

Increasingly popular New Ruralism deserves scrutiny

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=3217#more-3217>

In the middle of the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, there is an unusual structure - the underground library - and next to it is something else you wouldn't expect to find - a small plot of corn.

Now the story goes, or at least the one that I heard when I was a student, that the land that the corn was grown on was donated by a family many decades ago, with one stipulation. If the Uoff's agriculture school ever stopped using it to grow experimental corn varieties, the ownership of the land would revert back to the family.

That was fine for a while, but eventually the university's library needed to expand, and apparently the only feasible location for it was next to that corn plot. Somebody realized that corn needed a lot of sunlight to grow, but that the new library would keep the corn plot in shade.

If you've ever been to Illinois, especially central Illinois, you know that there is plenty of space to grow corn. Perhaps that little corn plot was valuable for growing new hybrids, since there were no nearby fields that could cross-pollinate it. Anyway, someone apparently thought it to be too valuable to lose, so they had to think of something quick. The solution was obvious - put the library underground. So they constructed it, several stories underground with a light well down through its center. The only structures visible on the surface were two tiny entry structures for the stairs and elevators.

And as far as I know, they're still growing corn there today.

There's a new movement related to New Urbanism that I have just begun to notice, and I will probably be writing more about it as I learn more about it. Called New Ruralism, it has to do with weaving rural life into urban planning and to bring back the practice of growing food in urban areas.

The movement was originated by Sibella Kraus, the Project Director for the Institute of Urban & Regional Development New Ruralism Initiative, who is also the President of Sustainable Agriculture Education. In a paper written by Kraus, and published in a UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design magazine, she writes, "New Ruralism is the preservation and enhancement of urban edge rural areas as places that are indispensable to the economic, environmental, and cultural vitality of cities and metropolitan regions."

New Ruralism does not necessarily have anything to do with rural towns, rural areas or small towns, as its name could imply. Instead it looks at the edge of cities as areas that can be used for the production of food for that city in particular, and that edge area can be significant in size.

She writes, “The geography for New Ruralism can be generally defined as rural lands within urban influence; the larger the metropolis, the larger the field of influence. The geographical structure of metropolitan regions extends out from the urban-rural interface and the rural-urban fringe to exurbia and beyond, to urban-influenced farmland.”

What is “exurbia”? Well, I am an example of an exurbanite. I live in the country, but I work in the city. Randal O’Toole, in his book, *The Best Laid Plans*, defines exurbanites as “people with urban tastes and occupations living in small towns or rural cities,” and wrote that “by some accounts, exurbs are growing faster than either suburbs or cities.” I don’t doubt that. Lots of people prefer to live in low-density areas, which is why the suburbs are so popular.

Kraus continued in her paper, “Within this field of urban influence, the New Ruralism movement would help create permanent agricultural preserves as sources of fresh food for the larger urban region, and as places for nurturing urban connections with the land. These could take the form of green food belt perimeters, buffers between urban areas, small agricultural parks at the urban-rural interface, or bigger preserves further afield that include larger farms and rural settlements. This vision must work hand in hand with the New Urbanism vision of compact mixed-use urbanized areas, the elimination of low-density auto-dependent sprawl, and distinct “edges” between towns and their surrounding rural working lands.”

If you have been reading my articles for any time, you know that I look at things like this through the microscope of the Constitution. Like many movements, there can be something good embodied within them, but that good can be overshadowed by the loss of freedom created by too many regulations that stifle creativity and productivity.

This movement warrants a lot of study before making a judgment, but In the meantime, it should be scrutinized for Constitutional issues, especially those involving property rights.

We still live in a free country if we’re willing to work and fight for it. Happy Thanksgiving!

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