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The Golden Mean

Some members of the New Urbanist listserv Pro-urb recently criticized Richard Carson for his writings about the rise of Urban Realism and the demise of New Urbanism. They asked him if there were any "serious, credible alternatives out there?" In this article Mr. Carson responds and proposes a radical alternative -- The Golden Mean.

By Richard H. Carson
Jan 27, 2003




Context: The American Experience

Freedom of choice is at the heart of the American experience. The further you get from the eastern cities, where the European immigrants lived in overcrowded tenement buildings, the more powerful is the desire for a freedom of choice in architecture, transportation modes and the use of the land. Many Americans embrace this freedom of choice with every fiber of their being. For this reason many of them find the increased regulation of their property, lives and cities to be anathema to their belief system.

So it was no accident that the original antithesis to the crowded eastern cities, called "sprawl," was born in the postwar settlement patterns that growth fueled. Cities like Los Angeles, Atlanta and Phoenix each became a poster-child for the failure to do rational planning.

Situation: Paradigm Shift or Trendy Fad?

Rapid population growth and inefficient, costly leapfrog development in the 1960s and 1970s drove some states to act legislatively. The first state-mandated land use planning laws were created by Florida, Oregon and

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[The Smart Sprawl Strategy](#)

By *Wally Siembab*

Aug 31, 2005

How do we retrofit America's sprawl to prepare for a post-oil world? In this week's Op-Ed Wally Siembab proposes a strategy of "smart sprawl" -- retrofitting suburbs of any density so that residents can shop, obtain services and work all within a mile or two of their home.

[The Sky Is Not Falling On Cities](#)

By *Carol Coletta*

Washington. The intent of these planning goals was to comprehensively address the myriad of complex issues inherent in planning for rapidly growing urban areas. It was not meant to be social engineering. These progressive national models were concerned with the functionality -- and not the psychology -- of the urban environment, and mitigating the impacts of growth on both the natural environment and natural resources such as farm and forest. The reasons for using such comprehensive planning techniques as the urban growth boundary were simple. It helped define the edges of a community and created a compact urban growth form that optimized infrastructure delivery.

In the 1990s, new buzzwords started to appear in the societal discourse. Growth management, neo-traditional town planning, smart growth and new urbanism became the latest planning catch phrases. All of these movements had one thing in common -- they believed they could improve on the comprehensive planning process. The promoters of these "new and improved" approaches to urban planning presented their products as more environmentally sensitive, having better urban design, and solving the traffic congestion conundrum. For the most part, all of these movements have added some value to how we plan for our cities. However, all of these in total did not go far enough in actually solving the real issues of growth. Edward Abbey said that, "Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell." The truth is we did not cure the cancer. We merely slowed the progress of a disease that may still kill us.

Solution: The Golden Mean

So where do we go from here? New Urbanism is an intellectual solution that makes density more enjoyable through design, but it not a practical solution to rapid growth. Smart Growth in reality only slows growth by incrementally moving urban growth boundaries. Both use higher densities to try and slow the geographic expansion. Neither doctrine has found a home in the nation's psyche because of our belief in freedom of choice and our disdain for social engineering. Neither doctrine alone can change the fact that growth in metropolitan areas will result in overcrowding, traffic congestion, and poor air quality. Gridlock is simply a function of too many people living in an area, and no concurrency policy or dollar outlay can fix it. The same can be said of air quality.

Aug 25, 2005

Cities aren't in decline. The way population change is "measured" by the Census Bureau leaves much to be desired, writes Carol Coletta in this week's Op-Ed. But even if cities were in decline, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success. What is ironic about these estimates and the misleading story of decline that has been spun around them is the fact that cities no longer have to grow big to grow wealthy. For the first time, according to research from CEOs for Cities, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success.

[From NIMBYs To DUDEs: The Wacky World Of Plannerese](#)

By *Ric Stephens*

Jul 26, 2005

Ric Stephens has compiled a list of some of the wackiest -- yet at times quite realistic -- urban planning words, in a vocabulary he has dubbed 'Plannerese.' This week's Planetizen Op-Ed includes a selected glossary of the terms, in addition to 'A Modern Fairy Tale in Plannerese,' which looks at a typical planning issue through the humorous lens of planning jargon.

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Nor can either policy stop the expansion of cities. It's inevitable, for instance, that the West Coast will eventually evolve into a massive megalopolis stretching along Interstate 5 from San Diego, California to Seattle, Washington. There are similar examples all around the country.

There are a few urban theorists who suggest that cities may have an optimum size and population. They tell us that an ideal city is a sustainable one, where economic, social, and environmental systems are in balance, and where residents feel that they are part of a definable, understandable community. Writers like Ian McHarg in *Design with Nature* have pointed out that urban areas, like natural areas, have an inherent carrying capacity. Others, like Carl Sagan in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* described the pathological effect of population size on urban areas and individuals.

Yet planners rarely talk about limiting growth. That's because we don't have a politically marketable alternative that allows for rational growth. Even in the states where urban growth boundaries are a way of life, the urban areas keep expanding.

Daniel Kemmis theorized in *The Good City and the Good Life*, that a city's optimum size could be determined by using the ancient Greek "Golden Mean" formula. The Greeks devised the Golden Mean as a tool to solve a problem of something very large (the earth's population) relative to something very small (a single human being). The formula $A/B=B/C$ reveals that the earth's population (now 6.3 billion) would ideally result in 80,000 cities with 80,000 individuals in each city ($1/X=X/6.3$ billion). Christopher Alexander in *A Pattern Language* also argued for a hierarchy of size and space, and Constantine Doxiadis articulated a similar taxonomy in his influential 1968 book, *Ekistics*.

Certainly there is credible evidence that smaller metropolitan areas like Eugene, Oregon and Santa Fe, New Mexico are livable precisely because of their size and sense of place. This is not a No Growth strategy. When new towns are needed, they should be established at a minimum distance from existing settlements. Such towns would never outgrow their urban growth boundaries or intrude into their greenbelt buffers. This is a model that has existed in Europe for centuries.

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A basic tenet of planning is that we plan for 20 to 25 years -- the equivalent of one generation. If our life span can be 80 to 90 years, then shouldn't we be planning our cities for four or five generations? So why not have 100-year plans?

Conclusion:

We need to manage our cities wisely and there are three basics for city planning. First is to understand a city in the context of the space-time continuum already discussed here. Second is that the city function effectively and cost-efficiently. Third is that the city should grow organically. That is to say it has to be a place the people of the place want. It has to reflect the city's unique geography, geomorphology, history and society. Quite frankly, the special interests (i.e., building industry associations, environmental group, new urbanists) should butt out. The citizens should be allowed to democratically divine their own future. A city should be the creation of its citizens because only they can build a city for the purpose of providing for their happiness.

[Richard Carson](#) is a writer and a practicing planner of 30 years who lives and works in the Pacific Northwest. He is also the Internet editor for the Open Directory Project's [Urban and Regional Planning](#) category that has some 400 website listings.

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