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Green planning and design? Start with the density and buildings found in Boston's neighborhoods

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Sustainable design starts with sustainable development...and getting both density and design right is essential to creating development that supports more sustainable lifestyles. To picture the kinds of densities that free people from complete dependence on their cars—and begin to make a tangible dent in the amount of energy consumed by a community every day, envision Boston's older neighborhoods of row houses, triple deckers, older apartment buildings...and newer lofts. These densities provide the one to two thousand housing units within a ten minute walk necessary to support the kind of Main St. that makes a neighborhood walkable in 2011. These same densities support transit, neighborhood supermarkets, active parks, a range of housing choices, and other qualities that people tell Goody Clancy make their communities more livable. These are also the densities that support healthier lifestyles because people can walk, bike or use transit to shop, meet friends, and go to work.

Redeveloping large, failed shopping centers and other "grey field" sites at these same densities can create "transit ready" development and bring the same benefits noted above to suburban communities...and suburban residents and employers alike increasingly tell our planners that they want these benefits. Goody Clancy recently finished a plan to transform a series of outmoded shopping centers and office parks into a higher density, walkable, mixed-use, and "transit ready" downtown for Dublin, Ohio, just outside of Columbus. The state's wealthiest suburb and host to 50,000 employees who work in class A office parks, Dublin is preparing itself for a new era in which "amenities" like walkability, transit, housing choices, and vibrant Main Sts. will make suburban communities more competitive for future residents and employees.

Sustainable densities can make a tangible difference. Every year the developer Jonathan Rose distributes a chart that demonstrates the value of two things: green building and green locations. Moving the same household from an auto-dependent low density setting to a neighborhood with sufficient density to support transit reduces the amount of energy that household consumes by roughly 40%. Getting density right is half the task because "green" design cuts the household's energy use by another roughly 55%. Green design has two meanings. First, it means making the right density a welcome neighbor. For decades community leaders have rejected poorly designed projects as too dense—even when they represented lower densities than their neighbors. Goody Clancy's planners, urban designers and architects work closely together to develop designs that visibly enhance their settings—animate the adjacent sidewalk, promote a sense of community, bring new life to old buildings, step down to honor the scale of existing nearby buildings, and use materials that do not mimic but draw inspiration from their neighbors.

Green design means creating communities that "tread more lightly on the earth"—and the familiar adage, "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle", is most applicable with buildings, our largest handmade objects.

Reducing the substantial consumption of new construction, which uses half the natural resources consumed by the United States, and reusing existing buildings, avoids the waste and toxicity streams created by new products while creating 20 to 30% more jobs than manufacturing with the added advantage that the jobs generated by renovation are local. The myth that existing buildings can only be made more energy efficient with substantial alterations is gradually being debunked as more holistic performance based energy codes are tested in cities like Seattle, Washington and old fashioned, less is more, approaches to comfort are promoted with strategies like ceiling fans and caulking to avoid air infiltration.

In a world already feeling the impact of global warming, sustainable development is a necessity. Getting density and design right are not only both essential, they depend on each other. Communities have been correct in opposing poorly designed density and great design cannot compensate for development that promotes sprawl or fails to revitalize urban neighborhoods. There is a Kenyan proverb that rings very true today: "The earth is not given to us by our parents, it is lent to us by our children." Honoring this responsibility requires that as we build we work together to achieve greater environmental responsibility from the first stage of planning to the last stage of design.

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