



Where Should Growth Occur?

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The debate over the primacy of the central city versus the suburbs has been around some time, but it is at the heart of the debate about what our cities and regions will look like in the future. Where is most of our future growth going to occur? Does it make a difference where it occurs, and could we do anything about changing where it occurs if we wanted to?

Consider Houston, a typical big city with the usual growing pains. Four million more people are coming to the Houston area (choose your own time frame—they'll be here eventually, whether in 20, 30 or 50 years). The population density of the suburban areas around Houston is about 4,000 people per square mile. Do the math, if all of that growth goes to the periphery that means that at least 1,000 additional square miles of agricultural land, prairies and forests will be forever destroyed. That is more land than the city of Houston covers now! Is this loss inevitable, a necessary price of growth and progress? If that were the case, we could do nothing more than mourn the loss and do what we could to salvage a few scraps. But of course it isn't inevitable—there are alternatives, and I'm not talking about the no-growth alternative!

Where else could these people go if indeed they are coming to Houston, you ask? The alternative is denser development in the heart of Houston. Contrary to popular opinion, denser development does not have to look like a Jacob Riis turn of the last century tenement in New York City. Properly designed and planned compact growth can result in a very high quality of life. Some of the most desirable places to live in this country have population densities in excess of 40,000 people per square mile.

One of the biggest issues facing a flat area like Houston is drainage, and that's a great way to highlight the differences in the cost of developing the periphery versus compact growth in the center. The biggest single predictor of where drainage problems will occur is the amount of impervious or paved over surface. Simply put, the more pavement there is, the more runoff there will be, and consequently more flooding. The more you pave, the more you must do to somehow mitigate negative impacts, usually in terms of stormwater detention ponds and other measures.

Now here is where the difference between compact growth and sprawl becomes apparent. There really isn't much difference in additional imperviousness when going from 4,000 people per square mile to 20,000 people per square mile. At 4,000 people per square mile, things are pretty much paved over already—sure, there are more lawns, but lawns aren't prairie and runoff in the suburbs is pretty close to what it is downtown already anyway. So the additional impacts of the 16,000 more people we crammed into that square mile aren't all that significant, at least in terms of flooding.

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But what if we spread those 16,000 additional people out at 4,000 people per square mile on new, undeveloped land? That's at least another 4 square miles paved over! Now we are talking a real difference in terms of additional runoff. Four square miles of prairie or forest or even agricultural land has a tremendous detention potential, especially if we factor in the depressional wetlands that dot our native prairies. Multiply that out over the 1,000 square miles that will be paved over if current growth patterns continue and imagine the loss in stormwater detention and the additional flooding we are bound to see. But the four square miles of natural habitat does more than just detain stormwater—it also cleans the water through filtration and thus helps to maintain high water quality in our bays and bayous. There is no question that the loss of another 1,000 square miles of natural lands will have a substantial negative impact on the water quality of Galveston Bay, one of the most productive estuaries in the nation and an important economic linchpin in our regional economy.

Beyond the economic and ecological functions of open space, isn't having some wide open prairies nearby part of our natural legacy? Is the only thing we can bequeath our children and their children 2,000 square miles of wall to wall subdivisions and strip malls? Is it inevitable that in places like Houston we will have to drive 60 miles to see the prairie? I think we can imagine a better future. I think we can imagine both a healthy and livable city and a viable ecosystem in and around our cities. In fact, I don't think one can be imagined without the other.

The plain fact of the matter is that livable cities are compact cities. Compact growth facilitates proximity and connectivity, two essential elements of a great city. Having things close together is one of the main reasons cities developed in the first place, and the interconnectedness of different uses and activities is an extraordinary template for creative growth. Dispersed growth or sprawl enhances neither and thus cannot promote the kind of creative growth that our cities will need to be competitive in this century.

Most of the cities in this country and elsewhere that people think of as attractive and worth returning to are highly dense. Charleston, South Carolina and the French Quarter and Garden District of New Orleans are just two examples. Interestingly, both of these cities were designed and built for a pedestrian scale before the advent of automobiles. Cutting-edge planners now recognize that the human, pedestrian scale should be the dominant scale for city planning, incorporating the automobile and its accessories into this scheme rather than the other way around.

In an era when security concerns seem to drive everything, consider the differences between sprawl and compact growth. How well do you know your neighbors in the detached single-family housing of suburbia? I rarely see mine! I don't walk very often in my neighborhood (only recreationally!). The vast majority of my trips are in my car in and out through my driveway. Contrast that with a dense urban neighborhood, perhaps composed of townhomes or condominiums, where a great many trips to the grocery store and other amenities can be made by walking. Who will know their neighbors better? What makes a safer neighborhood?

The opening of light rail in Houston, Los Angeles, and other cities opens a real opportunity for accelerated compact growth. But to be an effective agent of compact

growth, a dense transit network should be built within the urban cores. Facilitating commuting from the suburbs will not aid compact growth. A dense transit network is a prerequisite for the kind of compact growth associated with great modern cities. Families will continue to own at least one car per driver unless reliable and timely transit is available. The only place that a dense transit network can be developed is in the city center, not in the suburbs. A dense transit network could actually enable most new growth to be inside the dense cores.

The pattern of future growth is the preeminent environmental problem facing this country. No amount of mitigation can make up for the lost ecological functions of 1,000 square miles of open space. There is no doubt that suburban development will continue, as that kind of development will continue to be a choice for many Americans. But many, perhaps even most, would choose the amenities that come with true urban living, were it available. Making that choice attractive and feasible is perhaps the greatest and most important challenge facing our cities. The future of both our cities and the prairies and forests they intersect depend on it.