Q&A with Robert S. Davis

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Robert S. Davis is the visionary founder and developer of Seaside, Florida, considered the birthplace of the new urbanist movement. Today, he is a principal in the Arcadia Land Company, which specializes in town building and land stewardship. He also serves on the boards of directors of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), the Seaside Institute, and 1000 Friends of Florida.

Why is it that although new urbanism and smart growth incorporated many sustainable development principles 15 to 20 years ago, they did not capture widespread attention the way green buildings and sustainability are today?

Sustainable urbanism is complex, just like sustainable ecosystems. Green buildings are actually relatively simple to evaluate, and their greenness is relatively simple to create a report card on. But sustainable urbanism could have a much larger environmental impact than green buildings. Transportation consumes more energy in the United States than buildings do and causes far more pollution.

So, the best thing we can do to try to reduce emissions and gasoline consumption is to change our land use patterns so that passenger cars become a much lower percentage of trips made by people and transportation in general can be a lower percentage of emissions.

Now, there is a pilot project between CNU and the U.S. Green Building Council to come up with a LEED [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design]–Neighborhood Development model for scoring neighborhood developments. The criteria for evaluating neighborhoods are still a work in progress, but there is clearly a demand for neighborhood report cards.

What are the greatest challenges to new urbanist development?

It is actually a set of interlocking challenges that essentially represent a system that has grown up over the past 50 years to plan, underwrite, finance, and develop conventional suburban sprawl. That system supports sprawl and, with the exception of finance—which is imploding—the system is very comfortable with itself.

Today's conventional model produces development that is not very sustainable as real estate investments over the long term. Sustainable real estate investments are in places like Georgetown in Washington, D.C.; the Upper East Side, or most of New York City, including the outer boroughs; and certainly in places like the Country Club District [in Kansas City], which J.C. Nichols, the founder of ULI, developed over a 40-year period.

Nichols is one of our heroes who should be honored and studied as we think about redeveloping America's cities. He did a very slow, long-term investment, not worrying about the internal rate of return, but simply knowing that if he put a lot of energy and money into the initial phases of development, that it would pay off over the long term. And it did: even during the Great Depression, it [the Country Club District] held its values better than other developments.

We need a more sustainable financial model, as well as a more sustainable model in ecosystem terms. Complexity is key to that model. Time is also key to that model. It actually is much safer to develop relatively slowly, without taking enormous risks at any given time, than to throw up a single 40-story high rise or develop 1,000 lots at a time and put up several hundred spec houses at a time.

My sense is there is an opportunity to revisit scale, time, and complexity.

Which other communities in the United States and around the world do you admire for their quality of life and sustainability?

Almost all of the 1920s developments of ambition in every community are inspirations for me. They dealt with automobiles, which will probably be a reality of life for a while longer, but they did so in a way that was urbane and elegant. Shaker Heights outside Cleveland, Forest Hill Gardens in Queens—those neighborhoods are still some of the most desirable places to live in each of their metro areas.

Other models are neighborhoods in Georgian London, like Mayfair and Belgravia, which were thrown up rather quickly but are complete urban neighborhoods with shopping districts, schools, churches, and homes. They were constructed on leased land that the landlord expected to get back in 99 years. They are the most desirable and beautiful urban residential areas in the world.

Besides being a pioneering new urbanist development, was Seaside also a pioneering sustainable community?

Seaside was a protogreen community. We did a lot of things that were pretty radical at the time that we talked about in our initial brochures. But it was too early for sustainability to be at the core of our marketing campaign.

In addition to making a pedestrian-friendly place where people parked once and left their cars parked for a week, the first houses were designed as passive solar houses with south-facing porches; deep roof overhangs; cross-ventilation; outdoor showers; and clotheslines as an alternative to dryers.

We required traditional natural building materials for houses—even though the norm at the time was vinyl siding and aluminum and vinyl windows—because we were convinced that the real stuff would last longer and look better if reasonably well maintained. The houses were built up off the ground by code so the air could circulate under them and so all the drainage could be natural. We did no drainage structures at Seaside except in the downtown—and that is in our amphitheater.

We outlawed grass except for the amphitheater, croquet lawn, and Lyceum. All existing vegetation was required to be left in place except for the building footprint. Where vegetation was disturbed, it was replaced with native vegetation. We built walkovers to protect the dunes.

Are not local land use policies a tremendous impediment to more sustainable, more attractive new development—and to redevelopment of existing or empty infill sites?
We need to get beyond the current paralysis in land use politics caused by the unholy anti-growth alliance of NIMBYs [not in my backyard activists] and environmentalists. If we can do that, there are opportunities to redevelop a lot of underused land in our cities into neighborhoods where people can walk and use transit for most of their daily needs.

Even so, we will need to develop greenfield sites. If the country settles the immigration morass and we once again welcome the rest of world and continue to grow, we will need to develop a system of producing new towns and cities that are almost as pleasant to live in as our old cities.

Many new urbanist communities offer homes at a substantially higher price than their market's average. Cannot a developer make a profit on homes in new urbanist communities that sell for prices the middle class can afford?
For the most part, what you are seeing is that homebuyers are willing to pay a premium, and why would not a developer take advantage of that? There is some additional cost in developing two sets of streets—an alley/mews system and the street at the front of the house—and currently there is a little bit of a cost premium involved in going through entitlement battles. Most locations are not geared to incentivizing new urbanism. Instead, they put up many entitlement obstacles.

But there are numerous new urbanist neighborhoods that deliver market-rate and subsidized housing that is no more expensive than nearby places. One of the things that most disappoints me about new urbanist public relations is that the movement is known a lot more for Seaside and projects for the gentry than it is for the scores of HOPE VI projects we completed before the Bush Administration decided that the guidelines were not written by them and therefore HOPE VI should be killed.

HOPE VI was a remarkable success. It transformed completely dysfunctional low-income housing projects into mixed-use, mixed-income urban neighborhoods that, after several years, seem to be quite sustainable.

What are some of the land use and transportation patterns you think are necessary for communities to adopt to better enable them to combat sprawl and cope with the effects of global climate change and declining traditional energy sources?
What we need to do is the sort of thing that BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] has started doing in the San Francisco Bay Area. BART is transforming a suburban transit system into a system that links a series of high-density nodes to each other.

As a strategy, what we need to be doing is taking the public transit we already have and creating very urban, fairly high-density development around those transit nodes. We need to be looking at new and affordable ways of creating more efficient transit, like the inexpensive surface rapid transit implemented by Jaime Lerner, the former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil. Lerner created a linear corridor of very high-density development wherever he put a rapid-transit system in Curitiba. [See "Smart Cities: Curitiba," April 2007, page 68.]

What other suggestions can you offer to create more environmentally sustainable communities?
First of all, we need $10-a-gallon [$2.60-per-liter] gasoline, because that will begin to change people's behavior. Take the money from gasoline taxes and reinvest it in transit, in renewable energy, pilot projects, and, most important, in helping the less fortunate in our society adapt to these changes, since they are the ones who drive the farthest and spend the most on automobiles because they can only afford to live in exurban locations.

The second strategy is to have a combination of local, regional, and state-level governments, with some help from the feds, begin to work on a set of proactive plans that would begin to allow urban infill sites and, particularly, transit-friendly sites to be developed at higher densities and with a mix of uses that would allow people, particularly the young and the elderly, to use their feet as a means of transportation.

Third, we need to deal with some of the material and life-cycle issues—slow down the construction of throwaway buildings. In suburban construction, we are throwing up five- to ten-year buildings to house companies like Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart's strategy is to abandon that building before it disintegrates and after it has sucked all of the money out of the community, and move on to a Wal-Mart Supercenter. What is left is a suburban slum occupied by lower-value tenants until it completely falls apart. It is an incredibly wasteful system.

What do you consider the most important initiatives for creating real and lasting change in our country's development patterns?
I think that what will happen is a slowly growing awareness that climate change is a real issue, that energy dependence is a critical geopolitical issue, and that we need to come up with strategies beyond higher-mileage automobiles to deal with these issues.

The other thing I see happening is trendsetters are moving back to the city. My guess is that a lot of the kids who will be forming families over the next couple of decades are going to realize that the city is not only cooler, it is a better place to raise kids. As soon as they become active in school board politics, we will have the best schools in the world in our urban areas.

What is most encouraging is that it has become fashionable to live in the city, just as it has always been in Europe. I think that more and more people will be moving to the city, and that will put increasing pressure on real estate prices. But that will also create lots of opportunities for redeveloping industrial sites. As the value of real estate goes up, the environmental problems of cleaning up and recycling those sites will begin to be economically feasible. **UL**

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