

Livable Places Update

Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

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20th Annual Ahwahnee Conference Provides New Vistas:

Twenty years ago, the introduction of the Ahwahnee Principles provided a highly influential “ah ha” moment for those in attendance. In 1991, the challenges of the day, including the ugliness of urban sprawl, loss of open space, traffic congestion and poor air quality, were making many local elected officials and their constituents look for ways to stop growth. The Ahwahnee Principles provided a new, win-win alternative.

This year, we had another “ah ha” moment in Yosemite, this one grounded in a concern about high unemployment rates and plunging city and county budgets. Together, presentations by urban planner Michael Freedman, new urbanist leader Peter Katz, Santa Cruz Mayor Ryan Coonerty and Noel Perry, Director of Next Ten provided directions for future economic success in our cities — one that refines and builds on the original Ahwahnee Principles.

Freedman demonstrated the relationship between the economy of a community and its urban growth patterns. He took us from the agrarian-based economy with farmers surrounding town centers to a manufacturing economy where residences, shops, and businesses were mixed together; to the “modernist vision” where homes, work, recreation and transport are all separated in space but connected by miles of pavement. This vision was actually codified in 1933 in the Charter of Athens. It was made possible by the availability of cheap gasoline, abundant and affordable land, and massive government subsidies.

Freedman explained that the modernist form of American cities has relied upon a consensus among financiers, developers, planners, architects, engineers, local elected officials, and citizens. The consensus has lasted for over 50 years, but Freedman believes it began to deteriorate about 3 years ago. Rising energy prices, persistent traffic congestion, diminishing water supplies, the threat of global warming, and the declining strength of the US economy has begun to bring about a change in thinking.

The question for the leaders of our communities of today then becomes, “what are the land use strategies essential to addressing today’s problems and providing sustainable prosperity in the current era?”

One response, Freedman holds, is the development of new land use patterns that vastly reduce VMT. This simple solution calls for compact, complete, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods integrated with a transit network — in other words, smart growth or the Ahwahnee Principles.

The other response is related to the nature of work. Creativity and innovation have become the primary wealth generators in the global economy. We now need to substantially improve the design of the parts of our cities that house this sector. This requires the clustering of people, productivity talents and skills, so that new ideas can inspire and build upon one another. “The business park is a dead end,” says Freedman.

A paper presented by Kim Walesh and Doug Henton at the LGC Ahwahnee Conference in 1998, further explains: “The New Economy values the vital centers of regions, towns, and neighborhoods. These centers promote the interaction, accessibility, and creativity on which the New Economy depends.”

“Creativity is encouraged by work and living environments that allow for a lot of interaction among people. Chance encounters in hallways, restaurants, neighborhoods, and conferences lead to new partnerships and solutions to tough problems. The proximity, density, and publicness of vital centers stimulate interaction among people. Vital centers are typically filled with the kinds of places conducive to planned meetings as well as chance encounters — places to eat and drink, conference and meeting venues, recreation space and facilities, parks and plazas, business service centers.”

A city not only needs places for creativity to occur, it must also attract creative people who are choosy about where they live and work. They reportedly like green space, attractive streetscapes, smaller unique shops, a lively pedestrian environment and transit, and urban densities.

Freedman summed up some strategies that cities can use to become centers of the new economy. They include redeveloping old business parks into creative workplace districts (a strategy that is already underway in places like Irvine and the Silicon Valley); redeveloping disinvested downtown industrial zones into creative workplace districts (look to the City of Emeryville for great examples); continuing to add workplaces to historic downtowns; and incubating creativity and entrepreneurship in existing urban neighborhoods.

There is a long history of creative people, especially writers, working in coffee shops or restaurants. Put in a blank room, they say it can be almost impossible to write. However, the stimulation that occurs in public spaces seems to stimulate the brain without distracting the worker. Today, the demand for such spaces is high — peek into any urban coffee shop today and you will find workers intently focused on a lap top. “The nature of work has changed but the city has not,” Freedman observed. But in many small corners, in many places,

the change has begun.

Noel Perry identified the members of the new economy. Small businesses account for two-thirds of all new jobs in America, and green business start ups account for the lion's share, particularly in California. Between 1995 and 2008, green businesses in this State increased 45% in number and employment in this field grew 36%.

Most businesses in the new economy are started and owned by members of the "creative class." But jobs in these industries and the types of workers they employ vary significantly. According to Perry, they include people in recycling and waste; advanced materials; agriculture; green building; transportation; air and environment; water and wastewater; and energy infrastructure, generation, storage, and conservation/efficiency – and that's just the manufacturing side of it! Add to that the consultants, researchers, advocates, business services, finance and investment, to name just a few, and it is not surprising that the new economy is growing rapidly.

California's clean energy economy is the most rapidly growing sector and is expanding three times faster than the State's economy as a whole. The Renewable Portfolio Standards, signed into law this month, will dramatically increase activity in this area. (The Standards require our utilities to deliver 33% of their electricity from renewable sources by 2020.) Already, in the Sacramento region, this sector provides more jobs than the agriculture industry!

In his recent publication, *Many Shades of Green*, Perry sums it up: "Globally the demand is rising for vital resources, like energy and fresh water, as the world's population grows and the standard of living in developing countries rises. Add to the equation, volatile fuel costs and the real impacts of climate change such as diminishing sources of fresh water, threatened coastlines and changing weather patterns, and the impetus has arrived for a transition to a new economy."

Santa Cruz Mayor Ryan Coonerty shared how they enhanced their downtown while accommodating the innovators. Coonerty began his talk at the Ahwahnee by introducing his constituent, Shane, who once worked in the usual, isolated, Silicon Valley office building. Coonerty noted that all our current public policies related to health care, taxes, housing, and transportation are centered around this office park model.

However, Shane left the office building to explore another niche for his creative skills. Since then, he has experienced a high level of professional success by working in public spaces and, occasionally, at home. Shane says what he most wants is 150 square feet of office space, no lease term, no taxes or licenses, and

a really cool community of innovative people that reflect his work style and values. In return he will provide employment, frequent downtown businesses, and pay taxes.

There are a growing number of "Shanes" as large corporations are beginning to disaggregate their employees and outsource everything that can be outsourced. Coonerty himself responded by securing a vacant 11,000 square foot building in the heart of downtown Santa Cruz, and cutting it up into small workspaces, thus creating an incubator for the creative class.

He suggests that cities can best bring new jobs to the community with new codes that create co-worker environments and providing them with a few basic services and health care. Many will hire more employees, and some will turn into job-creating engines like Google.

Peter Katz, author of *The New Urbanism*, completed the picture, demonstrating the economic benefits that accrue to communities that grow their downtowns rather than investing in sprawling, big box developments. He demonstrated that in Sarasota County, Florida, a one-acre, moderately high-rise, mixed-use building will generate the same amount of taxes as a 21 acre Walmart. He then moved on to compare the city's investment in infrastructure for multi-story downtown residential versus a suburban multifamily housing project. The increase on investment in the high rise was 35%, compared to a loss to the city of 2% for suburban multi-family housing.

Others have looked at the cost of services for sprawl development versus buildings located downtown. It takes four times as many police to afford the same degree of protection in a sprawl development versus downtown. The city also has to buy, fuel, and maintain four times as many patrol cars to get that same level of protection on patrol.

Fire protection has similar issues. Larger numbers of units protected per mile of street allows the city to save its citizens many millions of dollars in insurance costs without having to build, staff, and equip nearly so many fire stations. And with some fire trucks topping a half-million dollars apiece, a new fire station can be a major item in a city's budget.

In Summary: Doug Henton, another expert on the new economy, is fond of quoting Darwin, "It isn't the strongest or the most intelligent species that survive, it's those that are most able to adapt." Today's world of resource shortages and rapid expansion in telecommunications demands that we adapt and change. Those cities that are resistant to change will certainly fall behind; successful communities will be those that understand and embrace the future. For pdfs of the talks noted above, go to www.lgc.org/events.