

View from above and a reference to "smart growth"

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Let me start by saying that I believe in "smart growth." As a former urban planner, all of the elements of smart growth - mass transit, high density with open space surroundings, less auto dependency, condensed infrastructure, and in general, efficient land use - all make sense to me.

Unfortunately, I think most Americans believe that smart growth is for other people: existing urban dwellers, empty nesters, singles, artists, etc. Smart growth is for people who don't want or need big yards, big cars, highly rated suburban schools, soccer leagues, and homogeneity of neighborhoods. It seems many Americans simply don't seem to want to move to older urban centers where there is high density housing available, but also maybe "too much" mixed use and diversity. There are, of course, exceptions like downtown Boston and similar cities where empty nesters in particular will flock. But the living in these places is expensive and therefore limited to a small sliver of population, not exactly what I would call a smart growth movement.

In short, while I believe in smart growth, I'm afraid it has a limited audience.

That said, the other evening, I attended a lecture given by an aerial photographer who had completed a beautiful photographic essay book called "Over." I had seen his photography before, where he mostly focused on aerial views of the different evolutions of landscapes. In his recent presentation, and recent book, he focused more on patterns of growth with an obvious bias towards environmental issues.

The photographs were extraordinary, both beautiful and shocking. One after the other, the photographs showed huge suburban packed valleys, mile after mile, in such places as California and Arizona, all blanketed by a thick coat of smog. He reminded us that our atmosphere is very thin, and that jets flying at 40,000 feet are mostly outside of it. He made the metaphor of an orange (earth) wrapped in cellophane, the cellophane essentially being the thickness of our atmosphere. When you saw the smog covering hundreds of miles of roadway and housing, you got the point.

He made other points with: a lusciously green golf course totally surrounded by desert, long fingers of fairways creeping up into arid canyons; a development in Arizona, where every lot, incredibly, was waterfront on a series of canals (everyone assumed it was Florida). He showed an extraordinary perfect square of greenery packed with houses, perhaps about 20 miles by 20 miles, in the middle of a huge desert, with no apparent connection to anything else. He commented on the huge amounts of water needed to support these outposts and golf courses, and supported his arguments by showing aerial views of dried river beds and long aqueducts across the desert from western lakes and the Colorado River.

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