

# Subdivide and Conquer: A Modern Western



 *Viewers Guide*



# *How to Order*

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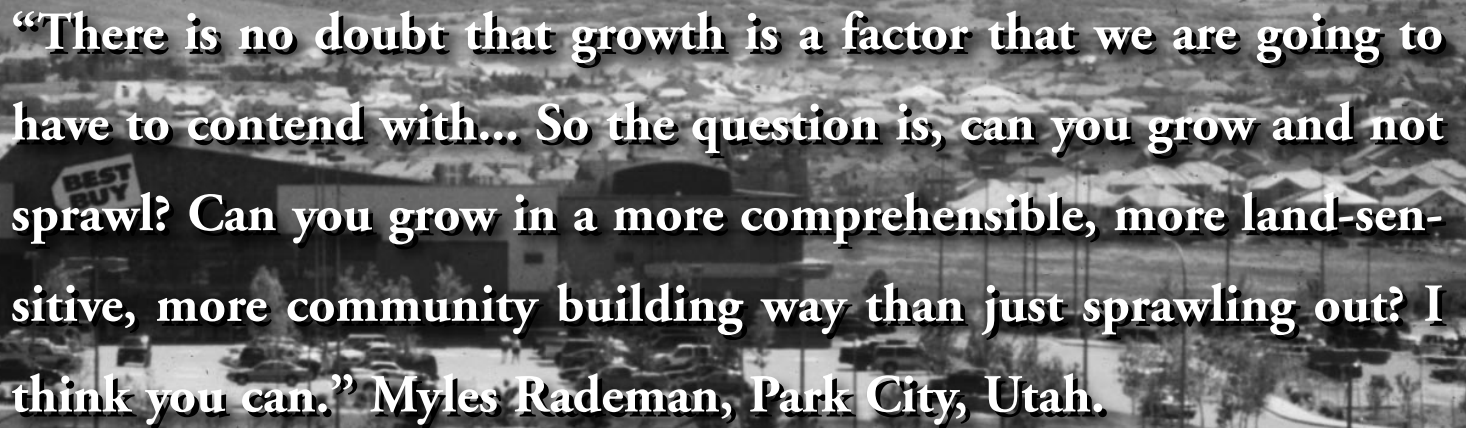
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**“There is no doubt that growth is a factor that we are going to have to contend with... So the question is, can you grow and not sprawl? Can you grow in a more comprehensible, more land-sensitive, more community building way than just sprawling out? I think you can.” Myles Rademan, Park City, Utah.**

DEAR VIEWER,

Past civilizations tend to leave traces of their built environments on the landscape, providing clues about culture and lifestyle. For the last 50 years in America, we have scratched our particular pattern of development across vast landscapes in almost every metropolitan region and rural town for some future civilization to ponder. We call this pattern “sprawl”.

While the effects of sprawl are the same coast to coast, the mountain West is the fastest growing region in the country. It is a region at risk, as subdivisions, freeways and stripmalls consume the open spaces where some of America’s most stubborn myths were born, and where ideas about the frontier still play in our imaginations even as we sit in traffic breathing exhaust from the cars around us.

Since the 1950’s, cities and towns in America have fulfilled the promise of providing homes, work places and transportation using a one-size-fits-all development pattern. However, what worked in the decades following World War II may not work today. We are a different America — our population has changed, and so have our lifestyles. Single family homes in the suburbs and dependence on the automobile no longer suit everyone, but in most communities the alternatives are few.

Some people maintain that the only way to end sprawl is to stop growth. Yet, sprawl is just one way to grow. Across America, voters are going to the polls demanding a different kind of development – one that protects green spaces, that creates more housing and transportation options, and that guides growth. In some places, architects, planners, elected officials, citizens and neighborhoods are starting to get involved in planning how growth should look and where it should be focused. They argue that sprawl is not the result of consumer demand but rather the outcome of public policies, regulations, and subsidies that can be changed.

Subdivide and Conquer examines the impacts of sprawl on our lives, its history and the reasons sprawl is still the prevailing pattern of development. It also celebrates people and places experimenting with new patterns of growth. It is our hope that the film will help motivate and inspire people to think about how to create more livable communities that enrich, enliven and endure.



Sincerely,  
Jeff Gersh and Chelsea Congdon  
Producers

## Overview

Across America, far-flung automobile dependent development is the dominant pattern of land use. What's more, this form of growth, called "sprawl" is no longer confined to large metropolitan areas. It's happening in small cities like Fresno, California, and in towns and rural areas like Red Hook, New York.

Growing communities constantly face the question of how to provide people with places to live, work and shop as well as a convenient way to move from one place to another. Sprawl is just one pattern for accommodating growth — one that we have been relying on since World War II. Yet, in recent years, the social, economic and environmental costs of sprawl have triggered a nationwide rethinking of costs and benefits of this pattern of development.

In the fifteen years between 1982 and 1997, sprawl has consumed 30 million acres of land in the United States, about 5500 acres a day. In one lifetime, citizens of Montana lose an area the size of Glacier National Park to sprawl. In Phoenix, Arizona, sprawl eats up an acre and a half of open land every hour, 24 hours a day.


As more and more open space is carved up for houses and roads, and people inch to work on clogged freeways shrouded in smog, the costs of sprawl are making front page news. Voters are going to the polls to support growth management and the preservation of open space. Many Americans are taking stock of the way we grow, and looking for alternatives that more closely match contemporary desires.

The population of America is fundamentally changed from the 1950's. Today, the nuclear family of mom, dad and two kids makes up only 25% of the population. Retirees, aging baby boomers, empty nesters, married couples without children, singles, and single parents with kids now make up the majority of the population. Housing choices, indeed lifestyle choices, haven't kept up with these demographic changes. Sprawl has become a poverty of choice; and, Americans are asking for more.

Subdivide and Conquer is a one-hour film that examines the social, environmental and economic costs of sprawl, and how these effects are felt by all of us in some way. It explores the origins of sprawl following WWII, and reasons why this pattern of growth has persisted for 50 years. The film also introduces a variety of measures for reigning in sprawl and for building more livable communities.

The producers tell the story of sprawl against the backdrop of the Rocky



An aerial, black and white photograph showing a vast landscape. In the foreground, a winding road curves through a valley. The middle ground shows a residential area with houses and trees. In the background, a large mountain range stretches across the horizon under a clear sky.

Mountain West, the fastest growing region of the country, and a landscape steeped in mythology. Television westerns and advertisers continue to use western scenes to tug upon ideas and feelings embedded in the American imagination about the last frontier as a wild, open land teeming with singing cowboys and roaming herds. Sadly, these images could not be farther from the truth.

Subdivide and Conquer is intended to support and promote the public discourse about sprawl, to motivate and inspire people to explore alternatives, and to encourage people to get involved in making the decisions that shape the way we grow. In addition to the one-hour film, there are several educational materials available: a 30 minute version of the film; a website ([www.subdividefilm.com](http://www.subdividefilm.com)) with links, resources and references, downloadable teachers' activity sets for grades 6-12, and this viewer's guide.

## About this guide

This guide is designed to accompany the one-hour documentary film "Subdivide and Conquer: A Modern Western." The film is available to all PBS stations nationwide. Call your local affiliate for details about broadcast dates. Copies of the film are available from Bullfrog Films (1-800-543-3764; [www.bullfrogfilms.com](http://www.bullfrogfilms.com)). Additional copies of the guide can be downloaded from the film's website ([www.subdividefilm.com](http://www.subdividefilm.com)).

This guide is meant to serve as a tool to promote public discourse and education about issues of sprawl. The guide is organized into 5 sections. The first 3 sections correspond to a section of the one hour film: 1) the effects of sprawl on our lives; 2) the history of sprawl and reasons we continue to build it; and 3) a variety of alternative approaches to growth that can help create more livable communities. Each provides a synopsis of that particular portion of the film and a series of discussion questions. The final sections of the guide provide a brief description of how the planning process works, and ideas for how you can get involved in helping design your community.

## Other Materials

In addition to this Viewers' Guide, several other resources have been produced in conjunction with the one-hour film, "Subdivide and Conquer":

- A website with additional information on sprawl, links to organizations involved in growth management around the country, and suggestions for ways citizens can participate in growth management;
- A set of classroom activities for grades 6-12 that can be downloaded from the website;
- A press kit with information for the media;
- A 30-minute version of the film.



## *Part 1:* **Sprawl Affects us All**

Sprawl is a low-density pattern of development where freeways, subdivisions and malls spread outward and away from cities, leaving behind older neighborhoods and urban centers, erasing farmland and wildlife habitat, and forcing people to spend more and more time in their cars. Once associated with major metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, sprawl is now occurring outside of rural towns around the nation, reaching farther and farther into the countryside.

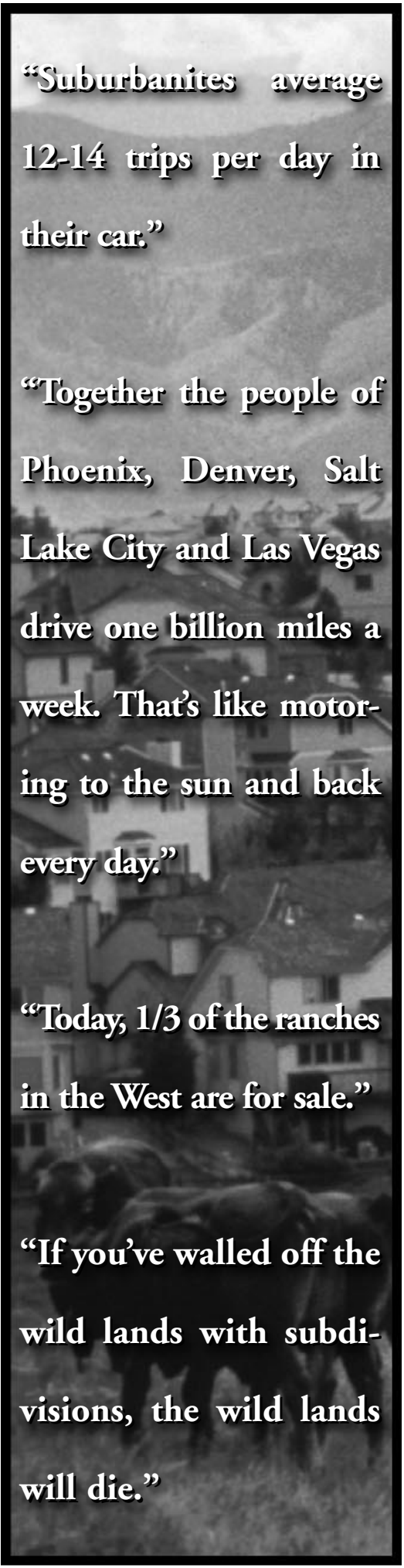
No matter where each one of us lives in the United States, and regardless of our lifestyle, sprawl affects our daily lives. Some impacts of sprawl are so familiar we may take them for granted, like traffic jams and smog. But these impacts are not insignificant. In 1990, Americans spent 1.6 billion hours stuck in traffic, burning 2.2 billion gallons of gasoline and generating air pollution from exhaust and from the particles worn from our tires and roads. The American Lung Association calculates the health costs of air pollution at \$50 billion a year. Other impacts may be less obvious.

Sprawl also affects our pocketbooks. It costs about \$6000 a year to own and operate a car—money that might otherwise be used for rent, a mortgage or other costs of living. The automobile is the second highest expense in the average American household.

For parents and children in the suburbs on the edge of a metropolitan area, the community can be a lonely place. Neighbors and families find less time to interact as they spend more time driving between the house and errands, school, work, and entertainment. Teenagers complain of having nothing to do after school, nowhere to go to meet friends and hang out, and few ways to get around without being dependent on their parents. Indeed, for the 80 million Americans who can't drive, or choose not to, sprawl may translate to isolation.

As more and more people and jobs move to the suburbs, the effects of sprawl are felt in downtowns and inner cities that are left behind. The tax revenues to support city services like schools, police and fire services dwindle, and older urban centers and suburbs fall apart. People of different economic classes are more isolated from one another, with poorer families unable to afford homes or schools located in the suburbs, and families in the suburbs moving into different classes of houses or behind automatic gates.

Outside of metropolitan areas, farmers, ranchers and others who begin to find themselves surrounded by new housing developments and shopping malls feel the pressure to sell out. At the same time, green spaces are transformed into houses and cul de sacs. And, where new developments



**“Suburbanites average  
12-14 trips per day in  
their car.”**

**“Together the people of  
Phoenix, Denver, Salt  
Lake City and Las Vegas  
drive one billion miles a  
week. That's like motor-  
ing to the sun and back  
every day.”**

**“Today, 1/3 of the ranches  
in the West are for sale.”**

**“If you've walled off the  
wild lands with subdi-  
visions, the wild lands  
will die.”**

border on public lands, wildlife habitats are squeezed and migration routes cut off.

Sprawl is devouring open land all over America and it is dictating lifestyles that many people find lonely, stressful, unhealthy and expensive. Ironically, automobile suburbia, that once promised freedom and convenience, is now a poverty of choice, limiting the range of housing and transportation options that might otherwise be available to Americans.

## Discussion Questions:

- Where has growth taken place in your community in previous decades? In what ways has the quality of life in your community improved or declined over time? How has the pattern of development affected people who do not drive?
- Growth can refer to economic growth, job growth, population growth, or development patterns. How are these related? Sprawl is one way to accommodate population growth. In what other ways is your community making room for a growing population?
- In what ways would managing sprawl make positive contributions to the economy generally and to your pocketbook specifically?
- If you could design your neighborhood, school, place of work, and/or mode of transportation, would it be different than it is now? How?



## *Part 2:* **History**

Suburbanization is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Early in the 19th century, residents of large cities like New York and Boston took advantage of transportation technologies such as ferries and horse-drawn railroads to move away from the center of town. Later, mechanical and electric trains would create “streetcar suburbs”. But not until WWII ended would suburbanization take off like a brush fire.

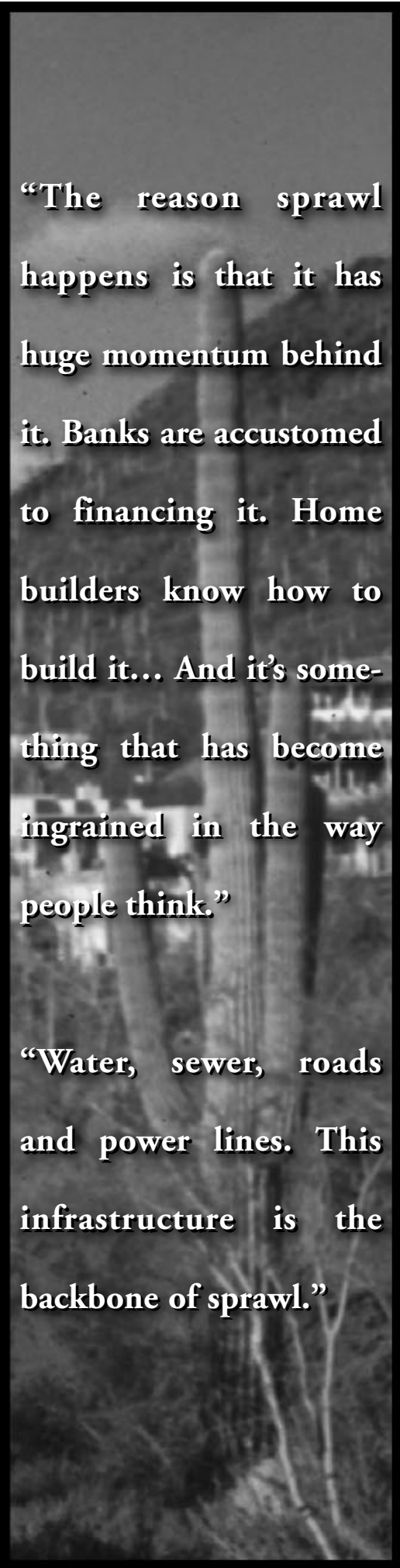
A pent-up demand for housing combined with post-war prosperity allowed the nation to turn the engines of industry from building tanks and barracks to manufacturing cars and housing. William Levitt adapted the formulas of mass-production to housing when, in 1946, he started his Levittown development in Long Island. Other entrepreneurs took their cues from his success and the low-cost box house with garage and yard became a nation-wide phenomenon. Thanks to a new federal home loan program for veterans, 16 million Americans returning from war could purchase an inexpensive new home for themselves and their families.

While cape cod and ranch houses sprang up on both coasts and everywhere in between, there was nevertheless a major difference between the landscapes of the East and West. A tightly arranged city and village development pattern was established on the East Coast in the 1700’s and 1800’s -- before the ubiquity of the car. In contrast, the American West was largely an empty canvas for development as recently as the 1940’s. Because most of the growth of towns and cities there has occurred since the advent of the automobile, sprawl is especially prevalent in the West.

Today, fifty years after WWII, America has undergone extraordinary changes in demographics. “Family” and “household” no longer refer to a father, mother and children; now “family” may mean a single-parent and child, a retired couple, a couple without children. What has not changed is a system of public policies that mandates sprawl through outdated zoning, taxing and financing regulations, and government subsidies. This “institutionalization” of sprawl prohibits the sort of neighborhoods many people say they want, with a mix of housing types, opportunities to shop and to find entertainment close by, and the option to move from place to place without constant dependence on a car.

People are searching for alternatives to the social, economic, and environmental problems associated with half a century of suburban development, now called “sprawl”.

However, citizens will have to change the regulations and public policies that motivate builders, developers, and bankers to build sprawl before the market will provide more choices for housing and transportation.



**“The reason sprawl happens is that it has huge momentum behind it. Banks are accustomed to financing it. Home builders know how to build it... And it’s something that has become ingrained in the way people think.”**

**“Water, sewer, roads and power lines. This infrastructure is the backbone of sprawl.”**



For an excellent, engaging history of suburbanization in the US, see Kenneth T. Jackson's book, *Crabgrass Frontier*.

## Discussion Questions:

- Think about the history and pattern of development where you live: Does the WWII development pattern still make sense 50 years later in your area?
- Consider the culture, lifestyle and needs of 78 million aging baby boomers, or of "generation x"—how and where might they wish to live when they grow older? Ask around.
- Compare an older neighborhood you like to one of the newer housing developments in your region. What do they have in common? Are there features of the older neighborhood that you would like to see in the newer one? Why do you think they are missing?



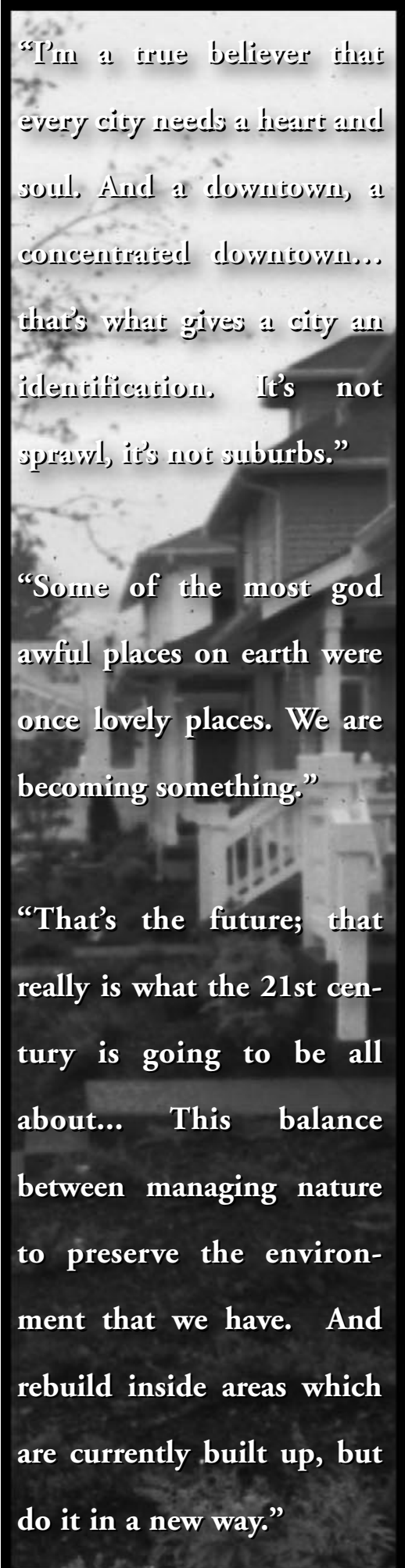
## *Part 3*: Alternatives to Sprawl

Sprawl is the result of a pattern of development that came to predominance after WWII, when Americans everywhere were enamoured of the idea of living outside of the city, and travelling in a private automobile. However, what worked well half a century ago may not be the best way to grow today.

The term “Smart Growth” has been coined to refer to type of development that changes the way communities are designed by introducing more choices of housing and options for transportation, rebuilding older cities and neighborhoods, and preserving green spaces surrounding cities and towns. Architects, planners, civic leaders, and elected officials in some parts of the country are beginning to experiment with these alternatives to sprawl.

Take a trip to almost any city or town in America today. What are the most popular areas for homebuyers in that community? Generally, neighborhoods built many years ago are among the "hottest" in the real estate market. Why? Because these communities offer the widest range of lifestyle choices: a variety of housing types from apartments to bungalows, from cottages to single-family homes. Housing is built along a grid-pattern of streets and sidewalks that tie in to stores, theatres, coffee shops and parks, all of which can be reached conveniently not only by automobile, but also by walking, biking, or mass transit. Ironically, in most places around the nation today, outdated zoning regulations prohibit this kind of diversity in neighborhood design. Yet, because more people would like to move into these traditional communities than there are homes to accommodate them, these areas are becoming more and more expensive. That situation can be changed by amending outdated policies so that traditional neighborhoods can be built; and, so older suburban developments can embrace some of the features that enhance livability and community.

For most of us, a sense of community probably begins at our back door and extends to our neighborhood, and beyond. It may include the places we frequent for work, shopping and entertainment, as well as the farmland which we depend on for local foods, the green spaces we bike past and hike through, or our favorite wildlife habitat and nature reserves. Improving the livability of our communities depends on guiding the location and design of development across the cities and states where we live. It also requires that we participate in decisions about how our community will look; and, that we encourage elected officials of both state and local governments to work together “regionally”, i.e., across political and municipal boundaries.



“I’m a true believer that every city needs a heart and soul. And a downtown, a concentrated downtown... that’s what gives a city an identification. It’s not sprawl, it’s not suburbs.”

“Some of the most god awful places on earth were once lovely places. We are becoming something.”

“That’s the future; that really is what the 21st century is going to be all about... This balance between managing nature to preserve the environment that we have. And rebuild inside areas which are currently built up, but do it in a new way.”

## Discussion Questions:

- Who decides how a community will accommodate a growing population? Who decides where growth will go and what it will look like? What is the role of the public in making these decisions?
- Identify an area in your downtown or city center that is/was run-down. Have there been efforts to renovate this area? If so, how? If not, can you imagine how this area might be revitalized to meet demands for housing, shops, entertainment?
- What transportation options are available to you for getting from home to work, school, shopping, or entertainment? Is there a light rail system in your region? Was there such a system in the past?
- Familiarize yourself with the master plan for your area (available at the planning office), How is the land around your home zoned? Are there new developments planned? Are they the kind you would like to see?

