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Creating Community Places

An Antidote to Sprawl

The problems of sprawl are by now familiar to most Americans: its propensity for eating up our land, destroying our environment, and creating neighborhoods with little or no sense of place.








On a macro level, one of the most important steps in counteracting sprawl is to improve existing built-up areas with compact patterns of development. There are thousands of communities like this throughout the United States; even suburban areas not known for compactness offer intact infrastructure that can be reshaped. By building livable, sustainable communities upon this existing framework, we can give people a good reason to stay put in - or come back to - older areas, and provide development opportunities that reduce the need to spread out.

On a micro level, communities are successfully combating sprawl by creating and restoring special places that bring people together and energize community life. These places - plazas, central squares, transit stations, main streets and downtowns - can both support and spur the renewal of compact communities that many people have begun gravitating to, searching for the comfort, convenience and connection they find missing in spread-out, isolated developments. Compact communities allow people to mingle in parks and other public spaces; walk to shopping, schools, and other daily destinations on attractive, lively streets; and use public transit instead of constantly bucking stop-and-go-traffic.

Improvements at the micro level are the essential yeast for rebuilding sprawl-contrary "old town" communities.

At Project for Public Spaces, our approach to creating anti-sprawl, community-building places involves looking at, listening to, and asking questions of the people in a community. We learn about their problems and aspirations, and work with them to create a vision around the places they view as important, both to community life and their daily experience. We then help them to implement their ideas, beginning with short-term, often

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The third article in a series.

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[Health and Community Design](#)

Looking for strategies to combat sprawl? Browse through these PPS publications and videos:

[How to Turn a Place Around](#)

[Getting Back to Place](#)

[The Role of Transit in Creating Livable Metropolitan Communities](#)

[How Transportation and Community Partnerships are Shaping America](#)

[Cities Back from the Edge](#)
By Roberta Gratz and Norman Mintz

[Placemaking: An Antidote to Sprawl](#)

experimental improvements that can quickly add value to a place while demonstrating its future potential. Our experience has consistently shown that if the community is asked to define its problems from the start - rather than merely review a solution to an externally defined problem - the process becomes meaningful and efficient.

The outcomes of this approach are many and varied:

- streets and transit facilities that increase pedestrian activity, economic development and community livability goals
- parks, plazas and central squares that become focal points for a community
- commercial districts enlivened with local business opportunities, public markets, vending and other entrepreneurial activities and events
- libraries, courthouses and other public buildings that can serve as centers of community life and activity

More traditional approaches to eliminating sprawl include land use plans, land preservation through acquisition, growth boundaries and development of new traditional neighborhoods. These tools are important, but they bring us only halfway to a solution. As writer Jane Holtz Kay said, "For all the far-flung new-towning, it is old-towning we need." This "old-towning" must start at the basic, human-scale, daily life level: the street corner or transit plaza, a neighborhood park or downtown main street. Improvements at this micro level - the establishment of public markets selling local products, redesigned streets, rejuvenated parks - are the essential yeast for rebuilding those sprawl-contrary "old town" communities.

**One of the most important things we
can do to combat sprawl is to reclaim
our existing communities and
rejuvenate public environments.**

What are the substantial obstacles we face in re-building our communities?

- ***Entire communities and downtowns are choked by traffic***, which makes neighborhoods less safe for residents and pedestrians, less conducive to walking, and discourages easily accessible destinations.
- ***Privately controlled environments*** such as shopping centers and malls are replacing parks, town squares and genuinely public spaces, which accommodate a wide range of activities important to the civic, economic and social life of communities.
- ***Fragmentation and disconnection in the siting and planning of community institutions***, such as post offices, museums and retail centers, creates more traffic and less

convenience and access for the residential communities that they serve.

- **Public transit facilities are disconnected** from the needs of the communities in which they are located - less convenience means less ridership.
- **Bland and lifeless-looking architecture** in downtown areas, which often replaces well-scaled historic buildings and places having real life and vitality.
- **A lack of opportunities to incubate new businesses** and encourage entrepreneurial activity in communities, especially disadvantaged ones.

In combating sprawl, one of the most important things we can do is reclaim our existing communities and rejuvenate crucial public environments. By restoring a basic people-friendly infrastructure, creating walkability and attractiveness and promoting "mixed-use" activities - living, working, playing - we can create communities where people want to be. It's a much more livable alternative to the search for "greener pastures" that turn out to be not so green - or great - after all.

Resources

Smart Growth and Sprawl www.smartgrowth.org

The concept of Smart Growth stems from an increasing awareness that growth and development, although inevitable, can be channeled to contain sprawl. In this view, growth, rather than being cut off completely, needs to be planned from the bottom up and balanced within a regional context. This requires the recognition that development can be economically viable and at the same time protect the environment, promote livability, and preserve open space and natural resources. It also requires government policies that support this view, such as regulations that allow for greater density, brownfield development, recycling of existing infrastructure and development of transportation alternatives. The Smart Growth Network, by bringing together national, regional and local coalitions, is building an alliance of diverse stakeholders who can effect Smart Growth change in their own communities and coalesce to broadly influence new directions in public policy.

Other links:

[SprawlWatch](#)

[Sierra Club Challenge to Sprawl Campaign](#)

[Sprawl-Busters](#)

[Sprawl Guide from Planning Commissioners Journal](#)

[Sprawl Net](#)

[Sprawl City](#)