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It is depressing to contemplate how much bad development has been caused by faulty public policy. It takes years of meticulous engineering, review, public hearings, and approvals before anything can be developed, and yet the result is so disappointing and so familiar that people assume that it must be the work of powerful political or economic forces. What has directed the shape of the suburbs up to now, however, is not so much the power of the market but rather the deathly grip of archaic regulations.

Advocates who have struggled for decades to ensure that new development followed zoning and subdivision laws have long since won those battles, but by the time all communities adopted such ordinances, the models on which they were based were obsolete. Planning Boards and Planning Departments continue to direct today's suburban development using regulations that were developed for very urban areas at the turn of the twentieth century. A notable example is Section 502.1 of the current Baltimore County Zoning Regulations, the requirements for special exceptions, which is taken nearly verbatim from the preamble to the 1916 New York City zoning ordinance - the Country's *first*.

Post-World War II development across the country is surprisingly similar- sprawling, spread out, sterile, car-dominated, and often, just plain ugly. Even in historic rural towns, it's as if farms suddenly sprouted vinyl-coated boxes instead of corn. This series examines some of the reasons why the built environment looks the way it does, but its theme is that the appalling way America looks is no accident but rather the result of deliberate public policy and the direct consequence of our system of laws and our collective preferences.

Prior to 1950, America was largely a collection of towns, each with a coherent form surrounded by rural areas. While many individual suburban parcels are beautifully planned and constructed, there is no overall structure, no core, no linkage between the pieces, and no consistent fabric of development. Much of the Baltimore Washington corridor, indeed much of the I-95 corridor, has become an unintended town, but one without any apparent design. As James Howard Kunstler famously put it, "Eighty percent of everything ever built in America has been built in the last fifty years and most of it is depressing, brutal, ugly, unhealthy, and spiritually degrading…" The suburbs have been called "edge" cities, but perhaps "edgeless" is a better description.

But first, what is so wrong with sprawl, other than it chews up the countryside and puts unsustainable burdens on public services? What is so wrong with a beautiful home, wide streets, a big lot, and plenty of room onsite for our kids and many cars? First of all, architectural short comings aside, what is wrong is these places are dismal because the public realm that binds them together is meaningless or nonexistent.

But the most damning case against sprawl is that it actually creates more traffic. The farther things are spread out, the more each of us must drive to get back and forth. As a result, the number of vehicle miles driven per year grows at a rate far beyond our ability to build new roads. The inexorable increase in traffic creates more congestion and gridlock and will inevitably force us to alter the way we live and work and our model of development.

Our collective preferences, however, are not to be underestimated; we are all cappuccino cowboys. We all want to live in the country, but commute on an uncrowded country road in an off-road capable SUV to a job with a parking space next to the front door. Deeply embedded in our collective consciousness is the American dream: to have just a few acres of our own in the

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country. The problem of course, is that when everyone has a few acres in the country, it's no longer the country.

So how did the countryside morph into the sprawling, pedestrian-unfriendly, car dominated, suburbs we have today?

Sprawl is a result of many factors: cheap gas, the mortgage deduction, and federal highway subsidies, among others. But in our view, there are two great engines of sprawl: Euclidean zoning, a tool that was designed to control highrise construction in lower Manhattan a century ago and road codes, sometimes called public works standards. Public works standards are usually drafted by well, public works engineers and not so surprisingly, the safety and convenience of cars is paramount in their design- the needs of humans less so.

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Also, new roads are justified to relieve congestion, but you cannot spend your way out of traffic problems. To paraphrase *Field of Dreams*, "If you build them, they will come." It is impossible to build enough roads for two reasons: first, it is simply too expensive. Four extra lanes on I-270 between Gaithersburg and Frederick are anticipated to cost in excess of $4.5B—about twice the cost of the Inter-County Connector and a stupendous amount that will drain funds from all other transportation proposals. Second, while new highways are justified as a way to reduce congestion, they actually increase it. When I-270 is widened to Frederick, it will initially reduce commuting times but that reduction will serve to generate development in Frederick and Hagerstown and perhaps even further out, and will cause traffic volumes to inevitably grow again. Hence, a paradox: roads built to alleviate traffic actually create it.

The other great engine of sprawl is our near universal reliance on Euclidean zoning which generally prohibits mixed use and which was deliberately designed to prevent "overcrowding of land." Prevention of "overcrowding of land" is, of course, a prescription for sprawl.

THE ORIGIN OF THE SUBURBS

Although there were a few antecedents, surprisingly, the suburbs were actually invented by someone. Sir Ebenezer Howard was an Englishman who was deeply troubled by the congestion, pollution, and horrific living conditions of London in the late 19th century. He was also influenced by various Utopian thinkers of the day and as a result, in 1898, published a book entitled *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. He offered an idealistic vision of a town, free of urban ills enjoying the benefits of both town and country. He believed in the creation of new towns of limited size, surrounded by permanent green belts of agricultural land. His book was republished in 1902, with a much catchier title, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* and ignited what came to be known as the Garden City Movement. Sir Ebenezer hired two of the most famous town planners of the age, Sir Raymond Unwin and his brother-in-law, Barry Parker who designed the first garden city, Letchworth, in Herefordshire north of London and later a second, Welwyn. The idea was widely copied and the Garden City concept quickly traveled across the pond where it was famously first used in America at Radburn in Fairlawn, New Jersey, which was designed by Clarence Stein for the developers Bing and Bing. Radburn was enormously influential and garden cities sprouted, notably in Maryland in Greenbelt. Radburn also advanced a radical idea originally used by Unwin for the first time: the *cul-de-sac*. In the Radburn case, one end of the cul-de-sac opened upon the road and the other end on the greenbelt. The idea, novel for its time, was that children could walk out of the end of the cul-de-sac on a path through the greenbelt and on to school without ever crossing a road. Robert E. Simon, Jr. was the son of one of the partners of Bing and Bing. Presumably he had heard of Radburn from his father and later he developed the first of the great post-war planned communities, Reston, Virginia.

So how did the idyllic Utopian Garden City morph into the suburban megalopolis we have today? And how can our laws and design codes be changed to permit more human-scaled, livable communities?

Stay tuned for part II of this series in the next issue of *BUILD Maryland*.

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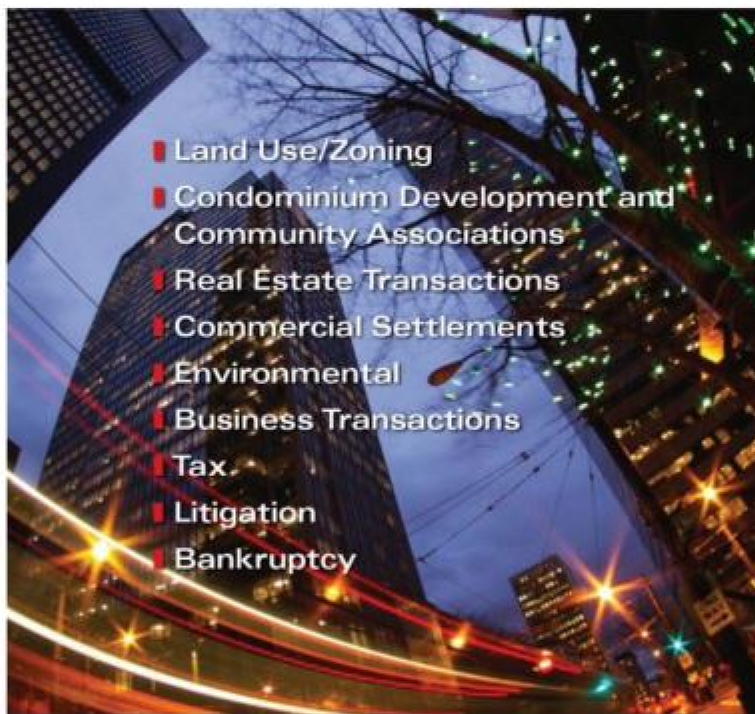

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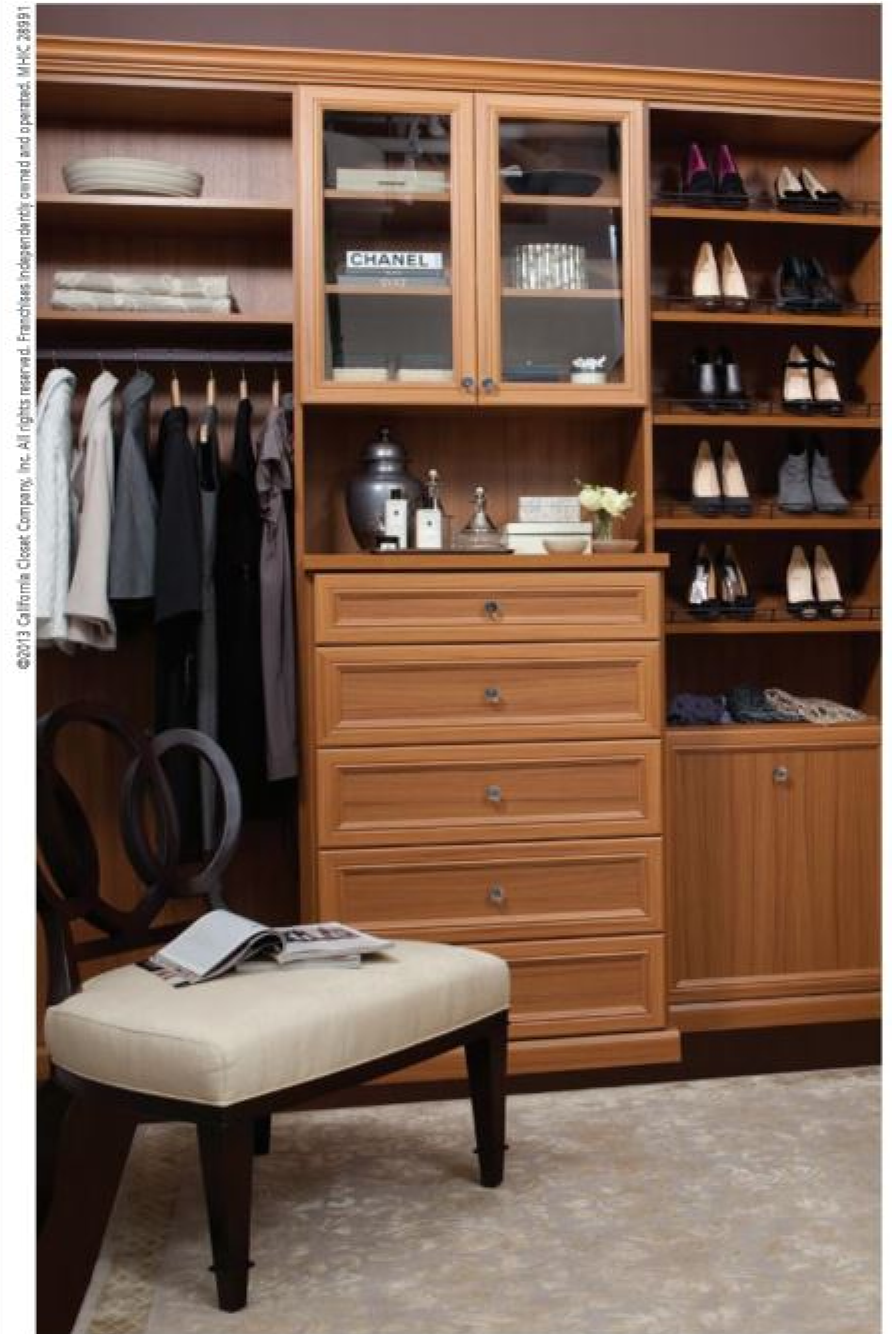

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