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CHANGING PLACES

REBUILDING COMMUNITY IN THE AGE OF SPRAWL

RICHARD MOE *and* CARTER WILKIE

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AN OWL BOOK

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For Jane and for Curtis

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PREFACE

Americans have abused—and sometimes repaired—their built environment, the familiar, traditional neighborhoods, towns, and downtowns, as well as the all too familiar "sprawlscapes" where most now live. Many of America's places—new as well as old, suburban and rural as well as inner-city—are not working as they should. There are a number of reasons for it, of course, but at the top of the list is the fact that the leaders and residents of those communities made bad choices, allowed bad choices to be made for them, or made no choices at all. Communities can be shaped by choice or they can be shaped by chance. We can keep on accepting the kind of communities we get, or we can insist on getting the kind of communities we want.

Winston Churchill once said that we shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us. He no doubt had in mind the multiple layers of history built one atop another in English cities and villages, and the evidence of culture and continuity that they gave to the successive generations of men and women who inhabited them. An important part of that culture, of course, was a deep respect for the accumulated architecture and landscapes and for the centuries of history that they represented.

While Americans are also shaped by the buildings that we have built, it is more accurate to say that we are shaped by the places that we have created. Buildings comprise a place, and architecture, it's been said, is the art of place making. In the last half of the twentieth century, we have not shaped our places very well. We have destroyed many of the most significant structures that once gave our downtowns their identity. We have abandoned and then neglected traditional residential neighborhoods that gave the people who lived there a sense of belonging. And we have allowed many of our smaller towns to dissolve into roadside clutter.

Many of our newer communities were essentially unplanned or minimally planned to provide the dream house on a large green lot far removed from schools, stores, and other community centers. The public spaces of these new

communities more often than not are dominated by huge discount stores and/or strip malls along multilane highways. In fact the design of these communities is largely determined by highway engineers and superstore developers who have stepped into the void left by public officials who are either resigned to, if not eager for, this kind of "progress," and by citizens who are either complacent or who believe they are powerless. These communities are the result of a series of steps, each one apparently logical or innocuous in itself. But, as Jane Jacobs first observed more than three decades ago, "every place becomes more like every other place, all adding up to Noplace."[1]

The result of all of this is rampant sprawl, a phenomenon that has sucked the economic and social vitality out of traditional communities and filled millions of acres of farmland and open space with largely formless, soulless structures unconnected to one another except by their inevitable dependence on the automobile. That there is a diminished sense of connections—social as well as spatial—in these pedestrian-unfriendly places seems unarguable. Residents spend more time driving from one place to another and less time with one another. James Howard Kunstler has defined sprawl as "a degenerate urban form that is too congested to be efficient, too chaotic to be beautiful, and too dispersed to possess the diversity and vitality of a great city."[2]

Virtually every community in America—certainly every metropolitan area—has been affected by sprawl, but perhaps nowhere were its potential consequences more vividly dramatized or more bitterly fought than in the northern Virginia Piedmont in 1993–94, when the Disney Company sought to locate a theme park in the midst of one of the most historic and pristine areas of the country. The central issue in the ensuing controversy was not the theme park itself, but rather the collateral development that it would inevitably attract and that would overwhelm historic fragile villages, battlefields, and landscapes for miles in every direction. Although this was probably the largest and most significant sprawl battle to date, it nonetheless provides a picture of what has happened in many other communities in lesser ways, more often than not with different results. It also provides a cautionary tale of the kind of sprawl-inducing threats that will increasingly appear unannounced at unsuspecting places all over America.

There are two primary alternatives to sprawl as we know it: better planning of how we use our land; and using—or reusing—the capacity of older neighborhoods, towns, and downtowns to a greater extent than they are used now. Both alternatives are essential if we are to successfully manage growth (not stop it, but manage it) and thus contain sprawl before it bankrupts us socially as well as financially.

But before we get to alternatives we need to understand how we got to this point of disrepair. It is largely a story of good intentions gone awry, but

there is more to it than that. There are many, sometimes complex reasons behind the disintegration of our older communities and the building of new ones that too often don't work. Crime, race, and the declining quality of public services, particularly education, have been important factors in spurring the exodus of residents from some of our center cities to their outlying areas. The financial rewards accruing to developers building cookie-cutter houses on cheap land—and the public subsidies that not only permit but encourage this kind of development—have given developers incentives to lure people there.

There are other reasons as well, often embedded deep in the American character. We are a restless people, seemingly always on the move. For most of the nineteenth century we moved west, until we inhabited the continent. For most of the twentieth century we continued to move west, but we also began to move shorter distances—from farm to city, from city to suburb. We like to move, and we like to occupy unoccupied places. But increasingly we move because the communities in which we live are destroyed, little by little, by insensitive development or by the arrival of the urban ills that caused us to flee the cities in the first place.

We also still tend to think of ourselves as a young country, without many man-made structures worth preserving. We don't readily see the opportunity that our accumulated architecture offers us to connect with our past, nor do we see often enough the opportunity that it offers us for reuse. We are for the most part a disposable society; when something is used up we discard it. New is better than old—tear down the old, build anew.

Happily, there are signs that this attitude is beginning to change. A growing respect for the limits of our resources and the fragility of our environment has caused us to begin recycling everything from newspapers and aluminum cans to automobiles and plastics. Belatedly, we are beginning to recognize that for the same reasons we must recycle our older communities as well.

But when it comes to communities, there are even more compelling reasons to recycle. First, it makes economic sense. We have invested billions of dollars in our older communities, in the buildings themselves as well as the public infrastructure—streets, water lines, sewers, etc.—and it is fiscally irresponsible to waste that investment. In a mobile society, that investment pays extra dividends wherever people seek out distinctive places in which to live, work, and spend their free time.

Second, recycling connects us with our past in a way that helps us to better understand who we are and where we are going. Losing the physical manifestations of our history—not just the great monuments but also the significant structures and entire neighborhoods that anchor our communities—leaves us, in the words of David McCullough, a historically illiterate nation.

Third, we don't make communities that work as well as they used to work, and it would be foolish to discard them when they can continue to serve us. Many people want the option of living in pleasant and walkable older communities, but, as we shall see, there are public policies in place that strongly favor the construction of new communities over the rehabilitation of older ones.

Finally, we imperil our whole society if we abandon entire neighborhoods and communities, and the people who inhabit them, because they no longer seem to work. We deceive ourselves if we fail to see the grievous consequences that will certainly follow such abandonment. Many of the ramifications are in fact already with us, not only in the inner cities of our great metropolitan centers but also in their outlying areas, where an estimated 4 million Americans, prompted largely by fear, today live within so-called gated communities. It is delusional to believe that the crime and decay in some of our inner cities is unrelated to what is happening in the suburbs. When the city "ceases to be a symbol of art and order," Lewis Mumford said, "it acts in a negative fashion: it expresses and helps to make universal the fact of disintegration."[3]

Twentieth-century America has turned its cities inside out, releasing industry, population, and commerce from the core, leaving ruinous environments behind. In the history of Western civilization, this phenomenon is unique. From the fall of the Roman Empire to the shrinking of the British Empire, "urban decline has usually been a product of national decline," according to urban historian Witold Rybczynski. And as author and photographer Camilio Jose Vergara has put it, America—leader of the free world—"leads the world in urban ruins."

This book is about ruins and rehabilitation. It is not about cities, per se, as much as it is about places within cities, in small towns, and across the countryside that have inspired residents to reclaim them. It is about places harmed and places healed. As much as anything, it is about places worth saving. Places such as historic Memphis, whose urban history could be the story of many once great American cities. Places such as troubled neighborhoods in New Orleans and Pittsburgh, where residents took matters into their own hands and transformed them into the livable places they once were. Places such as the small towns of Bonaparte, Iowa, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, and Franklin, Tennessee, where imaginative and determined businesspeople led efforts to revitalize deteriorated commercial districts and thereby gave their communities a new lease on life. Places such as Denver, St. Paul, and Portland, Oregon, where urban entrepreneurs combined with enlightened public officials to find new ways to strengthen core downtowns by turning buildings and whole districts that had been regarded as community liabilities into community assets.

These are largely unheralded stories, sometimes even within the communities where they occurred. They are the stories of men and women who challenged the prevailing wisdom of their fellow citizens to prove that they had within their existing structures the means of community rebirth. They are the stories of individuals who believed enough in their communities that they were prepared to risk their own resources and reputations, usually with little or no help from government. They are the stories of communities being shaped at the grass roots, and therefore they are uniquely American stories, filled with grit, determination, and optimism.

The message these stories carry is that our older neighborhoods, towns, and downtowns can be made to work again by realizing the potential of the physical resources that are already there. It may be necessary, particularly in the case of downtowns, to find new uses for some of those resources so they can serve the revised needs of the community. But imagination and "adaptive reuse" can be effective tools to make that happen. Every community is different, to be sure, and not every old building deserves to be saved, but virtually every community has within its borders many buildings and neighborhoods that do because they contain the physical seeds of community renewal.

We are beginning to realize that our communities, new as well as old, are not working as they should, and that the built environment that surrounds them has a great deal to do with it. We are beginning to see that we are indeed shaped in turn by the places that we shape, as Churchill suggested, and that we can do a much better job of shaping.

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CHANGING PLACES

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THE FOURTH BATTLE OF MANASSAS

> How much of historic America, how much of our national heritage, will be left for future generations? And what does it say about us, of our values, of our regard for those who will follow, not to say those who went before us, if we as citizens stand by while others destroy historic America—knock it down, pave it over, blot it out—in the name of so-called progress and corporate profits?
>
> —David McCullough

In the fall of 1993, the Walt Disney Company stunned Virginians with plans to build its next resort on undeveloped fields thirty-five miles west of Washington, D.C., in the northern Virginia Piedmont. The announcement sent shock waves through the region that reverberated across the nation, the opening salvo for one of the most publicized preservation battles since the Penn Central Transportation Company sued New York City over the fate of Grand Central Terminal. That famous case became a referendum with national implications governing the protection of historic landmark buildings. The Disney episode became a national referendum on the protection of historic places from urban sprawl.

If communities are shaped by the choices they make or by the choices that are made for them, then the northern Virginia Piedmont is a classic case in point—on both counts. In 1993, people far removed from the Piedmont descended on it to formulate plans that would change it forever. Few if any residents of the Piedmont were even aware of their plans, let alone helped shape them. Over the course of a year, however, people who lived in this unique corner of the country, with the help of others who believed that they, too, had a stake in the fight, decided they wanted to make another choice. In a matter of months, the episode became a battle joined by people across the country, wherever communities are being transformed by careless decisions about development and the use of land.

In the years since Disneyland opened in Anaheim in 1955, Disney's amusement park business had grown from a single eighty-five-acre park to four resorts on three continents: the original Disneyland Park; Walt Disney World, in Kissimmee, Florida, near Orlando; Disneyland Paris, operated in France by Euro Disney; and a financial stake in Tokyo Disneyland, in Japan. In 1993, the company tried to develop yet another destination in North America to complement its resorts in Florida and California, this time in northern Virginia, on the rim of the country's fourth largest metropolitan area, at the southern tip of the heavily populated northeastern United States.

Washington, D.C., is one of the top ten travel destinations in the United States. Almost 20 million people visited the area in 1993, and while some came for business and left quickly, 13 million visitors were Americans who came strictly on vacation and stayed longer, making travel and tourism a major regional industry worth $4 billion to the area's economy each year. After resolving to tap this vital market, the Disney Company decided that Dulles International Airport, in suburban northern Virginia, would be its gateway. East of the airport, near Washington, was a busy region, dense with highways, giant shopping malls, and the towering, sprawling office complexes of the new Virginia suburbs. Land to the west was still home to Old Virginia, large farms overlaid with two-lane roads that ran past colonial-era mills and homes, historic brick courthouses, and small, locally owned stores clustered along the main streets of scenic villages and towns. In choosing a site for its next major tourist destination in the United States, the Disney Company leapfrogged the New Virginia suburbs and settled on a pristine spot eight miles beyond the edge of urban sprawl, in a rural town called Haymarket, population 483.

Haymarket was a quiet place—only one intersection had a traffic light. Only one street was home to buildings in any significant number, and all of them were small. The narrow town hall, painted white, didn't look much different from a church, also painted white, down the street. The surrounding area was remote and relatively undeveloped, a virtually virgin landscape, as Anaheim had first appeared to the builders of Disneyland forty years before. The local terrain was dominated by hill farms, where people raised horses, beef, and hay on rolling pastures and a butcher advertised his services, "Custom Slaughtering," on a small sign poked in his yard. Here, the Disney Company could develop a locale from scratch.

Of the 3,000 or so acres Disney secured, 380 of them had been a farm picked up at an auction after a foreclosure. The core of the site, about 2,000 acres, was a former plantation, where an antebellum mansion built in 1826 had burned in 1973. Before Disney arrived, speculators had planned to develop the spot into a residential subdivision before a recession ended their