

Urban Consolidation

Factors and Fallacies in Urban Consolidation:

Introduction

As proponents of urban consolidation and consolidated living continue to manifest in our society, we must ensure that our acknowledgment of its benefits, and the problems of its agitator (sprawl), do not hinder our caution over its continually changing objectives.

Definition

Like much urban policy, the potential benefits that urban consolidation and the urban village concept seek to offer are substantially undermined by ambiguous definition. This ambiguity, as expressed through a general lack of inter-governmental and inter-professional cohesion on this policy, can best be understood in terms of individual motives (AIUSH,1991).

- * State Government's participatory role in the reduction of infrastructure spending.
- * Urban Professional's recognition of the increased variability, robustness, and interest in both the urban area and their work.
- * Conservation Activist's commendation of the lower consumption of resources, and reduced pressure on sensitive environment areas, suggestive of a reduction in urban sprawl.
- * The Development Industry's equations of profit established through better and higher levels of land use.

Essentially urban consolidation proposes an increase of either population or dwellings in an existing defined urban area (Roseth,1991). Furthermore, the suburban village seeks to establish this intensification within a more specific agenda, in which community is to be centred by public transport nodes, and housing choice is to be widened with increased

diversity of housing type (Jackson,1998). The underlying premise of this swing towards urban regeneration, and the subsequent debate about higher-density development, is the reconsideration of the suburban ideal and the negative social and environmental implications inherent in its continuation (Johnson, 1994). In reference to this regeneration is the encouragement of greater community participation, a strengthening and broadening of urban life and culture, and a halt to physical, environmental and economic decline (Hill,1994).

Myths and Misunderstanding

The relative successes of practical solutions to the urban consolidation model are constrained within the assumptions underpinning them. Appropriating community desire towards a more urban lifestyle ignores the basic fact that people chose to live in the suburbs (Stretton,1975). Suburbia as an ideal, is a preference based on perpetual stability, be it though neighbourhood identity or the act of home ownership ^ a view not reflected in planning models heavily biased towards highly mobile societies.

Cost benefits deemed to be provided by higher-density living, in terms of more efficient use of infrastructure, are realized primarily in the private sectors (Troy,1998). A result inconclusive to State government objectives towards reduced public spending.

Traffic reduction as an expressed direct result of higher-density residential living is largely incorrect. A falsehood achieved by using density as a substitute for sociological variables such as income, household size, and lifestyle characteristics (Moriarty,1996). Traffic reduction stems primarily from a decision to drive (Engwight,1992), a contributing factor not easily adjustable by urban planning alone.

Overemphasis of the contribution inner-city urban renewal has towards urban sprawl has allowed the prolongation of unchecked urban fringe development. The recurrence of the ^parcel-by-parcel (Girling,1994)^ distribution of new suburban development has not received

the same amount of active participation, or concerted research and development, as governments have generated in existing urban areas. Solutions in Themselves.

Too often the priority of consolidated land use is defined solely by density and cost analysis of infrastructure (Danielsen,1998). This produces a lack in qualitative understanding of the initial, highly humanitarian, aspects that consolidated living curtailed. It is in this vein that consequential detriments such as physical encroachment and overcrowding, unsympathetic housing styles (AIUSH,1991), and increased gentrification of urban areas inexplicably occur. In such, planning seems to produce solutions to symptoms, rather than address the issues which cause them.

Critical design failure arises from superficial viewpoints on such fundamentals as neighbourhood and community (Mack,1977). In such the built form dubiously grounds itself on place making, removed from the reality that people are the essential component of the place (Westwood,1997).

The only way in which adequate understanding, of actual community desires and obligations, can emerge is through active public consultation, and heavy local government involvement. Public insignificant, but unjust. Non-desirable political gains may include;

- * Participation to inform (pre-warn) citizens of intended action.
- * Participation to organise voluntary campaigns and work.
- * Participation to stall and combat organized opposition.
- * Participation to secure reliable feedback.(Kirk,1980)

It is often the case where public consultation is involved in the plan-making process after a

limited range of options have been clarified. Consequently the beneficial possibilities arising from the integration of the higher-density objective into collective public attitude, where an autonomous solution can be reached, is denied. Instead, objections towards urban renewal and consolidated initiatives are easily allied due to counter-emotive arguments not resolved by operative harmonisation of goals.

Economic rationale biased to higher-residential densities does not recognise the potential for other (traditional) measures of consolidated efficiencies (AIUSH,1991). Planning resolutions involving such aspects as lot frontage, have been disregarded, and may provide a far greater measure of public transport, and urban village success. Who is to blame?

The articulation of blame is a misrepresentation of the problems inherent with urban policy in general. Holistically, everyone is, in part, responsible. However, the futility of the current organisational strategies is not to be excused.

Governments and community response has generally been short term (BCC,1996). The reasoning is simple and two tier; State and Federal Governments are elected primary on short term contracts, whereas Local Governments and community organisations maintain a more stable, continuing set of goals and motivations (Petruilis,1998); Local Government and community organisations have, as a rule, substantially less authority over public policy, and a definite underrepresented amount of public funding (Alexander,1998).

Policy that is continually directed top-down is to blame. The misdirection of federally derived funds, through State legislature is stretching the ethical margins, and challenging its moral obligations as a public service provider not a provider for the public-service. The State Governments were able to appropriate the rhetoric of social justice and environmental sustainability that define ^Building Better Cities^, and at the same time use this language and

the funds provided by the federal government to consolidate an agenda of market-led urban development and the aggressive encouragement of property speculation. (Stevenson,1999)

Regardless of the reduction of the present day support we justify government by, a shift explained by Stretton (1996) where ^Our politicians have taught their electors to expect tax cuts, refuse tax increase, and despise government^, the supposed fiscal difficulties incurred by government do not impose urgent reductions in public spending ^ this ^freeze (Jackson,1998)^ placed upon social infrastructure is a strict resultant of choice.

In this constricted social environment, momentum must be gained alternatively through essential partnership between the public and private realms. The full extent of Frieden^s (1991) ^urban vitality^, gained through these partnerships, can only be fulfilled if the existing rules, regulations and red tape, that are non-descriptive and non-defining to individual situations, are alleviated (Anderson,1998) ^ essentially we have too many rule making agencies (AIUSH,1991).

Critical factors

Critical factors in the reinforcement of the need for urban consolidation to be established as a fundamental urban reality can be seen in the alternative ^ the continuation of urban sprawl. Even if all the assumptions are exaggerated, and the doomsday predictions are dramatically fantasised, there is major collective apprehension towards ANY further encroachment within the biological environment. Something needs to be done.

Quality of life in all respects and purposes should be the ultimate gain. Appraisal of this quality should be bound by no prejudices, pre-conclusions, or a variable market value. If not planning will instead deny equity (so proactively sought) and therefore careful intent and design would be subtractive rather than representative of community base. In exacting theoretical discovery, no matter how publicly participated, citizens as part of a just a

democratic society should not be made the guinea pigs of experimental reform. In terms of removing the faults from planning practice, it must be kept mindful that just as increased public transport is not an answer in itself, neither is physical and social planning. In as much by continually educating the community, in all aspects of urban practice, thereby facilitating a multifaceted participatory approach, will yield solutions otherwise undiscovered by good planning practice (Mack,1977).

Practical applications must ultimately be ends tested. Public transport and more efficient vehicles do nothing other than strengthen the need to keep planning for roads. Urban density is too often confused with housing form (Jackson,1998). The wholesale demolition of existing areas for incredibly ^heroic (McLoughlin,1991)^ achievements in density are not only non-proportionally effective, but also this new building denies the creative possibilities of adapting existing environments. The importance of preserving emotive neighbourhood character provisions such as established trees, and corner stores, is pinnacle. When we destroy the greenery and the individuality of a place we destroy the justification for the suburbs, the mandate of the masses, which ultimately means failed consolidation. All of the aforementioned articles of increased sustainability expose a greater need for radical social change. We must enact a fundamental change, at both the individual and community levels to make sacrifices for the common good!

Options for Action

What society needs is clear, valid and up to date objectives ^ a vision ^ from which a set of individualistic solutions can be consistently derived (AIUSH,1991). These derivations shall be firmly rooted in local government and other community organizations; an agenda that will become increasingly pertinent as political environments destabilise, due to minority parties and the likes, and less conducive to long-term planning.

However, this is not to decline a multilevel and multidisciplinary approach. Regional prospective must be applied so as to avoid periphery degradation of local governments areas, maintain open space networks, facilitate regional public transport and freight links, and to preserve a greater regional identity (RCC,1998). Over this Government needs to be organised in such a way that organisation in itself does not interfere with the coordination of all efforts concerned (Hill,1994).

There must be an importance placed on professionally recognising and supporting a broader cultural shift towards ^post-modernism, pluralism, power and desire, small batch production, local narratives, indigenous architecture and place (Stevenson,1999)^ ^ an environmental conscious, and the inclination toward sustainability. For that reason, there needs to be a more environmentally sensitive form emerging, a revolutionary re-conception of the accepted urban components, that in itself can bring a more eco-friendly suburbia (Girling,1994).

This could be achieved through positive research and development towards, for example, the integration of the natural environment to combat urban storm-water runoff, a multitasking of the essential pathway provided by road networks, a rethink of the utility of the yard (and what is the use of a lawn?), and the return of shopping habits of corner store, home production, delivery and market (Engwight,1992). There needs to be a cooperative rethink of present planning barriers and regulations. With the current provisions for overly wide streets, large setbacks, and minimum lot size regulations there are unnecessarily restrictions on alternative, if not just exploratory, ideas about the way communities can be structured, restructured, and constructed.

Conclusion

The benefits of urban consolidation will be achieved only if the elements upon which it is composed seek to benefit all of whom it will affect. Appropriating issues is clearly not a substitute for participatory community involvement. It, and other such short-term time and money conservation techniques, will ultimately cost the nation dearly if community concern, communication, and faith are abandoned for resentment and protest. We must avoid exaggeration, and prejudice over questions involving social planning, and through the proponents of ecologically sustainable development and an increased social consciousness, and actively promote the discontent towards ^knowing the price of everything, and the value of nothing (Wilde)^. Urban consolidation may well be the container of urban sprawl, but only if it rises above the rhetoric and market-driven ideologies.

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