

The (sub)Urban Octopus
The Evolution of the American Suburb and its Constricting Impacts on
Various Environments

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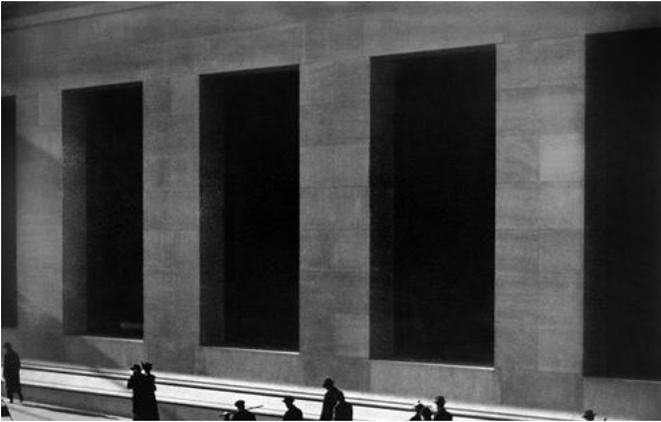
A scientist places a glass beaker containing 3 crabs into a tank. The crabs are trapped, able to see through the glass but unable to climb out through the narrow opening at the top. As the crabs circle around the bottom of the beaker, not knowing what to do, a long, thin tentacle unravels from the shadows. It is followed by another, then another, until the octopus which they belong to is hugging the beaker in an attempt to smother the crabs. Puzzled, the octopus steps back to think. It sits on the bottom of the tank and stares at the crabs through the glass walls. Its eight arms spread evenly around its radius as they pulsate across the floor, up the walls, and onto the base of the beaker. Their tips whip back and forth as they curl and extend. With its tentacles fully splayed, it covers nearly the entire floor and half of one wall of the small glass tank. Each of its hundreds of individual suction cups cling to the glass surfaces as it feels its surroundings, contemplating how to reach the crabs.

The typical American suburb resembles something like the outstretched tentacles of this octopus as they curl in “organic” forms, reaching ever greater distances from the city center. The two terms “suburb” and “sprawl” have almost become synonymous in the planning world today, each conjuring up images of endless roads and highways lined with cookie cutter mansions and strip malls. Suburbia has long been discussed by a wide spectrum of critics, from Hollywood films to leading authorities of city planning. Yet how did this sprawling phenomenon become so deeply rooted in American society and what are the consequences? With the growing environmental and economic threats such as global warming and peak oil, most of us are attempting to find ways to adapt the suburb in this new age. There is much discussion of how to reduce the impacts of the suburb by retrofitting it in a sustainable manner. But how feasible are these ideas? Will they cover the impacts with a shiny new coat of paint? Or are the impacts too severe for such a simple fix? In order to develop answers to these questions, it is necessary to fully understand the problem. In this paper I attempt to look beyond the surface of these problems by looking at the history of the suburbs, why they developed in the first place, and assessing their impacts on the physical, economic, and social environments.

History

Suburbs have been around for as long as sedentary urban development. Archeological digs outside the walls of ancient cities dating as far back as the Egyptian and Babylonian Empires have revealed small settlements, far enough outside the confines of the city to enjoy country life, yet close enough to the walls to retain ties to the political and economic systems inside. Medieval cities were not only surrounded by agricultural serf communities, but also elaborate mansions and gardens of the elite who sought rural refuge from the crowded and denatured city environment. The city was indeed an unhealthy place. The unsanitary conditions of medieval cities allowed for the bubonic plague to spread as quickly as it did and with devastating effects. Thus those rich enough to afford a private carriage ride out to their private country villa did so whenever possible.

The industrialized cities of the nineteenth century shared much of the unsanitary and crowded characteristics of the past. Economic growth became the priority as the pedestrian was ignored. The American city became a convoluted mass of factories, mills, financial towers, banks, and workers' housing. There were no zoning laws at this time, resulting in an orderless juxtaposition of buildings. Housing structures were placed right up against factories, bestowing upon the residents the great



The 1915 photograph *Wall Street* by Paul Strand captures the cold face of industrial age architecture. The pedestrian is dwarfed by this stone giant as they walk amongst the shadows of the street. It is understandable why the upper class sought refuge in the countryside outside the city.

sounds of industry. Like the trees of a dense rainforest, the buildings clustered together and stretched towards the sky in an attempt to escape the shadows below. The cities of the mid nineteenth century were indeed shrouded in a suffocating atmosphere. Understandably, the people who could afford to fled to the open space and fresh air of country life, commuting by private horse and coach into the city to do business.

However, these early commuter businessmen were few in numbers. Traditional methods of transportation by horse and coach were expensive and time consuming. The amount of effort required to rig a team of horses, let alone stable and feed them was

more than even the upper class was willing to put up with. This pattern soon changed when New York businessman Llewellyn S. Haskell developed the prototype for the railroad suburb: Llewellyn Park.

Llewellyn Park was a private gated community which defended mansions of the rich from the blight of the city. Modeled on the English Garden, these mansions were surrounded by vast yards separating each mansion from its neighbor. Privacy and return to nature were the two big ideas here. But what made this development so innovative was its access to a railroad line that left for New York in the morning, and returned in the afternoon. The age of the horse drawn coach was yielding to a new force known as the railroad suburb.

While the private upper class Llewellyn Park was a prototype to the suburb, the first real railroad suburb developed in 1869 along the Des Plaines River outside of Chicago. Riverside, as it came to be known, was designed by Fredrick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux with a higher density than Llewellyn Park, housing more mansions and less open space separating them. Much like today, the main objective of a wealthy family purchasing one of these country castles was privacy. "The purpose of the original creators of the suburb," according to Lewis Mumford, was "to withdraw like a monk and live like a prince." However, the open "natural" landscaping was still emphasized to, in the words of James Howard Kunstler, "promote the illusion of rural living."

Small shops and restaurants began to gather around the train station that was the gateway to the city. Riverside became the model for the railroad suburb, a model which closely resembles the

automobile suburbs of today. The only difference was that Olmstead and Vaux actually took the time to design the development so that it would have some degree of formality and continuity. The railroad suburb was designed for people rather than an ever growing flow of motorists.

Yet for all its quaintness and “balance” between the natural and urban environment, railroad suburbs were not small towns independent of the city which they surrounded. As explained by Kunstler,

They were real estate ventures lent an aura of permanence by way of historical architecture and picturesque landscaping. They had not developed over time and they lacked civic institutions that can *only* develop over time. They were a rapid response to a closely linked chain of industrial innovations: steam power, railroads, and the factory system. More, these suburbs were a refuge from the evil consequences of those innovations—from the smoke, the filth, the noise, the crowding, the human misery—built for those who benefitted from industrial activities.

The great irony of these suburbs is that they were experiments of the wealthy to escape the very things from which their wealth had developed. These were bedroom communities with a few shops by their mode of transit to the city. But as time progressed and the middle class began to grow, these railroad suburbs lost their air of exclusivity.

The popular idea of leaving the filthy crowded cities became affordable as America entered the twentieth century. With a growing middle class and the fundamental American ideal that anyone has a chance to make a profit for himself, real estate developers not only began to create new suburban communities, but they would also purchase the wealthier ones and subdivide them, maximizing the amount of houses to be sold on the land and thus maximizing their profits. By using cheaper building materials and a unified housing model, developers were able to slap together houses at never before seen rates and quickly turn them around to be sold to the growing exodus from the cities. By persisting to build single family housing units, the suburbs never became as crowded as the cities. However, by commodifying the suburban residence, the original intentions of privacy and the desired return to nature were lost. The original balance that the suburb intended to create between city and country living was completely turned upside down. Rather than housing the benefits of both, suburban communities began to house the worst of both. It lacked civic life and depended on the cities for economic activity and it lost the rural solitude it originally sought.

Mumford aptly explains how “the ultimate outcome of the suburb’s alienation from the city became visible only in the twentieth century, with the extension of the democratic ideal through the instrumentalities of manifold and mass production.” By the twentieth century, the suburb with all its innocent intentions to provide a better standard of living (as well as all its evil notions of class separation) had fallen victim to the democratic and capitalistic foundations of the American way. It was now nothing more than a vast tract of single family houses, linked to the city on which it depended to

sustain itself by the railroad. However, this was soon to evolve even more with the development of the automobile.

Enter: The Auto

The automobile had been around a decade or two before the twentieth century. Well into the first decade of the twentieth century they were still only possessions of the rich, mostly those who lived in places like Riverside and Llewellyn Park. However, it was not until Henry Ford revolutionized the auto industry with his assembly line system that an inexpensive machine would be made available to “the great multitude” as Ford put it. A new degree of mass production was achieved, able to churn out cars at an ever more affordable rate. By the 1920s the average man’s love affair with the car had already taken deep root in American culture.

Capitalizing on this newly formed obsession of the privately owned vehicle, a syndicate composed of various industries from tire makers to oil tycoons to real estate developers conspired together to form an insanely powerful lobbying group in the interest of the auto. The most powerful contributor of this lobbying force was General Motors. Companies like GM, Standard Oil, and Firestone Tires and Rubber coalesced to form sub-companies with the intention of dissolving the streetcars of the cities and railroad suburbs and replacing them with busses and private transit (cars).

By the time World War II had ended, the stage was set of an explosion of suburban sprawl based on the now crystallized car culture of America. Streets were widened, superhighways cut across cities and countryside’s, and vast real estate developments based on the valid assumption that every family would have its own private motor vehicle continued to be constructed in a manner that reflected the rapidly increasing commodification of American society.

For all the “privacy” and “access to nature” which these suburban developments offered, they came at a high cost. Impacts of the automobile focused postwar suburb on the physical (both urban and natural), economic, and social environments run deep in the landscape of American society.

Physical Impacts

Sprawling suburban development has altered the natural as well as urban landscapes. As real estate developers expanded the suburban fringe into the countryside, many middle class families left the city to fill up the new houses. As a result, the cities they left behind often became forgotten. Neglect of inner city architecture formed blighted cityscapes which in turn caused more middle class families to flee to the suburbs. This issue has many overlaps with the social impacts of suburban expansion. However, by focusing on the physical impacts we can see how the development of suburbs and the embracement of car culture changed the urban environment into a system of motor oriented highways and roads.

To accommodate the growing number of suburban motorists the architecture began to change. Cities and suburbs alike became car oriented rather than people friendly. In the city, the lucky buildings

which were chosen to be renovated or torn down to make room for new constructions were not designed with the pedestrian in mind. Much like the vintage cities of the nineteenth century, these new buildings reached to the sky as if to escape the blight of the street. The advent of steel reinforced concrete allowed glass coated monoliths to rise higher than ever before. Architecture ceased to be an art form, rather it was simply an engineer's solution to the number of floors and offices the client needed.

Elevated freeways criss-crossed the cities and divided up neighborhoods as they allowed the motoring suburbanite to drive quickly and efficiently from home to office without being forced to see anything other than the giant billboards and the brake lights of the other motorists in front of him. Signs were designed to capture the attention of a motorist cruising down the high speed freeways (without the thought that maybe too many cars would clutter these freeways for them to move at high speeds). They were huge, with letters the size of the cars themselves, and they were raised much higher than any pedestrian could see from below.

The sprawling suburbs developed a different form of architecture (or lack thereof) than the central city. Large, wide, one story stucco boxes with flat, boring roofs popped up along the side of the highways as strip malls formed a corridor of shops. The squashed box became the standard, short in height compared to its mammoth length, as if to mirror the highway which it sat next to. These flat boxes sat isolated from one another in a vast pavement desert divided up with white lines, parking blocks, and speed bumps enforcing the 15mph parking lot speed limit.

These seemingly endless parking lots are a result of traditional zoning laws which, like the suburb itself, were developed with good intentions that did not foresee the troubles they may cause in the future. Laws such as minimum lot sizes, setback requirements, and division between residential, commercial and industrial use were intended to preserve the environmental and personal health associated with an open park-like atmosphere free of the filth of industry. However, these laws did not adapt over time, and by the time of the post war suburban boom, they became standard laws which provided a car oriented environment rather than a people oriented one.

These zoning laws often affect the suburban houses themselves. Made with the intention of preserving a congruent architectural pattern, they only succeed in providing a monotonous landscape of endless cookie cutter houses. "McMansions," as Kunstler refers to them, reflect the mass commodification of American society. A suburban house and a McDonald's hamburger are remarkably similar. They are both mass produced—quickly, efficiently, and by the use of cheap materials—looked at by the manufacturer as an item that needs to be sold. The only difference is you can eat one of them and sleep in the other.

Architecture aside, sprawling post war suburbs have impacted the natural and rural environments by its relentless encroachment of new developments. The manifest destiny ideals of rapid western expansion remain in American culture today. As the suburban fringe expands, it consumes both wildlife habitat as well as farmland. Real-estate developers offer thousands, sometimes millions of

dollars to purchase farmland that has not yet become too commercialized. By subdividing it up and slapping together inexpensive wooden framed houses, the developer is able to rake in profits. The largest example of this is in Southern California.

In the early twentieth century, both Los Angeles and Orange counties were surrounded by miles of citrus orchards and agricultural land. The nation's leading area of citrus production, the farmlands of the two counties consisted of a society of small family plots. Many described the two counties as some of the most beautiful landscapes in America (Carle 2000). Yet by the time of the postwar boom, the landscape of Los Angeles and Orange Counties had changed remarkably. As Carle explains "for seventy years the citrus groves would provide beauty and wealth to Southern Californians, until 'inevitable progress' drowned their fertile soils beneath a flood of housing tracts and asphalt." A mighty agricultural system which held the potential to feed most of the nation (and it had been) fell victim to the shortsightedness of the profit seeking suburban developers.

In an area of Los Angeles known as the San Fernando Valley, these actions opened up a whole new can of controversial issues. Not only were the farmers' livelihoods being purchased from them, but because of the desert climate the issue of water supply arose. How would the city provide enough water for the residents of the new suburban developments to wash their highly esteemed cars and water their lawns? The answer was the Owens River. In the case of the San Fernando Valley developments, the impacts of suburban development reached 300 miles north, where the city had constructed a massive aqueduct and had nearly drained two lakes (Mono Lake and Owens Lake). Even to this day, the three counties (Mono, Inyo, and Los Angeles) dispute over the water rights. The issue has become extremely complex. On one hand the two lakes, essential stops of migratory birds have been drained, drying up the lake beds which create noxious alkali dust storms. On the other hand the San Fernando Valley has grown so large that it is now nearly fully dependent on the water from the Owens Valley and simply closing the tap would be disastrous.

The loss of wildlife habitat is also an impact of sprawling suburbia, either indirectly through pushing farmland further into the wilderness, or directly through the development of previously undeveloped natural landscapes. Acres of wilderness yield to subdivision tracts, ironically named after the very things they replaced, for instance Elk Grove, Deerfield, Oak Park, Owensmouth (actual places). Every few months the local news stations will cover a story of a bobcat or even a mountain lion that has been sighted in a suburbanite's backyard or roaming the streets. It's amazing to listen to the report as they roll footage (sometimes from a helicopter) of the creature fleeing pursuit of animal control. Darting in and out of bushes, over fences it flees, until finally they have cornered it. It growls at the authorities,



The cover of a brochure for the San Fernando Valley development "Owensmouth". Courtesy of Catherine Mullolland.

bearing its monstrous fangs. Killing it is not an option, not with so many animal rights activists these days. Instead the control unit tries to coax the snarling beast into a cage. But sometimes it is too vicious even for the most expert animal control unit, and needs to be hit with a tranquilizer dart. Only then can the creature be moved far away where it will not come in contact with humans, back to the wilderness where it belongs.

Many suburban residents often forget that their houses, schools and roads were built on top of the homes and trails of the bobcats, mountain lions, coyotes, deer, skunks, opossums, snakes, or whatever other wild animal they may stumble across in their driveway. The migratory routs and territories of local fauna are disrupted by the constricting tentacles of suburbia. Animals too frightened to attempt a cross of a six lane highway will remain in the small isolated islands of wilderness they have become imprisoned to. A smaller area means less food and more stress. A study by Forsy and Allen (2005) revealed an impact most people seem to overlook. Sprawling suburban development has a positive correlation with the introduction of non-native species. Foreign flora and fauna seem to adapt much better than the natives. This can put an even greater amount of stress on the natives and hinder their ability to survive.

Larger impacts to the natural environment cover the many problems with car culture, including carbon emissions and chemical pollutants. The vast spans of asphalt used to connect these suburbs with the cities collect the motor oil and all kinds of other crud. When rain falls, the malicious mixture is washed into a series of gutters and channels until it reaches the ocean or some other sensitive wilderness area.

Economic Impacts

Suburbia has more severe impacts on the economic environment than one might expect. While a great expansion of highways was involved in the great public works package of the New Deal, by the mid fifties it had taken on a new form. Through multiple government subsidies, the auto and real estate industries took off like rockets bound towards the treasuries of the heavens. However, as it appeared that there may be some limits to this mercurial growth, the dependencies of the American economy began to surface. The great build-out had in fact become the economy. The only foreseeable solution was to somehow continue the growth. As Kunstler alliteratively explains, "using public works as an economic pump-primer was no longer a partisan political issue." The result was the Interstate Highway Act, a government initiative to expand the highway system to new levels, fostering the suburban sprawl beyond a real-estate developer's or auto manufacturer's wildest dreams. Aside from the economic opportunities involved with construction, the great expansion of single family residences opened up markets to everything that would go into them, from washing machines to televisions.

However, this great economic prosperity resulting from an increasing level of consumption is far from sustainable. The Arab Oil Embargo of 1973 gave us a taste of the dire consequences this sprawling system can have. Oil prices shot up, causing panic throughout the nation. Suburbia, with car culture as its backbone, is completely dependent on two things: cheap land and cheap oil. If the cost of oil

skyrocketed so high as to hinder highway mobility, the consequences would reach far beyond the difficulty of John Doe driving 60 miles to work. The giant agribusinesses would have trouble running their diesel powered machinery of mass production. Even if they were somehow able to produce, shipping costs would be astronomical. Suddenly, John Doe, who has to drive 5 miles from his house to the supermarket, would find the now meager selection of food priced at insane costs. The oil addicted economy would simply crumble.

Perfectly in line with the American ideal that any man can have the freedom to create his own enterprise and rake in the profits, another interesting phenomenon of suburbia is the rise of the shopping mall. The shopping mall is quite often the commercial center for more than one nearby suburb. It offers all the “conveniences” one needs, housing a range of clothing boutiques, departments stores, electronic stores and a multitude of restaurants and eateries. Often surrounded by large seas of asphalt to accommodate all the cars of the suburbanites it attracts, the shopping mall has many effects that overlap both economic and social environments. Encouraging the typically lofty level of American consumption, shopping malls employ many design features to retain customers as long as possible. Clocks and windows are rare, so it is easy to lose track of time. They draw crowds from near and far, thriving on their pocketbooks.

Shopping malls are probably the worst thing for a neighboring small town. Here I mean town, not suburban develop. The small American town (they are rare these days) has many small, independently owned stores for whatever purpose mixed in amongst its civic structures (town hall, post office, public parks, etc.) and homes. Much like the story of Wal-Mart (which is essentially a shopping mall taken to the most ridiculous degree of mass production and commodification), shopping malls drain the small towns and their stores of customers and business. As the old saying goes, what goes around comes around, and the developer sells off the shopping mall to a commercial management company, reaps the profits, and begins to develop a new mall. If constructed close enough (which is not too hard considering the vast distances accessible to a motorist) this newer and better mall will eventually do the same to the older mall as the older mall did to the small town. Unable to pay the higher rent of the management company, many of the stores become vacant holes in the body of the mall. Thus the vicious cycle of consumption and destruction continues, all the while creating profits for the developer.

However, the impacts of shopping malls are not limited to the economic environment. Shopping malls are but one effect of suburban sprawl on the social environment of America.

Social Impacts

Impacts of sprawling postwar suburban development on the social environment are probably more severe than any other. On a wide range of issues, the suburb has produced many social controversies, some of which still exist today and only show signs of increased severity in the future.

Since the very beginning, with prototype developments like Llewellyn Park and Riverside, a separation of class has always been a social issue involved with suburban development. The upper class



The 1937 photograph *At the Time of the Louisville Flood*, by Margaret Bourke-White shows the irony of the “American Way”. Poor, city dwelling African-Americans line up for charity relief in front of a billboard promoting the wonders of car culture.

but individually homogenous.” Suburbs became segregated by all levels of class, and often times race. While the classes who could afford to move to the new suburban frontiers did, the poorer people were left in the degrading cities. Blight caused businesses and residents to flee, which drained the local economy, which in turn caused more blight.

Somewhere along the lines race got tied up in this social mess. Poor, uneducated, and displaced by the new machinery such as the mechanical cotton picker, working class blacks of the rural South sought work in the cities. By the time of the post war suburban boom, many cities had already developed a considerable amount of blight. The FHA seemed to have no desire to subsidize city housing, as the future seemed to be in the suburbs. Mortgage guarantees made it possible for most whites to leave the decaying cities while most developers refused to sell to blacks.

The expansion of the highways system divided up the already degraded urban neighborhoods. These highways served as physical barriers which fostered the development of ghettos, while suburbanites could move freely from their home to work without the straining their eyes on the poverty of the city.

The suburbs, however, caused more social problems than a segregation of classes and race by dividing itself from the city. The deep rooted car culture of America seems to have replaced most other forms of culture and civic life. An isolation is formed which runs deeper than between suburban developments and cities. This isolation runs right down to the individual American citizen.

This is partially due to the design of the typical sprawling suburb. With an ever growing mass of cars, lanes become wider and the developments become more and more car oriented. The normal length road, lined with houses without sidewalks due to once thoughtful zoning laws that have become

of the late nineteenth century created exclusive gated communities behind which they retired to their spacious mansions, leaving the troubles of the working class cluttered city behind. As the middle class developed during the first decade of the twentieth century, they too fled the cities. However, the middle class suburbs remained separate from their wealthier suburban counterparts. The zoning laws of many suburbs required a minimum price on the lot, discriminating against those who could not afford them. Robert Putnam describes the suburbs as a “sociological mosaic—collectively heterogeneous

useless in today's world, will collect onto a wider street with multiple lanes and a higher speed limit. The purpose of this is to keep the cars moving out of the suburb towards the main thoroughfare. Once at the main thoroughfare, the street becomes even wider and is lined with either a cinderblock barrier to shield the houses from the sound of speeding traffic, or it is lined with the boring isolated square buildings of a strip mall. These shopping centers usually take on one of two forms. There is the traditional strip mall, with extremely far setbacks, divided from the street by a vast pavement desert. Then there is the smaller cluster of buildings that turn their backs to the street as they surround a lagoon of asphalt parking lot. Fashion Island in Newport Beach, CA is a unique form of this. It is, as the name suggests, an island of fashionable and trendy stores and eateries, surrounded by a sea of parking.

None of these streets of suburbia offer a place for a child to play or an adult to stroll with the chance of civic engagement. Most of these streets (including the most residential) have been designed for much higher speeds than the posted limit. Wide lanes with smooth turns that keep a focal point a good distance ahead without running the risk of being so straight that the motorist doesn't notice the turn. The idea behind this is that any moron (intoxicated or sober), as Kunstler so unsatedly describes, will be able to safely navigate through the suburb without crashing and causing damage. Much like the ridiculous zoning laws, these suburban street systems were designed with good intentions. However, they are designing for the car, not for the people.

The repercussion of this car culture is personal isolation. The house, the supermarket, the bank, school, work, *nothing* is within walking distance. Even in the rare occasions that they are, walking on these car oriented thoroughfares is suicide. To the suburbanite, "the outside world is only an element for moving through as submarines move through water" (Kunstler). The car and the television seem to be the only two things which connect people to the outside world.

According to Putnam, "one inevitable consequence of how we have come to organize our lives spatially is that we spend measurably more of every day shuttling alone in metal boxes among the vertices of our private triangles [home, work, and shopping malls]." The more time we spend in our cars, the less time we spend with our family, friends, and neighbors building a healthy community. Putnam lists three ways in which sprawl has contributed to a massive civic disengagement over the past decades. The first is that sprawl takes time. Vast distances of freeways to cover, clogged by traffic congestion lengthens the amount of time spent in the car which could potentially be spent building a community. The second way is that suburban sprawl has been and continues to be a form of social segregation. Suburbs are divided by a multitude of class levels and races, each one a suction cup on the octopus' sprawling tentacle. The third and most profound way in which suburban sprawl contributes to civic disengagement is that it "disrupts community 'boundedness.'" By decentralizing and privatizing segments of society, the suburbanite is forced to travel by private vehicle to his destination without social interaction. This enforces a private world in which no community can exist.

Is There a Solution?

As we reach the next decade of this new millennium, we are seeing never before experienced problems and conflicts develop. With the long forewarned threat of global warming finally materializing, as we draw nearer to the limits of our resources, and with a system of class segregation that we cannot seem to shake, we need to look at the vast tracts of suburban sprawl as a truly unsustainable way of life.

There are many ideas in planning circles on how to rectify this problem. Some of them are repeats of past attempts, identical if not masked by the greenwashing of today. By widening existing freeways and building new toll roads, we are attempting to use fresh charcoal to smother a growing fire. The government sponsored highway expansions of the past proved to be nothing more than a temporary fix. Carpool lanes and electric vehicles will do nothing except focus traffic to one side of the highway and shift the carbon emissions and oil consumption from the vehicle to the power plant.

Yet some ideas seem promising. New Urbanism calls for bringing civic institutions of the cities to the suburbs. By redesigning the suburbs to be walkable and to offer many of the civic establishments that build a healthy local community, the suburbs will become something like the original American small town. Transit Oriented Development calls for the expansion of public transit (most preferably light rail) along which mixed use developments thrive.

However, the scars that car culture and suburban sprawl have slowly scraped at over the past century may prove to be too deep. Perhaps car culture and commodification are too deeply engrained in American society for a change to happen from mixed use developments. Despite the threat of peak oil and global warming, developers are still subdividing up new landscapes. GM has been failing much longer than this recent economic downturn. Instead of feeding them more money to prevent joblessness, perhaps they should take on a long term vision and create something new. Dissolving GM will leave hundreds of Americans jobless, no doubt. But it will also create an opportunity for new markets, for new solutions, for new jobs. Assuming the management of GM don't run away with their money (which they might if the company were to dissolve), they will have the opportunity to invest in a new industry, one that is much more relevant to the new age we are entering. Rather than clinging to the present with nostalgia for the past, it is time we looked into the future, really far into the future. We need to think up long term solutions.

These sprawling cookie cutter housing developments reflect the shortsighted shift towards mass production, the commodification of anything a salesman can sell, and the monoculture domination over diversity, all of which feed into the massive consumption patterns that is the American way of life. Quickly slapped together balloon frame houses, McDonald's hamburgers and other drive through fast food chains, shopping malls and Wal-Mart mega-stores, the absorption of small family farms into a gigantic commercial monoculture agribusiness. These shortsighted, unsustainable ways of life all offer affordable prices to the consumer. However, the costs are being paid in a non-monetary form. They are being paid for by a destruction of biodiversity, a dependency on a resource that is quickly reaching its limit, and by the dissolve of a once richly integrated system of social relations. To avoid utter failure, we

must rethink our society. Instead of focusing on applying ductape, bandages and other temporary fixes, we should be redesigning the whole system with long term conflicts and goals in mind. We are past the tipping point and looking down a very steep cliff. As time progresses, our society founded on cheap land, cheap oil, and cheap materials proves more and more to be utterly shortsighted and destined to fail.

The sprawling octopus needs to retract its lengthy tentacles back towards its squishy invertebrate head. Only then will it fit inside the narrow opening on top of the beaker. Only then will it be able to taste the sweet meat of the crabs inside.

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