

# **New Urbanist purists don't comprehend the lives of others**

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=4627>

Back in the late 1980's, car manufacturers began doing a peculiar thing with their motors. Instead of aligning the shaft of the motor with the transmission, they turned them ninety degrees. That's when customers began to complain about service costs of their engines. No longer could the average person change their own spark plugs, because they were so inaccessible that it required a lift to reach them from the bottom, or in some cases the motor had to be removed from the car.

The reason for the change? It was cheaper for the manufacturer to install the engine on the assembly line.

I just read a review of a book entitled *Sidewalks In the Kingdom* by Eric Jacobsen. The review was written by Grand Rapids Architecture Examiner's Steven Banks, who wrote, "Jacobsen makes a compelling argument that Christianity is incompatible with the urban sprawl of the past half century. Christians, he suggests, should be at the forefront of working toward vibrant neighborhoods of mixed uses, varied incomes, front porches, and sidewalks. He says that only in neighborhoods like these can incarnational ministry take place for only here will we come to know and interact with our neighbors."

He continues, "Since Christianity is built on relationship, Christians should be supportive of the kinds of neighborhoods that New Urbanism is proposing and should be appalled at the modern sub-division and the sterile, cookie cutter existence it promotes. Jacobsen asserts that the modern megalopolis, and the suburbs they spawn, are actually hurting the Christian cause for they isolate people."

I'm sure Jacobsen and Banks are both fine fellows, but I think that they're simply wrong. I read dozens of books and countless articles every year, and there are few that I can't finish because I can't agree with the premise of the book, and Jacobsen's book was one of them.

I've nothing against New Urbanism, per se, but I find it troubling that when they extol the virtues of New Urbanism, it is generally followed by characterizing "sprawl" as something to be demonized. Banks further writes that Christians can't live out their Christianity if they live 20 miles away from their church. I think that you will find millions of Christians in America that are doing just that, and are quite willing to make the trip so that they can go to the kind of church they want to attend and associate with the kind of people they like to be with. In reality, if the New Urbanist dream were to come true to create densely developed cities as the only place for human habitation, you would find that people would still drive 20 miles from one side of the city to another, in heavy traffic, to attend the church of their choice.

And I would have to ask, do these New Urbanists do Facebook, Twitter and all the others? Do you really think that they ignore far away friends and only spend time with their next door neighbors?

There is nothing wrong with sprawl, either. It is simply another way for people to live who want to live that way. This was a country that was built on capitalism, where developers determined what the customer's demand was, then responded to it. This so-called sprawl was a viable way of living then and is still in strong demand today. Perhaps younger people are driving demand for smaller, more compact living, but it is questionable and even doubtful that when they marry and have children that they will want to stay in that kind of environment.

New Urbanists also overlook the cost of developing a dense community.

The first cost is freedom, of course, if suburbs are to be eliminated as a choice. But there is another cost that cities face when they do so.

When water, sewer, and electrical systems are designed for a particular density, then that density is doubled, tripled or in some cases multiplied many times over, those systems become inadequate, and have to be upgraded to meet the demand.

The cost of dense development can be enormous, not just for builders, but for city government as well, and it becomes more difficult to service and upgrade systems where there is little physical space to do so. We only need to look at how New York city constantly tunnels under their city for all kinds of infrastructure, or the boondoggle, budget busting Big Dig in Boston as extreme examples of what can happen in our own community.

The New Urbanist purist, in reality, knows little about the lives of others that are different from their own or from the monolithic way they think we should all be forced to live.

That is why they are so willing to eliminate a legitimate lifestyle, suburban living, to replace it with one that they feel is more advantageous to them. They would rather be the only ones that can change the spark plugs.

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