs could afford to adapt their homes to the new codes, which grew increasingly stringent, or to rent separate commercial spaces; and zoning laws forbidding new businesses in or near residences made many such efforts moot. Mom and Pop have been sitting on their hands ever since, waiting for the professionals to make urbanism happen. Meanwhile, with fewer new small businesses arising, commercial growth has tended to find its outlet through cataclysmically large projects — on the suburban periphery and sporadically in otherwise dormant city neighborhoods.

Urbanism is in the details

Planners and policymakers rightly desire to close the prosperity gap between the region's smaller cities and Boston. But to the extent the problem is framed this way, we risk pushing our small cities to become more like Boston. Anyone who has observed Boston urbanism of late — badly scaled buildings going up

everywhere, independent businesses succumbing to chain stores, Newbury Street growing bland and cloying, an enormous strip mall being inserted into South Bay, poor and middle-class residents being priced out of their neighborhoods — has to wonder how this can be a good direction to pursue.

What is needed in our cities is a strategy that is authentic, that is rooted in the particulars already present in them. Our choice is simple: We can continue to funnel growth toward oversized projects conceived by strangers and visited upon us in spasmodic bursts, or we can once again allow incremental commerce to be initiated in our neighborhoods by people we know. We can continue pretending that megadevelopments are unavoidable and that architectural review boards are needed to assure compatibility, or we can begin the harder but more rewarding work of making a human-scaled *culture*, out of which human-scaled buildings will emerge naturally.

The seeds of this new culture lie where they always have — in the home. Its cultivator remains the home-based entrepreneur. It is perhaps hard to believe that answers to the enormous problems we face lie in so modest a place. It can be easy to dismiss home business as a mere detail in the complex urban system. But this is like saying that DNA is a mere detail of biology, when it is its essence. Home business is not simply a detail of urban culture; it is its DNA.

Urbanism, resumed

The changes needed to rediscover incremental urbanism are, perhaps ironically, considerable. Zoning districts should be reorganized by *intensity* rather than *use*: Similar intensities such as small stores, hair salons, repair shops, offices, daycare facilities, and even some forms of light assembly should be freely combinable with residences, by right. Residential-only districts should be the exception.

Regulatory codes need to be reformed to allow graduated



compliance. A new home business could be given perhaps five years to provide ADA-compatible ramps and toilet facilities. A home restaurant under a specified size could forgo costly, code-standard appliances if reasonable health practices are demonstrated. Old buildings — particularly those that are owner-occupied — could be forgiven expensive earthquake code upgrades if their nonconforming status is openly advertised.

The biggest adjustments will be psychological. Many will find it difficult to live in neighborhoods that will be constantly evolving. Confrontations will arise, even among those who stand to benefit. But one day, a sea change will indeed occur. A resident of a struggling city will stand up at a community meeting to object to a neighbor seeking to open a bicycle shop or taco stand in her home. And that resident will be hooted down for what he or she is: one who stands *against* the community, who wishes to send local money away, who prefers that her neighborhood remain creatively and entrepreneurially stagnant.

Fear of change will — and does — permeate the profession, too. Many planners and policymakers see no need for change, and claim that a boom in home businesses is already underway. Yet the “live-work” model with which so many are fascinated is directed at clean-hands enterprises — web design, business consulting, and the like — which are invisible to the street. Such is not an *urban* notion of business, nor is it one that accommodates citizens living outside the boundaries of privilege.

Others believe that a “creative economy” is already transforming our urban centers with a genteel gallery culture. But this co-opting of “creative” insults the would-be shop owners and laborers and workers denied their own opportunities to create. As for the “real” economy, unimaginative policymakers will continue to define economic

development as the attracting of chain stores, even though any chain store that turns a profit by definition removes more money from a locality than it returns to it, regardless of what it pays in salaries and local taxes.

Learning to let urbanism happen naturally once again will be the hardest part. The desire to control, to manage, to predict outcomes on a grand scale will be taken from us. This means that a lot of people will need to put egos aside and stop being impressed with big plans to solve the urban problem in our lifetime. We need to invest in the long road, in a process that will go on long after us. And isn't this — the possibility of permanence, the opportunity to participate in something that transcends us — the reason we are drawn to the urban endeavor in the first place? ■

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