10

Redesigning America

Peter Park

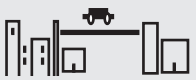
Courtesy of Peter Park

City planners face many challenges. In regions with rapidly growing populations, people are becoming more and more dependent on automobiles. At the same time, "cookie-cutter" subdivisions often isolate people from the greater community. But with these problems come opportunities. In these new growth areas, more and more workers are adding to the economy. Many older, established American cities have museums, theaters, and universities. These offer diverse cultural experiences. In all cities, young and old, city planners are busy working to improve their conditions.

Key Concepts
from Previous Chapters

2 Engineering Design Process
7 Systems

I'm Peter Park, and I oversee city planning in Denver, Colorado. Denver is a city that has grown quickly in recent decades, and today it faces a number of complex challenges and opportunities. I'm a part of a growing movement among urban planners, architects, developers, engineers, economists, and concerned citizens called New Urbanism. ***New Urbanism*** is an urban design movement that began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. New Urbanists aim to reform how our cities grow and to rebuild our regions, cities, towns, and villages. New Urbanism promotes neighborhoods that are walkable and include a diverse range of places to live, work, shop, and relax. We support regional planning of open space, architecture, and balanced development of jobs, housing, and transportation. We also believe that urban strategies are the best way to save the time people spend in traffic, to increase the supply of affordable housing, and to rein in urban sprawl. Many other issues, such as historic preservation, safe street design, and environmentally friendly building design, are also a part of the New Urbanism philosophy.



New Urbanism
is a movement among urban planners, architects, engineers, residents, and city officials to solve some of the design problems of modern American cities.

The New Urbanism approach certainly helped improve life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where I was the planning director from 1995 to 2004. I worked for a visionary leader, Mayor John Norquist (now President and CEO of the Congress for the New Urbanism). Together we improved the city's downtown, neighborhoods, and the river and lakefront areas by using New Urbanist principles. We even demolished an elevated downtown freeway. This provided opportunities for new development and improved connections to nearby neighborhoods. Replacing the elevated freeway with a walkable boulevard actually improved traffic circulation. It also removed a freeway that was both in the way and costly to maintain.

Now I oversee city planning in Denver, Colorado. As in Milwaukee, it's my job to guide Denver's development in a direction that makes it a more beautiful, enjoyable, and healthy place to live, work, and play.

I've always loved urban environments. Though I grew up in a small town, I remember traveling with my family to cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York. The beautiful buildings, parks, subways, and busy life on the street fascinated me and made a big impression. These experiences opened my eyes to how the design and structure of a community provides the setting for how people live.

I grew up in Pierre, the capitol city of South Dakota. I remember riding bikes and walking with friends through the city's small downtown, past the beautiful historic courthouse, the Carnegie Library, and the capitol building and grounds. Whether large or small, a city's design plays a very important role in shaping civic pride and creating a sense of place.

I studied architecture in college. After working at architectural firms for a few years, I decided to pursue a master's degree in architecture at the University of Wisconsin. Several of my professors gave me the opportunity to work on projects much bigger than a single building. I became intrigued with urban planning and the overall structure of cities. Cities are much more than collections of buildings. Cities can actually have a life of their own, constantly growing to meet ever-changing needs. City planning requires not only an understanding of building and environmental design, but also economics, sociology, and politics. At the heart of the New Urbanism movement lies the concept of sustainable development. ***Sustainable development*** means directing the growth of a city so that it meets the needs of current residents without compromising the needs of future key elements. These elements are density, mixed-use environments, beautifully designed buildings and public spaces, and multi-modal transportation (cars, trains, subways, bicycles, and walking). And all this will benefit people now and for centuries to come.

Sustainable development means directing growth so that it meets current needs without compromising future needs.

The Elements of a Successful City

Like any large-scale project, redesigning a city is not only challenging, it's also an incredibly complex task. However, there are plenty of famous cities that work well: New York City, San Francisco, Montreal, and Paris, to name only a few. These cities are some of the most attractive and prosperous designed places on Earth. Tourists flock to these urban areas, and their high property values prove that people will pay a lot to live in them.

It's no secret what makes these cities successful. All of them share the same important elements. You don't have to live in Paris or Manhattan to enjoy good urban design. Any city or town, no matter what size or location, can be designed to incorporate some of the following: high density, mixed-use environments, beautiful buildings, beautiful spaces, and multi-modal transportation.

Population Densities

Manhattan:
1.5 million people
23 square miles

≈ 65,000 people/square mile

Atlanta:
420,000 people
131 square miles

≈ 3,200 people/square mile

High Density

The great cities I just mentioned all have large populations, yes, but their populations are contained in a relatively small amount of space. Consider Manhattan, in the heart of New York City. Manhattan has a population of 1.5 million people living on approximately 23 square miles of land. That means that, on average, more than 65,000 people live on a square mile of Manhattan![1]

What are the advantages of a high-density city? ***High density*** reduces problems such as habitat destruction. Atlanta is a sprawling suburb with this problem. If the 1.5 million residents of Manhattan lived in city as dense as Atlanta, which has about 3,200 people per square mile, they'd take up about 470 square miles. That's a lot more habitat destruction.[1] It's fine that the natural habitats around cities like New York City or Paris have been paved over. However, the destruction is much less for each person in a city than a suburb or even a city with a less dense population.

Population density
refers to how many people a given space contains.

High density has other advantages as well. Why is Manhattan such an exciting place to be? It's great for people watching! You can observe people from all ages and all walks of life—not to mention a few movie stars—coming together to do business and socialize. The city's "buzz" makes residents and visitors feel connected to the pulse of the community. It also gives people insight into other cultures and ways of living.

Mixed-Use Environments

Zoning laws
are laws that govern how land can be used and what attributes the structures on the land can possess.

In densely populated cities, people live, work, play, and shop in the same area. When you walk through a city like San Francisco, you see storefronts, cafes, offices, and apartments all in one building. San Francisco has zoning laws that permit this type of mixed use. Other cities separate residential, commercial, and industrial areas. ***Zoning Laws*** are regulations that govern how land and the structures on them can be used. Zoning laws also dictate how tall a building can be, how far from other structures, and a variety of other restrictions.

[1]Source: US Census Bureau, 2000

Mixed-use zoning offers many advantages. Residents can walk to work, the store, or the park, which reduces automobile traffic, and this reduces traffic congestion and pollution. At the same time, residents get plenty of exercise. The average New Yorker, for instance, may walk four or five miles a day. You don't have to visit the gym after school or work if you walk that much!

Single buildings can house coffee shops, art galleries, and apartments, a reflection of multiple-use zoning laws.

Beautiful Buildings

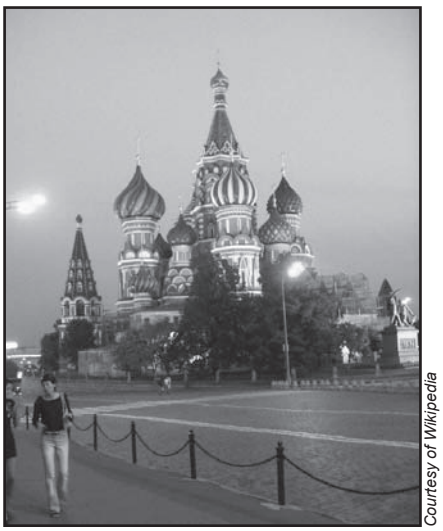
People travel thousands of miles to visit cities that have beautiful architecture. Museums, churches, and even corner stores in Paris are located in beautiful and often centuries-old structures that have been lovingly restored over the years. Of course, Paris and other large cities have modern architecture, too, but the modern buildings are designed to look good, work well as public spaces, and integrate nicely with the surrounding buildings.

I believe that every city has the potential to be as postcard-worthy as Paris. Many American towns and cities have historical structures. These structures could be restored into beautiful spaces that preserve the town's history and character. Even an old barn or factory warehouse in a town center can become a town hall or shopping mall. Restoring old structures also benefits the environment because it conserves lumber and other construction materials. You can think of it as a form of recycling!

You don't need an old building to preserve the charm and character of a city or town, though. Even tall skyscrapers don't have to appear cold and corporate. These buildings, when designed appropriately for multiple uses, can contribute to the look and character of a city.

Beautiful Spaces

People want to feel connected to their communities. They like to go to central places where they can visit with friends, learn about local issues, and catch up on gossip. Great cities have public meeting places incorporated into their designs. These spaces may take the form of green parks, such as Central Park in New York or the Boston Common in Boston.



Courtesy of Wikipedia

St Basil's Cathedral in Moscow

A walkable boulevard or "Main Street" can serve as a public space—as can a central building or a civic center. As long as it is free, pleasant, open to the public, easily accessible, and centrally located, any place can serve as a public meeting space.

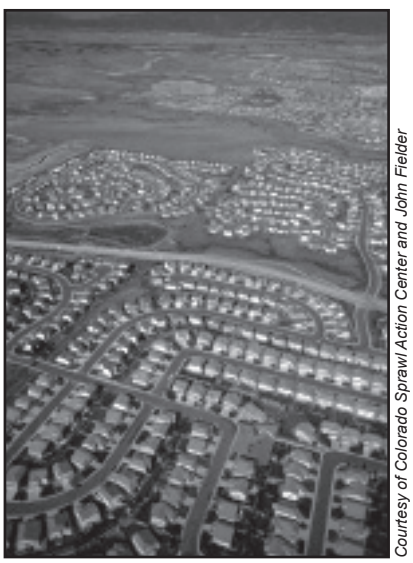
Multi-Modal Transportation

World-class cities provide people with a variety of transportation. Many cities use train and subway systems that shuttle people across town or to and from the suburbs. Public transit (buses, streetcars, trains, and subways) is a great investment. It reduces traffic and air pollution and promotes better land use. Transportation hubs, which promote pedestrian traffic, are excellent locations for retail businesses, restaurants, and public meeting spaces.

Many neighborhoods exclude walking and cycling in their designs. That's because the roads in many cities are for cars and are not very "people friendly." Great cities have streets that accommodate everyone, whether they use a wheelchair, a bicycle, or a just a pair of walking shoes. Well-planned sidewalks and bike lanes give pedestrians and bicyclists plenty of room. Well-designed crossing signals actually work, and motorists obey them!

Safe streets require more than proper signs and signals. Successful urban squares and streets are like "outdoor rooms." The buildings, sidewalks, lamps, benches, and cafes invite everyday contact, encourage an open exchange of ideas, and add to a city's vitality.

Sprawl: The New Urbanist's Worst Enemy



Courtesy of Colorado Sprawl Action Center and John Fielder

A bird's-eye view of sprawling development north of Denver

We know what works, and we know what doesn't work: urban sprawl. ***Urban sprawl*** is a term that describes the rapid expansion of a city toward low-density surrounding areas. Urban sprawl occurs when rural land is developed faster than necessary to support population growth. As these areas are developed, farmland and natural habitats disappear, while developed areas, often in the city center, are abandoned. This population movement has been the predominant growth pattern in most American cities since World War II.

This unplanned sprawl resulted in a wasteful consumption of natural resources and other consequences. "Single-use" zoning laws that separated residential, commercial, employment, and recreation areas forced residents to travel long distances, which led to wide use of automobiles. This lifestyle led to the traffic congestion and pollution that most of us confront every day. Those unable to drive—the young, disabled, and the elderly—still face significant disadvantages.

Denver's Challenge and Opportunity

Denver has suffered some of the negative consequences of urban sprawl and continues to deal with growth pressures. During the 1990s, Denver's population grew by 87,000 people—an 18.6 percent increase. And it continues to grow. By 2020, we anticipate a population growth of an additional 132,000 people. The population is expected to grow by one million people by 2025. Current estimates predict that land development will to continue to expand, consuming thousands of acres of rural land. Most of the roadways will be operating at or over capacity.

The expected growth in Denver can be seen as either a threat or an opportunity. Fortunately, people in Denver are now dedicated to sustainable long-term city planning and are willing to invest in the city's future. Voters recently approved a $4.7 billion plan to expand our light-rail and bus transit system. Called FasTracks, the project will connect the new with the old, providing people with alternative transportation from the inner city to suburban areas. What's more, we expect FasTracks to stimulate the growth of new urban centers around the city.

The idea is to reduce urban sprawl and create exciting new places to live, work, and play. Imagine stepping off a train after school or work to find a lively central plaza. You are surrounded by stimulating architecture. You walk past a scene of open-air markets and cafes. Restaurants and businesses are at street level and apartments and offices are on the upper stories. The plaza gives way to a tree-lined boulevard along which pedestrians and cyclists safely move in dedicated lanes alongside the streets.

This is Denver's "New Urbanist" vision—exactly the kind of scene that would look great on a postcard! Now, doesn't that beat sitting in traffic?

What's the Story?

1. What is New Urbanism?

2. What does the term "sustainable development" mean? Give three examples of development that might be considered sustainable.

3. Why does Peter say that Denver's path of development was not sustainable? What is the solution he is working on?

4. How does urban sprawl harm the environment? What are some other problems with sprawl?

5. What are multiple-use zoning laws? In Peter's opinion, how do multiple-use zoning laws benefit a city?

Connecting the Dots

6. What does urban sprawl have to do with the unintended consequences of the automobile that Araceli Ortiz described in Unit 1?

7. After FasTracks is implemented, will Denver's development problems be solved once and for all? Using what you learned about the design process from Shawn Frayne and Jamy Drouillard, explain your answer.

What Do You Think?

8. Every design can be improved upon. Think about your own city or town. What are its major design problems? Write a list of at least three problems and describe what impact these problems have on your community.

9. Prescribe New Urbanist solutions to the problems you identified in your previous answer.

10. Do you believe that the New Urbanism approach is the best approach to urban planning? Why or why not?