

RE-URBANIZATION OF FLORIDA

A BALANCE OF POWERS

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Introduction

Florida came to the attention of the rest of the United States during the Spanish-American War in 1898. A great many servicemen were sent there for training and went back to live or vacation when the war was over. Even more Americans saw Florida for the first time in 1918, when they were sent there to learn to fly the planes in World War I. And by 1920 when the age of the flapper was gone, Florida was ripe for a boom.

It was the kind of hysteria the country hadn't seen since 1849 when gold was discovered in California. But in this case, the gold was the land itself. And this time, people had cars to get them closer to the mother lode, and slick advertisers had radio to let them know where to go.

Just about everybody who lived in Florida played the real estate game in one way or another. Florida was at the center of one of the biggest advertising campaigns of all time. Real estate promoters would use anything to sell Florida land. They would hire sports and movie stars, political and social figures and even religion revival leaders to help get their message across.

This article discusses the damaging aspects of the urbanism produced by land speculators in Florida as a case study for similar conditions elsewhere in the world, and how "re-urbanization" could greatly improve it. When the power to make decisions over vast tracks of land is held by a few who have profits as their prime motivation, an economic, but highly incongruous development pattern emerges — something I call "patchwork urbanism."

Patchwork Urbanism

Patchwork urbanism is made of discrete single-zoned tracks of land linked at their peripheries by road systems that also connect to other communities, commercial areas and public facilities. In most cases the road system substitutes traditional streets and cars replace pedestrians. Transportation vehicles as well as medium-to-high speed roads become an integral part of this urbanism.

The nature of patchwork urbanism precludes the possibility of providing meaningful public spaces for its citizens. Public space is either privatized by shopping malls, condominium club houses and hotels or it is given up to the car on which public interaction is distant and

minimal. Although public parks are often present in most Floridian cities, they do not substitute the casual and rich interaction of a lively public realm.

Patchwork urbanism creates atomized public spaces in vast areas of land. The system is mostly fueled by a constant influx of visitors and immigrants to the State, and to a lesser degree, by natural growth. Immigrant's priorities do not include the need for an urban environment that takes advantage of its unique physical and cultural setting.

Three types of priorities can be distinguished according to the largest groups of immigrants to the State: Affordable housing, year-long warm weather and convenient nearby amenities including health care *for retirees*; jobs, affordable housing and schools for *professionals with young families*; and jobs, affordable housing and a nurturing community for *those coming from South America*. Affordable housing is the common denominator of the three groups and this is easier to achieve when land prices and development costs are low.

The demand for affordable housing coupled with single-use zoning promote the multiplication of patchwork urbanism. Although this article is centered on Florida, one of the latest States to be developed in the U.S., the reader will find a large number of common elements with new developments throughout this country, Europe and South America.

The Present Land Development System in Florida

Developer's social responsibilities are limited to the development of each "patch" of land and the city's planning efforts are somewhat limited to providing public services to different developments. Since most cities and communities are young and its residents are fairly transient there is a low civic spirit in most of them and particularly in new developments. A high amount of the decision-making powers are bestowed into uncoordinated planning agencies and developers. Because the State's mandate has been centered on growth since the 1920s, the process keeps repeating endlessly.

When developers turn the projects to their owners they leave isolated buildings and neighborhoods in an ocean of communities, shopping districts and roads with no common and meaningful urban spaces in between.

The Car

As mentioned earlier the car and the transportation system are an integral part of patchwork urbanism. The car's ability to compress space and time through speed makes it possible to occupy an ample territory in which the proliferation of activity centers is only natural. This description of course fits most suburban communities in the United States.

The results of patchwork urbanism are rather well known. In general it creates a dispersion and a dilution of meaningful social spaces, this is usually followed by a pervasive sense of the loss of community and place. The feel of isolation and alienation from the larger society created by this urbanism contributes to numerous social illnesses and this is often coupled with an incongruous and uninteresting living environment.

These problems were not so apparent in Florida when development began in the 1920s because of the small scale of the original communities. It was with the land booms of the 1950s and '60s that the situation worsened, and unfortunately it keeps repeating today.

Over the years, there have been a handful of suggested solutions for similar problems around the world. A few come to mind in recent times that range from Paolo Soleri's apocalyptic visions to Leon Krier's medieval utopias and their sequel in the so called "new urbanism." But any solution with a sense of reality must take the car, the existing built environment and the present social and economic structures as a point of departure and not as a negation or a scape from present conditions. Urban problems of this nature cannot be addressed by resorting to ideal communities, or negating the existing production and consumption processes of late capitalism; but by engaging metropolitan areas in its broadest sense as complete living organisms.

Re-urbanization

Re-urbanization seeks the intensification of the social experience in meaningful places by reworking existing suburban models.

In Florida, where the patchwork pattern is common to all major cities it calls for a revision of zoning laws and a balance of powers regarding the decision-making process that controls land use and development.

Zoning codes should offer more flexibility for uses of existing property and provide incentives for linkages between private and public interests that could improve the public realm.

By flexibility I mean the ability to combine or alter uses in single zoned patches. Apartments, offices and public facilities invading shopping malls. Apartments, attached houses, commercial and office facilities smartly infiltrating residential developments. Re-urbanization works at its best when the whole city is taken into account and flexible-zoned areas are put to work for the benefit of several communities or sectors of the city. Re-urbanization does not mean arbitrary density and mixed uses, but gradual, sensitive, organic growth or change to produce lively and meaningful public spaces. Unlike the so called "new urbanism" that is obsessed with repeating isolated traditional neighborhoods, re-urbanization works within existing patterns, welcomes diversity and invites

creativity to achieve unity within multiplicity.

Re-urbanization should be able to receive feedback from its own evolution, and instead of being based on a priori planning, it should rely on shared concepts and principles.

Re-urbanization affords the opportunity of reassessing the relationship of the city with its under utilized and or its natural spaces. Preserving natural areas, refurbishing worthwhile but decayed structures, reconnecting natural patterns and corridors whenever this is possible are but a few strategies for improvement.

Instead of negating the car, the space of the car must be domesticated to achieve a friendlier environment. Slowing car movement in certain areas, landscaping traffic routes, minimizing the negative impact of parking lots, providing sidewalks to connect people are only a few of the possible solutions.

Re-urbanizing Floridian cities.

Perhaps because Florida is so new, so flat (the State's maximum elevation is less than 200 feet above sea level), and it has grown so fast, the effects of patchwork urbanism are more evident than in other areas of the United States.

The flatness of the land is no minor issue here because it adds monotony to an already troubled urbanism.

The need for definition, character, and creation of public spaces in Florida may find its formal resolution in the study of its natural patterns. In broad and rather simplistic terms the State can be described as a vast plain between two coasts with a fifty mile wide river of grass at its middle. This river is called the Everglades.

Minute changes in elevation and soil conditions create inland islands of vegetation for different families of plants and trees. The larger and taller islands are called "hammocks" by the local Indians. Among plains, water and hammocks the State finds its subtle and unique beauty. Hammocks and water modulate the land and define spaces. As vegetation changes with latitude and elevation so does the character of different places.

In the vast plain of patchwork urbanism in Florida, there is the need of "urban hammocks" to define and give character to metropolitan spaces. Scattered and weak activity spots at key locations could be strengthened, made denser and richer using flexible zoning and enlivened with first rate public spaces: plazas, urban parks, greens, pedestrian districts, etc. Public transportation (which is minimal in all Floridian cities) could start to work effectively connecting the "urban hammocks."

Like natural hammocks that depend on vegetation "urban hammocks" should have denser planting to help strengthen the desired effect. A dense vegetation, especially of large trees, helps in harmonizing different architectural styles, provide much needed shade for a sub-tropical climate and redirect breezes to the ground alleviating excess heat and humidity.

This way, Floridian multi-centered cities will be in tune with their natural environment. Higher densities on the other side will preserve natural areas and agricultural land that are disappearing too fast. Since the concept is based on flexibility, adaptability and organic change and growth, places will be naturally different and variety will be assured.

On the political side, re-urbanization requires a balance of powers between the providers of development and the citizens. The existing decision making powers must be shared with established citizens since newcomers normally have little knowledge on local affairs or care less for long term commitments and consequences. Planning efforts must go far beyond the procurement of infrastructure and services to independent units, but must concentrate on the common goals that benefit the city as a total entity.

Conclusions

Anomalous metropolitan growth can be prevented by balancing the decision-making powers between providers of development and permanent city residents that care for a sense of place and quality of living.

Planning efforts should leave room for feedback and modification. Cities are living dynamic organisms that should not be trapped by fixed regulatory formulas.

Re-urbanization is a strategy that could greatly improve

the existing patchwork development of many cities in Florida and in the developed world. The organic nature of re-urbanization is based on flexibility and adaptability to existing local conditions.

Re-urbanization's aim is to provide definition, character and meaningful public spaces to metropolitan areas. The Florida case study suggests the strengthening of strategic activity centers already in place with flexible urbanism, domesticating the space of the car and inviting nature and vegetation to contribute.

Re-urbanization must take the whole city into account to create life-enhancing and meaningful places for its citizens and visitors. Flexible zoned areas must be put to work to serve several communities or metropolitan sectors.

The Florida experience may find resonance in other cities with similar problems. The model just outlined is flexible enough to absorb different conditions and idiosyncrasies and combat irresponsible suburban sprawl, one of the worst enemies of place-making in this century.