



## VILLAGE LIFE IN MEGAPOLIS *SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT* *IS BECOMING A REALITY*

TEXT: UWE VAMDEV FRANZ © 2002

Just imagine: You live in »Megapolis« and drive to and from work every day, a commute of perhaps 20 to 30 minutes. You work a typical American workday, many long hours, but when the day is done you drive home into a very different world – to an environment that’s almost like going back in time, to a place where people, not cars, are the priority.

You park your car at the edge of your subdivision and then walk home. Not because walking home is a designated workout you’ve chosen to do after driving home – you have to walk, because there are no streets for cars in your community.

The houses are built close together and are divided by lots of shaded walkways, with beautiful plants and trees. There are benches along the paths where people stop to talk to each other, and at the end of one of these paths is your own home, a gorgeous three-and-a-half bedroom house.

Your entrance door and the kitchen windows face a jewel of a courtyard with a little fountain in the middle, not far away from the children’s playground, very well-integrated with this courtyard.

Now, remember, you live in Megapolis, a 3 1/2 million-people city in the US. But once you leave your car at the garage port just inside the community but far away from the houses, you enter the wonderful world of village life. You live in a »sustainable community«.

In late February, the Southface Energy Institute and the Georgia Environmental Facilities Authority presented »Greenprints – Sustainable Communities by Design« in Atlanta. This conference was like a window into the trends in environmentally sound housing and construction here in the US. The conference was packed with workshops, information, great speakers and interesting exhibitions.

## *The circle is widening*

I had asked Dennis Creech, the founder and executive director of Southface what was the most important outcome of this event for him. He was very clear about it: For the first time all parties involved came together – officials from the regulatory agencies, builders, contractors and architects, and environmental groups and activists. They all listened to each other and learned from each other.

Lisa Frank, a board member of Southface and working for the Turner Foundation, answered the same question in similar terms.

»I think it's that the circle is widening. This conference used to be just environmentalists and small builders. Now it includes corporate heads and developers of elite communities or millionaires. The repeated refrain is there's a powerful need to explain why the old ways no longer work and why the new principles of sustainability make sense,« Frank said.

»Public education is the crucial next step. Environmentalists, government officials and builders do not have this skill. The time is now to engage the PR, marketing and advertising community to meet this challenge with the same gusto they use to sell SUVs and soft drinks.«

The conference actually covered a wide array of subjects, some very technical for a lay person like me, some more political. The most important issue for me was what's at the heart of this article: sustainable communities. It took me a couple of lectures to really find out what that meant.

Basically, it means taking a new look at old-style community living. In Europe and in indigenous cultures throughout the world, villages were built in the model of what today would be called sustainable communities.

People living together surrounded by nature – I thought it was as simple as that. But for most Americans, for most county and state administrators, for most contractors, sustainable communities are a far-out idea, a serious threat to American suburbia, the end of urban sprawl and the profits associated with runaway development.

Under the sustainability model, a 200-acre parcel would be divided into a 5- to 10-acre high-density town-type development surrounded by land left almost untouched as fields and woods, with

possibly an organic farm on it growing produce for the people living on the 5 to 10 acres. Shops, stores, churches and restaurants would be incorporated into the village so residents could get most of what they need by walking instead of driving.

Several developers presented very profitable, already existing sustainable subdivisions and villages in the Atlanta area. Again, the main problem they were facing was overcoming the information deficit of neighbors and regulatory officials.

### *Developing ,conservation communities'*

Village Habitat Design, an architectural firm specializing in this kind of development explained the concept in very clear terms:

The type of development they call a »conservation community« has very high housing density and pristine open space. While normal development in suburbia means half- to one-acre lots with a house on each, you have in East Lake Commons in Atlanta, for example, 67 units on 18 acres. But all the development is on 9 acres – fairly high density, even for Atlanta – and the rest will be »preserved land« including an organic garden facility complete with a full-time farmer cultivating the gardens.

The density lends itself very well to a totally different subdivision design idea. Here are some benefits this kind of development can enable:

The above-mentioned pedestrian walkways instead of drive-through streets would keep down air pollution, noise and the tension associated with automobile traffic.

A central space resembling the old European marketplace with little shops and service providers would alleviate the need to make cross-town trips to the mall by car. Most basic needs could be provided within the village itself – within a comfortable walking distance.

### *Greater security and safety – no drive-in and -out kind of crime.*

A much more active community, because residents meet each other walking around to do the chores. Simply by knowing each other and what everyone's skills and talents are could provide access to many more goods and services within the community. The value of the homes will be increasing because they offer a wonderful lifestyle compared with the boring suburban subdivision.

Most of the concept designs had daycare and even school facilities in the villages. You also have considerable benefits for the environment (a very important value-added issue of the future) through constructive land-use policy and reduced pollution.

With this kind of development, you can preserve valuable green space, even in a city, by an average of 50% of the total property area. That percentage goes up in suburban developments (75%) and could reach as much as 90% in rural areas.

One of the pioneers of this kind of community design, Randall Arendt of Pennsylvania, showed us some wonderful slides of subdivisions in California, Pennsylvania and other part of the country. His book »Conservation Design for Subdivisions; A Practical Guide to Creating Open Space Networks« was regarded by many of the conference participants as a fundamental text on sustainable communities. Just the feel of the shady courtyards, the beautiful walkways, the little creeks and the wide open space, so inviting – what a wonderful way to live.

### *Old ideas, new concepts*

In the beginning I thought, well, that's great, village à la Middle Ages, but I soon came to realize that wouldn't do justice at all to all the very modern concepts that are turning an old concept into a very exciting new way of creating real homes for people, not just houses, of constructing neighborhoods and not just subdivisions.

And old Middle-Eastern saying goes: You can only hate what you do not know. That is very meaningful today in a time of drive-by shootings and of greatly increased school violence. A group of people buying a house or an apartment in a certain area could become a group of people really getting to know each other, respecting each other and supporting each other where support is needed.

Children could be cared for by people right where they live. I have seen concepts of schools as an integral part of these communities, not these huge mass brain-fillers that our public schools have unfortunately become. Crime as we have it today requires a degree of anonymity. In sustainable communities, everyone knows everyone. Of course the crime rates are lower in these areas.

### *Already a reality*

But the open space, green lungs for the land and a healthy habitat for the inhabitants of these new villages, would make all the difference to me. There is one community planned with over 200 acres of open space outside of Atlanta – 200 acres to walk in, enjoy fresh pristine air and observe wildlife habitat, preserved for good.

The principals of Village Habitat Design believe that living like this will result in a great reduction of stress and make coming home an experience to look forward to every day of your life – even if you do work in Megapolis. I was thrilled to hear and see how many people are willing to take on the re-education process of the so-called general public, so our children still will know untouched land, birds and animals, not just from zoos, but from outside their houses, a couple of minutes' walk from home.



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