

New Towns : Building the Ideal

Every attempt to change society by first changing the living environment is desire to manifest ideals into physical reality. Throughout post-industrial history are countless examples of policy-makers, planners, architects and philosophers envisioning a town or neighborhood to realize their ideal visions of life¹.

While the American suburbs reflect a physical manifestation of American cultural values, throughout recent years, many have grown wary of the consequences of the suburban dream. The effects of suburbanism on the environment, community and social life of the country are continually being discussed by those concerned about the shape of the American landscape.

Therefore, as more and more highways and suburban neighborhoods establish themselves, others construct and imagine new towns that represent what they feel to be missing from American suburbia. These towns often revitalize the convenience and sense of community that had once existed in small-town America but has been sacrificed for dehumanizing highways and chain stores.

New Urbanism

One manifestation of the backlash to suburban sprawl emerges in the New Town or New Urbanist movement. In an effort to reclaim traditional values of neighborhoods before the loss of community and convenience. The New Urbanism is a utopian project intending to make community living possible in an increasingly disconnected America. This movement directly confronts "suburban sprawl characterized by low density"², and recalls America's small-town past.

The New Urbanist vision imagines "a place where people walk to shops and services... play in large open parks... where children find it more fun to throw autumn leaves in the air than to toilet paper your house." These visions are based upon the

shared values of diversity, community and human-scale living². New Urbanists recognize the traditional American neighborhood as an organic growth in response to human needs and compare it to what they see as the artificial, idealized system that is suburban sprawl³.

*"The ultimate outcome of the suburb's alienation from the city became visible only in the twentieth century. . . . In the mass movement into suburban areas a new kind of community was produced, which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge: a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class..."*²

The critique of suburbia by New Urbanists is, first, a critique of the consequences of totalizing modernism. Suburbia is accused of being completely "rational, consistent, and comprehensive... an outgrowth of modern problem solving"² and disallowing of human values. The suburban model's sole advantage, say New Urbanists, is the ease of analyzing it statistically. They criticize the intense traffic problems suburbia presents through homogenous organization and restrictive zoning and argue that since everything even geographically close requires an automobile to be reached, "even a sparsely populated area can generate the traffic of a much larger traditional town."³

New Urbanists criticize the technical profession of planning as one based upon numbers rather than people and recommend a return to traditional town planning. They remember when town planning was still "considered a humanistic discipline based upon history, aesthetics, and culture."² The New Urbanist movement sees modernist planning as overly-concerned with streamlining the physical environment at the expense of human-scale interaction and living potential. To New Urbanists, the suburbs are seen as a reflection of a modernist culture as well as the cause of decentralization, auto-centeredness, congestion, lack of meaningful civic

life, loss of open space, discrimination against children and those without cars, and a general discontent related to social isolation.

The Congress of the New Urbanism

Values such as livable streets, short blocks, diverse housing options, transportation accessibility and human-scale living have been advocated for decades by various scholars from diverse fields. New Urbanists continue the discussion about these values and ideals to counter suburban sprawl and believe that “human-scale building... will provide spatial opportunities for random social interaction... and facilitate the development of a sense of ‘community.’”⁴

The Congress of the New Urbanism which formed in 1993, is currently one of the only cohesive organizations that professionally advocates for better living concepts. The Congress takes universally-discussed ideas about improving the built environment and lays claim to them. Despite its critique of totalizing modernism and professional planning theory, the Congress of the New Urbanism uses its own professional identity as a solution for various social and environmental ills. The Congress’ website declares that New Urbanism is energy efficient, can energize communities, add economic value to cities and improve public safety⁵.

Although the congress may professionally advocate for planning that will makes such values a reality, it is not the only source of such change. The desire to live in dynamic, lively, people-oriented environments is an entirely natural human wish. There are instances when our built environments make this sort of living near impossible, such as when one’s home is several miles from any place of recreation or social interaction, and one is either forced to drive or is consistently confined to solitude. But it is not solely the work of the Congress of New Urbanism to be aware of and make positive change possible in the built environment. It is the work of every individual as a member of society to help construct the physical world that makes successful living possible.

¹ For examples, see *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning* by Le Corbusier; Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre city, and Ebenezer Howard’s Garden Cities.

² Shibley, Robert G. “The Complete New Urbanism and the Partial Practices of Placemaking.” *Utopian Studies* 9.1 (1998).

³ Plater-Zyberk, Elizabeth, Andres Duany and Jeff Speck. *Suburban Nation; The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. New York: North Point Press, 2000. Print.

⁴ Bartling, Hugh E. “Disney’s Celebration, the Promise of New Urbanism and the Portents of Homogeneity.” *The Florida Historical Quarterly*: 18.1 (2002).

⁵ “New Urbanism: It Just Performs Better.” The Congress of the New Urbanism. Web. <http://www.cnu.org/performs_better>



Gulf-Reston Chief: Something Old, New

By Wolf Von Eckardt Washington Post Staff Writer
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Ryan Takes Over from Simon

Gulf-Reston Chief: Something Old, New

By Wolf Von Eckardt
Washington Post Staff Writer

Reston, the widely admired, budding new town in Virginia, is in trouble. And Robert H. Ryan, Reston's tough, new boss, makes no bones about it.

Ryan seems to share the idealistic hopes of most city planners that Reston will pioneer a new quality of life for urban America. But first he gives it to you straight:

Reston is \$45 million in debt. The Gulf Oil Corporation has \$15 million in that liability. The money is unsecured because the John Hancock Life Insurance Co. holds title to most of the land to assure its own \$20-million loan. There is \$2.5 million a year to be paid in carrying charges.

"Gulf could have taken its loss and walked away," Ryan says. "Instead we decided to see if we can't make a go of this thing. It is not a particularly good investment."

So early last month "one man's dream became a corporate subsidiary," as one observer put it. Reston, Va., has become "Gulf-Reston, Inc.," and Robert H. Ryan was made its president.

He had his first talk with

Reston area market—the people who can pay around \$20,000 for a house.

Reston's industrial park, which is going extremely well, will soon be augmented by the Geodesic Survey, a Federal agency with some 3000 employees. Their average income is \$8000 to \$10,000 a year. But there is no housing in Reston in this price class.

Reston some time ago applied to the Federal Housing Administration for assistance to build 200 apartments under the famous non-profit 221-d-3 provision. FHA has kept cutting back this request.

No Federal Policy

newsmen last week in the living room of the Bowman House, the old mansion on the Reston estate, where Robert E. Simon, who even built his initials into his dream, used to discuss it with artists, architects and statesmen.

Simon was kicked upstairs to be chairman of the board.

Simon is a balding, slim, soft-spoken lover of music, sports and art, who fell heir to a New York City real estate empire that included Carnegie Hall.

Ryan is stocky, waves a cigar and looks something like one's idea of a baseball team manager. He has a master's degree in business administration (Harvard). He worked his way to the top of some of the biggest real estate development firms in the country. The usual word for a man like that is "dynamic."

The two men could hardly be more different. But the dream is as yet still the same. It is only that Ryan would "build economic feasibility into it." The feasibility is now being run through Gulf's computers.

Ryan says he has no intention to change the product.

and nine months for construction. Even with Gulf's added injection of \$12 million, it will take until next spring until some 300 new houses and apartments are actually available. To get back on the feasibility track, Reston must construct and sell 1000 units a year at least.

Ryan's prescription is improved building technology and "a dynamic marketing program."

No one has as yet been able to effectively close the technology gap. A home of 15,000 square feet, to include three bedrooms and a bath and a half, to rent for \$100 a month



ROBERT H. RYAN

... cites Reston's troubles

The idea is still that it takes a heap of livability to make a collection of homes a community. It is to be a well-designed community where all kinds of people can live, play, work, worship, learn and perhaps even stay put.

He has not, Ryan implied, become the president of a new town in order to subdivide it. "We'll stick to the original

see what it might do by getting the mobile home industry involved. The first report on this study has just been submitted. It didn't sound very hopeful.

Define Program

The marketing program, as Ryan defines it, is a matter of "listening to the market" to find out what people want. This would determine what to build and how to finance, advertise and sell it.

There will now, for instance, be 10:90 financing for Reston houses—a 10 per cent down payment, 90 per cent to be

master plan," he asserted repeatedly.

Perhaps that statement was coached by the public relations men, what with Reston's 2700 residents enjoying the considerable benefits of that master plan and Gulf's \$15-million stake in it. But, as the news conference became more relaxed, Ryan gave the distinct impression that he is his own coach. And his answers to many skeptical questions kept confirming the impression.

It is a "phony issue," Ryan said, to claim that sound planning and economic feasibility don't go together. "I am obsessed with the conviction that they do."

What, then, went wrong with the Reston dream?

For one thing, Ryan believes, people still have to get used to the idea of town houses out in the country. He is convinced, however, that town-house living makes sense in metropolitan areas and that before long people will take to it. Meanwhile he'll put more emphasis on other housing types, including a new type of patio house.

For another thing, Reston

See RESTON, D4, Col. 1

grounds and cultural facilities. Reston now offers. Reston and other genuine new towns are to show them that these things can be had in an affluent society.

And Ryan is all in favor of it. "In fact," he said, "I have asked Jane Wilhelm, our community relations director, for a list of anything more we can do in this respect. We want a sense of community and will spend money to encourage it."

The question planners now ask is what the market will tell Ryan after he has listened to it. Robert E. Simon had hoped to set an example of a new standard of excellence



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mon one.

What is at stake, planners say, is not only Gulf's investment but the future of new towns in America which many planners see as the most feasible alternative to the continued suburban sprawl that drains the resources of the city.

Ryan knows it. "Wish us luck," he asked.