

# The Good Suburb

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**O***mnis civitas corpus est.* Every city is a living body. A suburban city, or city as suburb, is no exception. As such, it has needs like any organic creature: to feed, to grow, to dispose of waste, and ultimately, to flourish. In American metropolitan areas of the postwar era, it apparently also has the need to reproduce, spawning suburban forms like overachieving rabbits, and then perhaps even to die (although this is seldom a fate that is hoped for).

As I was driving through the very new suburban development outside Reno recently—sad not to be astonished by the similarity of houses that, absent the western Nevada jagged landscape, would have me guessing whether I am in Raleigh or Racine or Redondo Beach as much as Reno—I thought about St. Augustine's quote: *Omnis civitas corpus est.* I thought about the suburb as a dynamic organism, about the often cancerous, low-density suburban growth generally termed *sprawl* and about just what it is that can make a suburb "good." Of course, it is foolish to think that there is just one "it," one fix. But I am certain that the problem with much of the nation's postwar suburban development is not that there are suburbs but, rather, in the form, or lack thereof, of their growth. Acknowledging that suburbs are not, of course, inherently evil, I would like to focus on just how a suburb can be good.

The good suburb strives to be the sustainable suburb. That is, it works to ensure the equitable preservation of the built and natural environments, cultural heritages, and economic opportunities for all citizens. As part of a larger region, it does not deplete the varied environmental, economic, and social resources from the surrounding region without a mechanism for replenishing them, just as species do not deplete the resources of their habitats without risk of death or the ability to move on (which in a way, is what suburban sprawl may be).

Whether "good" or not, all suburbs share a dynamic relationship with the central city or cities and other

suburbs to form the metropolitan region. The physical, economic, and social "shape" of suburbs, then, affect and are affected by the shapes of the central city and other suburbs, as well as by the people who live and work within them and the surrounding landscapes.

Historically, central cities played the primary role as dominant employment and cultural centers of regions. As suburbs continue to grow, however, the monocentric makeup of many regions changes to a polycentric one, with suburbs themselves becoming central employment and cultural locations. The relationships among cities within regions, then, become more integrated and complex: Suburbs do not exist as singular entities and in working toward a sustainable future cannot act as such.

Yet, the good suburb retains its own organic nature, its own community identity, in a regional context by integrating a variety of environmental (built and natural), economic, and social factors, providing options for citizens at all socioeconomic levels. The primary way in which the good suburb manifests itself is through land use, or civic form. How a suburb is laid out, whether through a master plan or in a less "organized" manner, determines everything from protection of an integration with the natural landscape to commuting patterns, citizen diversity, and economic stability.

Primarily, the good suburb is pedestrian oriented. It does not discriminate against the citizen who does not have access to an automobile. That is not to say that the good suburb cannot accommodate the automobile—indeed, it must if it is to be successful in today's world—but that it places a higher priority on the safe and enjoyable movement of people on foot or by means of public transit. The shapes of buildings, walkways, public spaces, landscaping, and all other features of the city and its structure (and infrastructure) must be designed to be experienced at eye level. Such details make the good suburb a pleasurable place to be and are recognized through building facades, street

furniture, sidewalk and building materials, diverse and usable public spaces (plazas, courtyards, parks, etc.), and vistas of natural areas and well-designed buildings.

The good suburb has a town center, or core, a central location where symbolic, environmental, economic, and cultural meanings dwell. If large enough, it has other, subordinate focal points (often called urban villages or neighborhood centers). These core areas are generally more compact than the development on the periphery of the metropolitan edge and are oriented around public spaces, civic buildings, and a mix of uses including residential, commercial retail, commercial office, institutional, and perhaps even industrial. They thrive at many hours of the day, on weekends as well as weekdays, offering physical and cultural amenities that keep a critical mass of people who in turn allow businesses to thrive. The best of these are also integrated with the natural environment, so that the good suburb has indeed grown from and is a part of its natural heritage.

A wide variety of housing for all family types and incomes is provided throughout the good suburb, although they may vary from one to another in building type. Housing is densest around the urban core but throughout the suburb is always compact enough to make pedestrian access from residential streets to places of employment, shopping, recreation, and others a viable opportunity. Architecture, not only of housing but of all buildings, is based on regional traditions and climate, not mimicking but rather growing logically from the earliest settlements, as applicable. Regional architecture is then coupled with site design and infrastructure placement that is in agreement with the natural landscape. It does not cut down hills but uses them to create a unique setting. It does not strain against the elements but rather uses them to enhance resource efficiency and residential comfort.

Core centers, housing, and all parts of the good suburb are interconnected locally and regionally through safe, enjoyable, and usable transportation networks. Public transit options such as light rail, trolleys, and buses are fundamental and have priority over automobile use. They are comfortable, convenient, and cost-effective. These are coupled with pedestrian and bicycle paths, which themselves are integrated into a variety of natural and landscaped trails and green spaces throughout the suburb and metropolitan area. Mobility therefore is not restricted by user type, ability, or income.

Preservation of open space is of utmost importance and is accomplished by first protecting the unique nat-

ural areas—wetlands, rock outcroppings, streams, and so on—and then by integrating infrastructure and buildings with the land (and water) so as to protect and use natural drainage patterns, climatic variations, forested areas, and other aspects of the natural landscape. The good suburb is ideally completely integrated into a regional open space system—scenic, wild, and agricultural—to help prevent sprawl.

The good suburb and its structures, citizens, and systems emphasize resource efficiency. This means that both renewable and nonrenewable energy are used wisely and efficiently through land use and building design so that nonrenewable resources such as water are used efficiently and are preserved and that waste is reduced, reused, and recycled in a variety of environmentally, economically, and socially equitable manners.

The good suburb learns from its past. As such, it builds on the good parts of its and the region's development through historic preservation and adaptive reuse, ensuring especially that buildings produce the ability for human beings' aging in place, that is, to produce a human ecology that can be used and enjoyed by people of all ages, including the very old. New growth does not compete with but rather complements existing buildings, and often, new technologies that make citizen quality of life better and more efficient are integrated into historic sites. Citizens learn about the history of their suburb and therefore come to respect it, knowing that that is where community identity and support truly begin.

Overall, the good suburb is diverse. Its buildings and spaces, public and private, are diverse, just as the natural landscape from which it grows is diverse. Its people are diverse in culture, race, income, and profession. But the diversity of the place allows residents and visitors to interact and get along well and also works toward mutual respect and safety. And economic opportunities are diverse, so that people with different education levels and work skills can participate at varying levels, even while educational opportunities are encouraged and abound.

Every suburb is a living body. Based on human scale, diversity, mutual respect, and a sense of place, the good suburb thrives as its own entity within the context of the metropolitan region.

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