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# Environment

## URBAN DEVELOPMENT

*In recent years, urban planners have become active proponents of compact, high-density, “walkable” neighborhood configurations as alternatives to conventional American suburban development. Here, however, the author offers a cautionary note about an early antecedent to the now-popular approaches to urban design.*

### Contemporary Place-Making: Urbanism and the Venetian Ghetto



By CHUCK WOLFE\*

The urban scene above is where “small-g” ghettos come from, the *Ghetto* in the Cannareggio section of Venice. This small island, with seven-story “high-rises” dictated by necessity, became the namesake of overcrowded and segregated urban neighborhoods around the world.

Yet, at the same time, from its roots in the 16th century to the present, the Ghetto has featured the compact, dense, walkable core—the type is fancied as the antidote to sprawl—with qualities central to mainstream urban reinvention today.

Are there risks of a “one size fits all” approach to reshaping our cities, and making new, sustainable places? Many have asked before—from those who accuse the “new urbanist” movement of an overly nostalgic “*historic amnesia*” to earlier, social engineering-based critics of the “*neighborhood unit*” theory. However, few if any provided such a direct and ironic photographic illustration of an undesired land use and societal outcome.

These ironic photographs are not so much a tool to criticize goals, but to frame a cautionary essay, an illus-



At first glance: A tasteful and compact, new urbanist venue?

tration to assure we remain mindful of the task at hand—to provide more livable cities, and more sustainable forms of development. An overemphasis on spatial outcomes and descriptors, without more, risks only polemic debates of urban v. suburban choice, and the virtues of urban alleys v. sprawl and cul-de-sacs.

Australian urban designer Ruth Durack suggested earlier in the decade (with a passing reference to the Venetian Ghetto) that the urban village is dictated by a rigid form and function which *clashes with fundamental principles of sustainability*. She argued for a more free-form of planning that recognizes multiple, interactive systems which cannot be dictated by static physical models, premised on the “cultures” of green (e.g., agri-, perma- and aqua-). She provided a pragmatic focus by stressing commencement of sustainable community planning with a specific strategic act or project, such as a housing start, rather than imposition of a village plan.

The strategic act, she notes, should feature dynamic citizen input, and accept the unpredictability and discontinuities of American urban evolution. Durack’s emphasis was a careful undressing of “new urbanism”: without an awareness of urban ecology and a strategic input, the urban village may be little more than a dangerous chimera.

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Waterside living, or medieval tenement?

Nonetheless, we need guiding “live-work” principles of the compact, walkable, transit-based communities which frame emerging urban policy. But we also need to keep a contextual eye on the prize. Integration of local values and preferences is a central aspect of the public process and is critical to the creation of unique communities.

For instance, as we concluded in a recent study of barriers to transit-oriented development in Washington



Proportional height to streetscape with tasteful simplicity or verticality by necessity?

State, silo-specific orientations often fail to discern the wide variety of investments, regulations, policies, financing mechanisms, and public outreach needed for developing alternatives to conventional auto-centric development.

The point: Track context over catchwords. In another place at another time, the virtues of compact, walkable, and dense were the very isolation we now abhor.



After 1516, Christian curfew guards (paid for by Jewish residents) assured that island inhabitants were secured at night by locked gates at the bridge