American Cities, Suburban Sprawl, And The Threat Of Terrorism

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By Edward H. Ziegler

It takes only the first raw scent of the smoldering piles of debris at Ground Zero in New York, and a quick glance at the gust of blasted, black-charred buildings fluttering in a smoky wind, to immediately agree with President George W. Bush that the attacks were a direct strike at what he called "the American way of life." That way of life is not only tied to our freedom and mobility. It's also expressed in the wasteful design of our sprawling communities and the need to sustain them by reaching ever deeper into the far corners of the globe to satisfy American demand for oil, minerals, timber, labor, and capital.

—KEITH SCHNEIDER, 2001

TERRORISM, URBAN FORM, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Aristotle's statement that a city is "built politics" suggests the interaction between the design and form of the built environment and the dominant political value of what shape a city's governance. Throughout the history of the United States, the form of the built environment has embraced, at various times and places, both the closed stockade values of fear and terror and the more open, hopeful, and exuberant values of cosmopolitan urban modernity. Today, our largely suburban nation shadows our major cities. Nearly two-thirds of this country's population presently lives and works in suburban areas. The threat of global terrorism has renewed a debate about this country's "built politics," which raises critical questions about the sustainability of the design, form, and footprint of both our major cities and suburban areas.

There is an increasing awareness of the inherent vulnerability of our major cities to terrorist attack, but the integration of homeland security concerns into building design and urban planning is just getting under way in this country. Efforts to safeguard major cities through design and planning ("target hardening" and the "militarization" of our architecture), however, may so detract from the aesthetics of urban living that they actually enhance the outward dynamic of urban sprawl. This caution against making new Max Weber's observation of the city as, "the fusion of fortress and market." In this context, Richard Bruegman has referred to the terrorist acts of September 11 as "an attack on urbanism" that threatens to accelerate the problems of urban sprawl in this country and thereby turn "many urban virtues upside down." American cities would greatly suffer under any antiterrorist strategy that promoted the urban dispersal of people and businesses.

Such a defensive dispersal strategy would not be an entirely new phenomenon in the country's history, though. During the 1950s, in the early years of the Cold War and at the urging of urban planners and security experts, the federal government officially adopted a policy of "defensive dispersal" (Defensive Dispersal I) to protect metropolitan areas from nuclear attack. This policy was an important factor in the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 and the construction of our yellow brick road to sprawl: the interstate highway system.

As sustainable development proponents have been quick to point out, there is more than a little irony in proposals for adopting a "Defensive Dispersal II" national urban policy.

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7. Bruegman, supra note 6, at 566.
Our suburban landscape and lifestyles are already extremely vulnerable to the shocks of global terrorism and will become increasingly more vulnerable with further dispersal. In this view, the terrorist attack on September 11 suggests the clear need for extra-survivable, compact, walkable communities and a less petroleum-dependent economy, an argument that no longer goes unheeded in the religious and ethnic conflicts in the Middle East. As Koivu-Schneider notes, "The aftermath of September 11 added an unprecedented and whole new dimension to the Smart Growth movement. More sprawl won't enable Americans to run away from terror. Rather, the death of too many Americans on one will heighten the urgency to design communities in the ZEBRA way that use energy and natural resources much more efficiently."7

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SUDAMERICAN SPRawl

The forces and policies of automobile-dependent sprawl advocated by the Defensible Development 1.0 policy of the 1950s have continued in this country virtually unchanged. As the majorities of all new residential and business locations occur outside major cities and urban residential densities continue to decline. Despite calls for "Smart Growth," there is little prospect for major change in land development patterns in the near future. As Joel Kertitz, a senior fellow at the Development Initiative for Public Policy in Saint Petersburg University, has pointed out: "The overwhelming trend forged by the 2000 census is that the decentralization of industry and population seems inexorable." An influential 2000 report on auto-related finance and investment in the U.S. similarly claims as a national survey of fund in the land development

"Investments don't expect Americans to give up on their dreams of suburban McMansion and expensive backyards despite traffic jams and growth constraints. There is smart growth and then there is real growth," says a Dallas developer. "You may be able to sustain growth to certain extent to buffer, but then places simply start going to do what they want—draw growth and sprawl. Nothing makes you do to stop it. Real growth is suburban sprawl."8

The national debate in America about "smart policies" has focused in recent years on sustainable development (often labeled in urban sprawl, "sustainable development," through often commercialized), is a concept easily described. It embraces the notion of a widely shared decent standard of living, even the "good life" of urban modernity but reasonably balanced by a sense of economic and environmental sustainability.9 In this view, our present standard of living should be both widely available and sustainable for future generations. In the important respects, national equity, and particularly intergenerational equity, along with restorative conservation and environmental protection, are central concepts in sustainable development philosophy.

The sustainable development issues raised by our hypergrowth pattern of land development have been widely recognized for years and are now increasingly measured and reported.10 The U.S. consumes for more resources per capita than any other country in the 17th century. As a result, the environmental exploitation caused by the average person in this country is estimated to be 30 to 50 times that of the average person in a developing country like India. Urban sprawl generates, among other things, an insensitivity about the water and air pollution. It results in the loss of nearly open space, forests, prime farmland, scenic views, wetlands, and wildlife habitat, and by fragmenting ecosystems, threatens the goal of biodiversity and sustainability. Scientists now tell us that increasing pollution by cars and streets may be creating a process of global warming and climate change that could rival the devastating consequences of the "nuclear winter" feared during the Cold War era.11

Our automobile-dependent pattern of land development increases the urban footprint many times the rate of population growth and this has been even in areas near such "urban fronts," by American standards class as Chicago and Boston. As a result of our automobile toys, the U.S., which has less than five percent of the world's population, consumes about 25 percent of global oil production. Our oil has become a completely oil-dependent economy, vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices and supply in particular, potential interruptions of foreign oil supplies (providing about 58 percent of the oil we consume) and forcing our involvement in Middle Eastern religious and ethnic conflicts (a zone that provides about 35 percent of our oil). Moreover, the issue of sustainability will become even more critical for the U.S. as our known sources and domestic reserves of oil (excluding the Gulf of Mexico) are exhausted. This is expected to occur within the next eight years. Beyond that point, no one really knows what the supply of domestically produced oil will be, how easily everyone expects demand and prices to increase in the world market.

Infrastructure and related economic costs associated with the high level of automobile use in this sprawl...
Automobile-dependent sprawl in this country has been as destructive of people as it has been of physical places.

The use of an individual household for owning, maintaining, and operating two automobiles averages more than $2,300 each year.\(^3\) Moreover, this country is losing its countryside and largely open-air lifestyles, as are the counterparts of the infrastructure maintenance deficit. A 2003 report estimated the infrastructure maintenance deficit to be $3.5 trillion and noted that it is likely to increase at a rate of more than $100 billion each year.\(^4\) Whether these costs, obviously defined by our impenetrable urban landscape, should be passed on to the community or paid by future generations is, and should be, the subject of increasing debate.

Urban sprawl also contributes to the deteriorating economic viability and social livability of the core areas of most major cities and towns. In some cases, the destructive impact on cities has been acutely similar to the destruction of nuclear weapons. In the last decade alone, 25,000 homes were razed in Detroit—this area has less than half its postwar population since 1950.\(^5\) The loss of so many homes is often held behind by shopping and high-rise neighborhoods and schools, for new projects.\(^6\) The trend is ongoing, and many more are threatened elsewhere. In the last decade alone, the city of St. Louis was razed in about 1,000 abandoned housing units. There are now an estimated 4,000 abandoned homes in St. Louis, many of which are in older neighborhoods, sites impacted by ever-increasing urban sprawl.

Automobile-dependent sprawl in this country has been as destructive of people as it has been of physical places. Since 1935, more than 2.5 million people have died in traffic accidents on this country's roads, more than twice the number of American battle deaths incurred in all of this country's wars combined. Since the Revolutionary War through the present war in Iraq, there have been, of course, hundreds of millions of traffic injuries. To keep the risk of terrorism in perspective, the number of people killed in traffic accidents in 2005 in this country will easily surpass the number of traffic accidents in the period 2001-2005.

THE THREAT OF TERRORISM AND THE POTENTIAL FOR DEFENSIVE SPRRAWL

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, the National Science Foundation announced a study by Harvard University professors Edward Gibbons and Jesse Rubinstein to examine the relationship between violence and urban form and density.\(^7\) This study found that throughout modern history, where has sometimes significantly impacted the development of cities across time and place. The study noted that cities were probably the original "defensive" urban environments, relatively "safe havens" from attack. Large concentrations of people, however, were found to be more easily targeted by violence and destruction from the "fear of violence" during periods of civil unrest.

The study concluded that today's American cities are likely easily to be considered "safe havens" for political and social movements. The authors noted that the September 11 terrorist attack in New York targeted the World Trade Center, the symbolic center of the United States. The study indicates that while it is impossible to measure the change in the perceived risk to all buildings and

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High-density urban areas associated with the September 11 terrorist attacks. Future conservation policies in America may well be affected by these concerns. The study concluded that, while "the expected impact of terror on America's urban landscape is unclear," the "imposition of congestion to density will continue and will serve as an added cost to urban agglomeration."

This is not good news for America's major cities. Preoccupations over availability development and smart growth aren't sufficient about any interest in the state of sprawl. Michael Dudley notes: "The Cold War version of defensive dispersal was a titanic argument for learning to live with the bomb, rather than finding upon its prohibitions in 21st century counterparts would have to divert our cities to the theme of terrorism without reference to its forms. In both cases, there is a failure to recognize deeper connections. Similarly, another report, critical of "defensive dispersal" in response to terrorism, states: "A new wave of dispersal in our cities may well quell the sense of congruity that the question is intended to produce in us." Speaking of the link between higher density development and environmental protection and resource conservation in this country, Eric Goldstein of the Natural Resources Defense Council states simply: "The No. 1 environmental concern is that the2008 floods." Many cities had been steadily losing population during the 30 years prior to the September 11 attacks. Other major cities that recently had been losing population during the black economy: The 1990s actually had a rise of growth in the decade of only about half the rate of urban population growth. A recent Fortune magazine study of Census Bureau data for the period from 1992 to 1999 found that density had dropped significantly during that period in all segments of the county and even in the most metropolitan areas. Development markets, such as New York, San Francisco, Boston, and Chicago. This study found that suburbs were experiencing the opposite, with a majority of locally focused household types and key age groups. The urban resurgence of the 1990s, when the population growth rate of this country's 100 largest cities increased a group from 60 percent to 80 percent, was not exactly a stabilizer back to urban core areas.

One positive finding of the Harvard study was that recession had had only a small impact over the last 10 years on the growth and urban form of London and Dublin. However, this experience is relative to this country only if high-development areas are comparable and if Americans share the distribution of the people of Great Britain and Ireland. These are many reasons to believe that this is not the case. Americans are highly mobile almost by habit, tend to show both attachment to place, particularly cities, will overwhelmingly prefer a single home in a suburban neighborhood, generally are able to afford suburban living, tend to view "housing" as an economic investment, have a large built environment, and are willing to drive small they qualify" to attain a suburban lifestyle, even in existing traffic congested. Americans are also highly mobile. Many expect the fear of terrorist attacks to accelerate already existing trends toward corporate decentralization.

21. Eric Goldstein, "The No. 1 environmental concern..."
22. Fortune, "The No. 1 environmental concern..."
23. Fortune, "The No. 1 environmental concern..."
24. Fortune, "The No. 1 environmental concern..."
tion and declining in favor of primary suburban office hubs. While the risk of terrorism is low and insignificant at any one central urban location, the risk is even lower in suburban and rural areas. Some observers suggest that the prevailing American business location matrix may become "Don't Branch Up" and "Keep a Low Profile." Major corporations, in examples such as Wal-Mart, Microsoft, and Merrill Lynch, make headlines, but no major economic need for trophy headquarters, as even major offices in the downtowns of major cities.

Compromises adopt long-term strategic plans to spawn a single suburban or suburban "downtown" campus," with high activity funding, complete corporate social access, landscaped golf course, and no fear of a tenant mix that could include a higher risk "danger" tenant.

It is hardly surprising that many believe that the desire of tenants' snacks on America's urban places will accelerate suburban growth in this country. Some predict that, long term, this country will likely experience a "new corridor in the face of suburbanization and decentralization of businesses and urban dwellings." It is important to put these expectations about the acceleration of sprawl into perspective. These expectations do not involve a paradigm shift in this country's present development pattern, but accelerate it in the already existing pattern of low-density sprawl that has been underway in this country for nearly a century.

Reports released in 2001 indicated that Big, based on data on new office construction, office and apartment vacancy rates, location of federal facilities, and business activity in downtown areas, "no such changes have occurred" and that "suburbs haven't benefited disproportionately at the expense of cities." According to one report, as the events of September 11 occurred in time, other ominous forces, such as immigration, globalization, and technological innovation, may be more important factors in urban growth and development. According to a recent General Accounting Office report, managers that anticipated substantial growth in the nation's major cities may have mitigated the economic impact of the terrorist attacks on cities.

In my case, since an economic recession had already begun and was not a main issue, by the September 11 terrorist attacks—accelerated sprawl would not necessarily show up yet in the data. Corporate ownership of major buildings and long-term leases may delay the decentralization of some businesses. Other potential spillover-effects, including consequences of the risk of terrorist attacks on cities, such as tighter rules to fund business and commercial preservation programs, increasing costs of private security systems and advertising, deteriorating urban amenities and aesthetics from the potential "millenialization" of city life, and the determining fixed conditions of major cities, may still be yet to come.

Some data already suggest that an acceleration of sprawl may actually be underway in some metropolitan areas of the country. According to a 2003 census, major cities, such as Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco, which had been gaining population in the last decade, have now started to lose population. Also, a number of major cities, including Denver, Philadelphia, S. Louis, Cincinnati, Cleveland, New Orleans, and Savannah, which were losing population during the last decade, are now losing population at an even faster rate.

No one, of course, is predicting that major cities will become depopulated ghost towns. There is likely to continue to be a stable market for residential housing in downtown areas in the years ahead due to the increasing number of children households comprised of empty nesters and singles. Similarly, at the end of 2001, two areas considered to be primary terrorism targets, Washington and Washington, D.C., had office vacancy rates that were the lowest in the country and numbers again flipped to these areas. The risk of terrorism has not affected their standing as global centers. A SORP report on America's real estate markets pointed out that "To some degree, terrorism has been factored out of the system as everyone goes about their business." That report, however, continued by saying, "For all the business as usual, two trends remain an immutable fact and echo on the real estate markets: "To provide the entire economic, economic uncertainty," says an interviewee. "You can't quantify it, you hear one little discussion about it, but there's even if it isn't factored into pricing." It is important to remember that after all levels need not be as high as such a massive acceleration of spread. The same report notes in this regard that "the unfeasibility of a "boof out of the blue" is considerably higher than it was before 9/11," and concludes that "Nobby is ready to venture a guess as to what might happen next time.

Since have proposed the decentralization of cities and the acceleration of spread as a natural occurring pattern. Planners: Joseph Pelsinger, 2003, argues for a form of regional decentralization and spread with population and business center linked together by a new national railway system. These "decentralizing the center" metropolitan wrinkles are likely to be seen especially as more urban planning professionals. The American Planning Association in 2004 has expressed strong support for this concept leveraging strategies for smart growth and new urbanism, both of which embrace concentrations, high density development in urban core areas."
Caselli, 1995, has strongly criticized the "compartmentalization of crisis" approach to fighting terrorism. He argues that the current pattern of urban sprawl "emerges from reliance on relatively inefficient, external commodity engines, with resulting deficits in environmental quality, causing infrastructural stress, insufficient provision of public works, and loss of social support." Perhaps more directly on point, he makes the following argument:

"Sprawl does not do as necessary as expected. Instead, it is a dynamic trend, not limited to small towns, nor have we seen centers just in rural areas. As a result of expanding the Pentagon in suburban Virginia as the World Trade Center in lower Boston, we could see similar linkages in the next generation. The answer to this question is confusion of context, confusion of location."

**SOME THOUGHTS ON THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND THE THREAT OF TERRORISM**

The threat of terrorism highlights the number of sustainable development issues related to America's built environment. The threat of terrorism in our major cities and this country's way of understanding both emphasizes, in their own way, important sustainability issues related to our current pattern of urban sprawl. The economy and lifestyle supported by this automobile-dependent built environment is capable of being sustainable, but the infrastructure and the highly dependent upon automobile for significant urban sprawl will likely require a significant change in the way we think about urban development. The threat of terrorism includes even more attention on urban and neighborhood, we might expect NIMBYism to get even worse. Future terrorism attacks on our cities also might still our ability to assure mass transit to serve these types of development and might even lead to a larger automobile-dependent built environment that would not be much of an appeal. The threat of terrorism also is not only a threat to our economy and the urban landscape, it is also a serious threat to our security and the security of the nation. The threat of terrorism also is a threat to our national security and the security of the nation. The threat of terrorism also is a threat to our national security and the security of the nation.