

Urban planners have a problem thinking outside the box

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=4700>

Planetizen is a website that, by its own definition, “is a public-interest information exchange...for the urban planning, design, and development community.” It is actually a very interesting website, especially for people like me who are interested in urban planning.

Several weeks ago I wrote an article that drew the ire of a few of its devotees. The brief version of my article was that sprawl should not be demonized, that churches don't work the way some planners would like them to in densely developed communities and that there are freedom issues involved in planning. They were particularly perturbed because I had criticized the book, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, which was written by a pastor in support of New Urbanism. I found myself in such disagreement with the premises presented in the book that I put it down without reading it all (in fact, I read almost half of the book.)

Their response, entitled “Churchgoers on the Defense Against New Urbanism’s Anti-Sprawl Crusade” took issue with my article. One of those who wrote scathing comments on the Planetizen website was Tim Barton, a planner in Vancouver. To his credit, he sent me a very nice (I mean that) e-mail to let me know that my article had made the Planetizen website. Also to his credit, he was the only one who had the courage to sign his name to his comments.

An anonymous comment entitled Church Creep said, “What I find objectionable is when churches in old, historic neighborhoods buy up and knock down houses to enlarge their churches. In one of the oldest neighborhoods in my town, one church has bought 40 properties and torn (sic) down the houses to turn the land into parking lots and added church space. I’m sure some churches make good neighbors, but some seem bent largely on the premise, “build it and they will come.”

That comment proved a point that I have been making for years regarding the impact of highly regulatory land management zoning codes - that is that they create land shortages, especially for the kind of land that churches need. This is the inevitable result of imposing an urban growth boundary that is designed to force dense development.

While no specifics about that particular church was given, it is not difficult to imagine that in the absence of suitable land to expand, it may have been necessary for the church to buy homes that surrounded it in order to expand, or perhaps the church simply wanted to keep its location. For whatever reason, this church picked what is perhaps the most difficult, expensive and risky way to expand. It could have taken only one of the forty homeowners to decline the purchase of their home to kill the whole deal.

Regardless of the reason, I would be willing to bet that that church did not go to the city demanding that eminent domain be used to take the homes on their behalf. I would also bet that

they paid the homeowners at least market value or more, and they may have even allowed older homeowners to stay in their homes until they passed away.

Although I am just as interested in seeing historic buildings preserved, I also have some difficulty thinking that they were of more value to the community than the church would be. Churches can and do design their facilities and programs to be of value to their community. But when cities impose stringent land regulation policies, it places churches in a no-win position that ultimately could become a loss to the community.

In a Tulsa suburb, two churches in a 27-acre blighted residential area were forced out to make room for new retail development. So I ask, would the person who criticized the church that bought 40 homes also criticize that city for buying the homes in that area? What if it had been a church that had purchased them instead? Would that person have condemned the church for buying the homes fairly instead of forcing them out? Is it acceptable for a city to force people out of their homes for “social good,” but no one else? And were the property rights of the homeowners in the historical area greater than the property rights of the homeowners in that blighted area? Should our laws be respecters of persons? Was one wrong, and the other right simply because one of them fit a preconceived “desired urban form”?

The problem I have with many urban planners is that they have become so dedicated to their own beliefs that, while they think in great depth, they don't think in great breadth, and so they don't give due regard to individual rights or the rights of churches.

They have become so indoctrinated by academics, so immersed in theories, and so motivated to save us from ourselves that they seem unable to think outside their own box. It's easy to do because what they think actually makes perfect sense until it is passed through the sieve of the Constitution and property rights. Then all those theories and academics are not so clear.

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