

Pave Paradise, Put Up a Parking Lot

Contributed by Mark Winston
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Winston-Salem's urban boosters and young professionals want a more edgy, urban metropolis. It's sad that they're tearing one down in pursuit of it.

Now repeat after me: Urban is variety. Urban is vitality. Urban is not density. Urban is not upscale.

I don't really know where today's urban professionals come from. I don't exactly know whether they are migrants from the "near abroad" escaping rural Southern redneckdom, professional migrants from large cities in other parts of the country, relocated here by the many companies expanding into Southern cities in search of green fields, or just learned rich kids who want to live the edgy urban life (or some hastily-assembled approximation of it), but don't want to give up the old familiar faces and places.

Whomever they are, they know nothing about urban life. They are replacing every low-rise 1920s-1950s structure downtown with a high-rise office building or condo complex tastefully situated so as to consume a whole city block. They are eliminating the small-scale structures with generous street frontage in favor of large retail complexes with concealed parking in a central courtyard. They are replacing businesses which had catered to the long-time residents, from lunching office workers to the urban poor, in favor of a stratified, wealth-centric retail class whose patrons mostly come from outside the urban core and owned primarily by suburbanites or distant corporations.

In other words, the "return to the city" which has characterized downtowns in America for much of the past decade has failed to reverse the trend of the urban core being anything but a giant leech on metropolitan resources in all but the most long-lived, steadfastly old-school cities, such as New York, Chicago and San Francisco. A few places have started to create spontaneous vitality on their own, such as San Diego and Los Angeles; but in most cases these zones of "real" new urbanization are on the West Coast, and owe their success in this endeavor to a severe dearth of land due to the unique topography (and development ethic) of the region, consequent extremely high property values, and (despite these things) a continuing influx of newcomers creating a reason for density and rendering smaller scale development economically feasible in the auto age. In just about all other cases: Dallas, Austin, Raleigh, Charlotte, Oklahoma City, etc; the money coming into downtown is outside money, the money being made downtown is going to outside businesses and investors, and the tax breaks incenting redevelopment are drawing down reserves paid in by suburban residents and office parks, meaning that no indigenous development or reinvestment exists.

Winston Salem has not (yet, thankfully) succumbed to the degree of recurring redevelopment that has virtually wiped out the vintage vitality and texture of such places as Uptown Charlotte, a favorite example of mine in describing the very definition of urban re-destruction; but it's coming close. It's been decades since the north side of Winston's downtown was decimated by mid-century urban renewal, which mostly attacked poor black areas in most American cities. Now that "level and rebuild" mentality has given us blocks upon blocks of nearly-empty office buildings with underground parking garages, bleak new high-rise condos with equally high vacancy rates, and will soon deliver to us a shiny new ballpark which will no doubt double or triple the amount of vacant retail space (not to mention bleachers) in central Winston Salem.

This is not some black box and it doesn't take a degree in urban planning to see that creating a glut of real estate will not entice retailers to move in. The empty streets at 8pm on a weekday night at Fourth and Cherry should be enough to scare away any indigenous potential retailers at that very location, let alone four blocks west under the vacancy-riddled new condos with requisite street-level retail pads. Why require street-level retail in new development when existing buildings are unable to attract it? Why create more expensive retail space when older, cheaper buildings can't even find a market? Why rip out occupied buildings and replace them with empty ones where the previous tenants are unable to afford (or prohibited by various intricate redevelopment codes) to locate there?

Tax breaks and redevelopment grants, in addition to the Stalinesque overuse of eminent domain for the purposes of private redevelopment, create an incentive to decimate cities. Subsequent "upscaling", either by enforced monopoly rights or specific business charters written into development deals, does not eliminate "blight" or low-income development and services: it just moves it to the next block where the buildings are still old and the rents still cheap. What it does do is prevent inner-city dwellers from owning and managing inner-city businesses, and enforce the destructive cycle of automobile and suburbanite accommodation which erodes every city it touches.

Enforcing "upscale" shops and restaurants, whether by statute or by defacto through a monoglut of new-only development, ensures that most patrons of said businesses will live in the suburbs. Finding a large enough pool of businesses to fill this niche will ensure that the choices are reduced to large national chains who reinvest none of their profits in the city into which they move. These two combined inevitably enforce the supremacy of auto transit into, out of and within the downtown area. This means every business that expects to survive must have access to parking -

eliminating one of the only real reasons behind urban development. Cities are gutted by this cycle because no development can proceed without devoting huge amounts of real estate to idle autos, and no old buildings or small-scale developments can succeed because they lack adjacent parking. The result is not an urban core, but a dense suburbia, complete with all the faceless inanity which tends to drive people away from the suburbs and toward the city.

What usually sells someone on the idea of urbanization is the variety and vitality they feel when walking down a street in New York or Chicago, complete with old buildings, new buildings, small buildings and large ones. Dozens of restaurants in a single square block, dozens of small businesses, and dozens of families all living in the same space, sharing the same buildings and keeping the street safe by constant activity and spread-out personal schedules. It can't be built from the ground-up, and it can't accommodate a populace that refuses to walk more than 300 feet on the way to their destination. It needs domestic, indigenous reinvestment, not a constant drip of tax breaks and outside funds.

Finally, there's the often-unacknowledged fact that most vital, diverse cityscapes are in cities that have a huge local population, and draw on an immense region of intensive development. Creating this city economy takes millions of bodies, and it can't be approximated by city managers or developers, no matter how many tax dollars or bulldozers they throw at their mid-sized towns. A new high-rise condo tower won't create it. A new ballpark won't bring it. No amount of young professionals can make it happen. Vitality happens with time, with slow, steady growth, with lots and lots of human beings, and with a variety of buildings, people and occupations, including some poor, some unseemly, and some old, on every street, in every direction.