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American Suburbia vs. the Planet

A really good rant takes a rare combination of passion, knowledge, wit, and intelligence. Recently, in a long phone conversation with Andres Duany, the architect and urban planner, I was privy to one of the best I've ever heard.

The origin of global warming. The cause of American cultural malaise. The inanity of our planning, zoning, transportation, political, and community processes. Duany has a lot to rant about. Ostensibly our conversation was about the carefully distilled, practical advice contained handbook-style in his new release, *The Smart Growth Manual*, published by McGraw Hill. But our conversation about the book showed why Duany and his coauthors, Jeff Speck and Mike Lydon, had to pare down to core concepts: Otherwise, Duany was just going to explode with it all.

Duany began by identifying three concurrent crises that he traced directly to the American lifestyle: Peak oil (the likelihood that we've already consumed more than half the planet's petroleum in barely 100 years), the housing bubble, and global climate change. "It's where we live, the size of our houses, the distances we drive for work, commerce, play--everything."

And it's all a vicious circle. The reason our houses are so big (and inefficient), he says, is because we have eliminated a healthy civic life. We build homes with giant foyers because we have no public squares. We need media rooms because it's not easy or pleasant to drive to a multiplex theater, cross a parking lot through an ocean of cars, and pay a fortune for popcorn. We build bars in our basements because there are no neighborhood pubs. We have giant refrigerators and ever-growing storage needs because shopping is both far away and unpleasant (hello, Costco). The result? We heat and air-condition unused rooms in oversized unpleasant houses. And because our home bars and foyers are empty and our media experiences private, we're lonely, to boot.

And there's a brutal irony to our long record of poor choices, Duany says: Other countries are emulating it. As they become wealthier per capita, it's the American lifestyle that they aspire to, the one that has undermined our health, our social engagement, and our environment. He laughs. "In some ways, it's our only chance," he says, of staying on top. "We can ruin China by making extremely unpleasant places for them." What justifies density is urbanism, he says. "You give up your back yard for street life. But they're getting neither. They're getting Tyson's Corner."

The solutions to this oversized, expensive, and planet-killing misery, Duany says, are simple, obvious, and nearly impossible to implement. Regional, not local, planning. Logical mixtures of work, home, commerce, and civic structures. In his early years, the ones leading up to the publication of his first significant book, *Suburban Nation*, Duany had to spend his time convincing city and town officials and endless boards and commissions of the wisdom of smart growth. Then, he says, just when his ideas (and those of many other smart-growth theorists and practitioners) were really gaining traction, the planning process changed. Now citizen review boards are often integral to the process, and even more resistant to new ideas. Democracy depends on an educated citizenry, says Duany, which is why he produced the manual. But without education on the issues, he says, "public discourse is mob rule--tribalism, not democracy."

"People are intelligent in the abstract," he says. "They just get stupid when they talk about their own back yards." It's enough to make you rant. Or to pick up *The Smart Growth Manual*.

