BOOK REVIEW PERSPECTIVES

The Smart Growth Manual by Andres Duany & Jeff Speck with Mike Lydon

McGrawHill, 2010, 240pp, ISBN: 9780071376754

Ethan Goffman
ProQuest, 7200 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 601, Bethesda, MD, 20878 USA (email: ethan.goffman@proquest.com)

The Smart Growth Manual is a handy guide to the nitty-gritty details of planning and building compact, walkable, mixed-use communities. Two of the three authors, Andres Duany and Jeff Speck (along with Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk), also wrote the now classic Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream. That book gave narrative voice to the angst so many of us felt, but had not collectively identified, as networks of roads infested with automobiles were flung ever outward, as stripmalls took the place of grass and trees, sidewalks disappeared, and even crossing the street could become a life-threatening adventure. The very different Smart Growth Manual is a practical guide to at least part of the solution.

The authors of The Smart Growth Manual are architects and planners who are founders of the new urbanist movement. While often associated with smart growth, new urbanism works at a more local, architectural level. Drawing upon neighborhood planning from generations past, planning that was swept aside in the latter half of the twentieth century (in the United States, at least), new urbanists design attractive, walkable communities that mix housing, shopping, and, ideally, employment. One problem is that such communities can be somewhat artificial, and may not blend in with the surrounding car-oriented sprawl. Rather than replicating traditional community life, their residents may tend to use them as “bedroom communities,” while their jobs are elsewhere. Indeed, in vibrant urban areas, shopping and entertainment may lure new urban residents to use automobiles almost as much as before. Nevertheless, the approach outlined in The Smart Growth Manual, while partial, may be the only one viable in our contemporary society, where people migrate across the country in search of jobs, where the car is the default mode of transportation, where the isolated individual is paramount and the idea of community has slipped away.

For a society that has forgotten how to design traditional communities, The Smart Growth Manual offers extensive practical advice. These recommendations include many gems that at one time must have been “common sense,” such as reclaiming and repairing old buildings and neighborhoods (which we should also do with consumer goods); creating road networks in grids rather than curvy dead-ends; designing for pedestrians and bicycles; providing wide, tree-lined sidewalks in retail districts; allowing ancillary dwellings to increase density; employing passive heating and cooling; ensuring a natural, healthy indoor environment; and using plants appropriate to an area’s features, notably water availability. Other advice is more tailored to our present circumstances, such as reducing parking where public transit is available; slowing traffic in residential neighborhoods; designing porous surfaces to reduce runoff; generating on-site energy; using high-tech conservation methods; preserving wetlands and surrounding them with parks; collecting and reusing water; and, overall—what really should be common sense but somehow is not any more—avoiding unnecessary waste.

Partly offsetting the critique that new urbanism may result in isolated islands, The Smart Growth Manual begins with a discussion of the need to “think globally, act locally, but plan regionally.” Regional planning is, indeed, the key to an organic smart growth. Yet too often, as the authors admit, “effective regional planning is rare, because few municipalities are organized to coordinate administratively at a scale encompassing the entire metropolitan area.” Unfortunately, the core of The Smart Growth Manual, with its emphasis on specific neighborhoods, is unable to follow through on the idea of the regional with any kind of comprehensive discussion. The book does end with four extremely instructive appendices, on what smart growth is, how it may be achieved, the Charter of the New Urbanism, and a companion follow-up that contextualizes the book’s core. The placement at the end of the volume is a bit strange, as without this discussion the main text amounts to “preaching to the converted,” showing planners and
architects who already agree with the premises of smart growth how they can go about changing things. Not that there is anything wrong with this approach. It is simply tailored to a particular audience, one far smaller than those attracted to Suburban Nation. The Smart Growth Manual is not a sweeping argument intended to persuade, but a guide to professionals as to how to go about changing things. In this it is a starting point, not detailed enough to be followed step-by-step, but full of excellent principles and little packets of useful advice. The book is organized as a reference for readers who want to begin to reclaim our lost communities from the concrete jungle and to help preserve our dwindling social and natural environments.

About the Author

Ethan Goffman is Associate Editor of Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy and writes the SSPP Blog. His publications have appeared in E: The Environmental Magazine, Grist, and elsewhere. He is the author of Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature (State University of New York Press, 2000) and coeditor of The New York Public Intellectuals and Beyond (Purdue University Press, 2009) and Politics and the Intellectual: Conversations with Irving Howe (Purdue University Press, 2010). Ethan is a member of the Executive Committee of the Montgomery County (Maryland) Chapter of the Sierra Club.