

What's Smart about Smart Growth? A Regional and Metropolitan Assessment **Owen Gutfreund**

By Raymond J. Palmer '13

Owen Gutfreund teaches urban history as an associate Professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at Hunter College in New York. Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, he became interested in the history of cities and how politics has influenced the development of our American metropolises. His presentation explored the background of urban and suburban living conditions as we know it: when and why did the idea of private home ownership converge with patriotism? Why have we moved out of the cities to suburban and rural settings? Questions such as these were discussed and answered as the focal point of his presentation.

Urban sprawl is a growing concern in our country today – more and more Americans are, and have been, choosing to live in suburbs remote from the hassles of urban areas, with a private house and a car. In other words, we are choosing to live the traditional American Dream. However, this is increasingly being considered environmentally costly and economically detrimental. Recognizing this, Gutfreund attempts to explain why such a trend has gripped the American mind, and how it came about. It turns out that this living pattern, which a lot of us consider typically American, emerged only recently in our history, about half a century ago. He presents his findings of “The American Pattern,” and explains the background of the American living environment through our government’s housing policies, transportation policies, and our cultural preferences.

First Gutfreund started out with the history of our government’s housing policies, and explained how the different presidents implemented housing policies that reflected the concerns of their times. The policies emphasized private house-ownership across the country in relation to the presidents’ economic outlooks and the Cold War. The story starts with

President Hoover: he served from 1929 to 1933, and was the one, according to Gutfreund, to start the trend toward private house ownership. As Gutfreund remarked “he basically said, ‘own your own home.’” because he believed that this encouraged individuality and independence – values which he considered to be important to the American character.

Some years later President Franklin Roosevelt made extensive housing policy decisions for America. He implemented a two tier policy with private suburban houses at the top, and urban housing at the bottom (including public and rental housing as well as multifamily and mixed use housing plans). This meant that all housing plans other than private house ownership were second priority under Roosevelt’s policy. This guaranteed that public housing was never a good option, and ensured that the suburban housing option would be pushed forward. Gutfreund summarized this, saying that “if public living was good, people wouldn’t own homes.”

Behind Roosevelt’s housing policies was the major issue of the Cold War. The US government was taking every measure to counter communist influences, including manipulating housing options. Private home ownership was seen as an ultimate expression of private property, which was symbolically the exact opposite of communism, a political system that did not allow private ownership. Thus came about the convergence between private home ownership and patriotism. The American government, for anticommunist reasons, implemented and spread the idea that owning the typical American house with a picket fence was a sign of better citizenship: you were a better American if you owned a house.

Transportation policies were also affected by this era’s need for anticommunist plans. Highways, which have become typical of the American landscape, which were largely constructed at around this period, were considered a measure to alleviate the disastrous effects of the then-anticipated nuclear war. Major highways, the government at this time

thought, would be an excellent evacuation route in case of such an attack, and could also serve the purpose of further spreading out the population to avoid concentrating damage from an attack. Also in mind was the full-involvement of American citizens through reaching out to rural areas by connecting them with highways. Summarizing the defense logic of this time was President Eisenhower's words, "a national highway program would be beneficial to the military, but would enable us to colonize the countryside of the continent.."

Backed by such intentions, the government favored highways in conjunction with private house-ownership. The vast networks of interstate highways were laid down at this period, and anti-urban funding biases became a reality – in many places, transportation funds could not be used for urban areas because there was a cap on how much an agency could use on municipal areas: as a result, more roads were laid outside of urban areas. To top this was the severe mispricing of our roads, which rendered them virtually free and caused our demand for highways to skyrocket: hence the name "freeway." According to Gutfreund, only 30-40% of the transportation infrastructure is paid by user fees like tolls and license renewal fees. Such biased policies greatly changed our American transportation landscape.

Parallel to these policies were the cultural values and preferences of that time, which were undergoing a sweeping change due to the advent of personal vehicles and other modern technologies. Gutfreund touched on the 1939 World's fair, where the "modern lifestyle" was introduced to an overwhelming 45 million Americans. The theme of the fair was to build a new and better future, and true to this theme, the now-prevalent pattern of private house and car ownership was featured as the future lifestyle. One exhibit, the "Democracity" for example, featured "the future city" in a huge globe, which looked exactly like the sprawled suburbs of contemporary America.

After reviewing in detail these three factors – housing policy, transportation policy, and cultural preferences – Gutfreund suggested that the status quo is actually an imperative

shaped by policies begun in the 1930s in the face of the political and social problems of that time, and that we need to move on. As was discussed in other presentations, contemporary Americans are not as car-oriented as before, show tendencies to prefer an urban environment, and also are increasingly concerned with the negative environmental and economic implications of our current car-centric lifestyle. Why, then, are imperatives from the Cold War era and earlier times still influencing our housing and transportation policies? “Our goals are different, but the imperatives are still there – and we need to change this” Gutfreund concluded.

However, we are far from addressing this policy discrepancy. Gutfreund pointed out that Smart Growth was not properly received by the public: “They take it as government intervention,” he said, “when the actual cause for this is to provide the multitude of lifestyle options that suit the current times.” He further explained, “The current situation is such that one style – single family houses and cars – is overemphasized when our values are changing” and called for a revision of such biased preferences imposed by an outdated imperative. With a misunderstanding of Smart Growth, reactions like NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) and BANANA (build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything) are common. Both responses can be reactions to the government’s implementation of environmental or nuclear policies, which citizens perceive as intervention - and they fight back. Since Smart Growth initiatives involve a holistic planning, it can be perceived as being counter to the value of private property ownership. As a conclusion, Gutfreund emphasized our need to “tilt the scale back” so that other lifestyle choices are supported by the government: We also must work to present this message to the public..

Another problem that Gutfreund pointed to was the small scale at which Smart Growth initiatives are being implemented. As he put it, under the current situation, “you can flock to any city that suits you”: people who are interested in Smart Growth can live in places

like Portland, Oregon, and may then become complacent. Overall, Gutfreund called for more action on the citizens part to replace the outdated.

Why though, have we allowed for such outdated policies to dictate our lifestyles for such a long time? When one traces history, it is not hard to notice the periods when we have all felt the unsustainability and economic burden of a car-oriented lifestyle, for example the first and second oil-shocks, increasingly ominous climate changes, and the economic downturns. But we have not used these opportunities to significantly revise our housing and transportation policies. To this personal question, Gutfreund answered that it was perhaps because we had other issues to worry about at the time, and that we did not have a chance to reflect on the issue of smart growth until now. With environmental and economic concerns converging with our lifestyle choices, now is a good opportunity to revise our outdated housing and transportation policies to reflect the realities of contemporary America.

In sum, Gutfreund's presentation took a causal look at the Smart Growth issue, examining why we had grown in an "un-smart" fashion. This was a fresh perspective among the conference talks, as others tended to focus more on the future benefits of smart growth strategies.

Additional Resources

President Eisenhower: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dwight_D._Eisenhower

President Roosevelt: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin_D._Roosevelt

President Hoover: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Hoover

The 1956 Highway Act: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Aid_Highway_Act_of_1956

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