

# 8

## THE CITY AND THE REGION

THE POSSIBILITY OF GOOD SUBURBS; SUBURBS THAT HELP  
THE CITY; THE EIGHT STEPS OF REGIONAL PLANNING;  
THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT AS A MODEL

---

There can be no doubt . . . that, in all our modern civilization, as in that of the ancients, there is a strong drift toward.

—FREDERICK LAW OLNSTED (1877)

. . . we shall solve the City Problem by leaving the City.

—HENRY FORD (1922)

---

## THE POSSIBILITY OF GOOD SUBURBS

We have discussed the evolution of cities and the two contrasting models for growth, focusing thus far on the design of new places rather than the improvement of existing places. Insofar as new places are being built at an astonishing rate—and are also influencing the rebuilding of older places—this approach has been useful. But it raises some important questions: Can suburban growth be organized in a way that is not detrimental to existing cities? What are we learning from new developments that can help make our



*The suburban city: acre for acre, most American cities are composed primarily of freestanding houses*



*Traditional planning in the traditional city: new low-cost homes (81 in all) blend in with existing houses in central Cleveland*

cities better places to live? What can be done to refocus development from the rural edge back to our neglected center cities?

We can begin to answer these questions by noting that most of the old neighborhoods within America's cities and towns are made up of elements that could be described as suburban. With the exception of the core business districts, almost all of the land within urban America is covered with the very same components discussed in this book, foremost among them the single-family house. With a few notable exceptions, a tour of any American city, be it Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Louis, or Seattle, would confirm that the typical American urban street is lined with buildings one to three stories tall, most of them freestanding.

Evidently, in the right form, suburban-scale growth is a healthy and natural way for cities to develop, as we will show. In Chapter 9, we will argue that many of the principles already described for making new places apply equally well to the improvement of existing neighborhoods. This cross-fertilization has proven effective in the best inner-city work of the past ten years. From the revitalization of downtown West Palm Beach to the rebuilding of low-cost housing in central Cleveland, the rules of neighborhood design are the most effective tool for bringing life back to older neighborhoods. Furthermore, since most American cities evolved from small towns, and since most American downtowns began as common main streets, many of the principles that apply to smaller neighborhoods also apply to the inner city. The difference is one of density, not of organization; in fact, one of the great virtues of traditional urbanism is that increased density only makes it work better. Of course, some problems and conditions are unique to the inner city, and these, too, will be addressed in the next chapter.

## SUBURBS THAT HELP THE CITY

Many of America's cities include their suburbs, which contribute in no small way to the health of the city centers. Because these suburbs are usually quite close to downtown, their residents participate in the life of the city, working or shopping there. As a part of a larger municipality, they contribute tax revenues that can benefit the inevitable troubled areas. Because of this, the presence of suburbs within the city limits is perhaps the single most significant determinant of economic health in urban America. The cities that continued to annex their suburbs well into the twentieth century, such as Minneapolis, Seattle, and Phoenix, are generally successful financially, while those cities that missed annexation, such as Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Miami, are much more likely to be undermined by suburban competition.\*

But the case of Phoenix reminds us that there is more to urban health than economic viability, because it is precisely places such as Phoenix—and its cohort of Sun Belt cities—where civic life has almost ceased to exist, and where residents complain about their quality of life. This brings up a second factor determining a city's health: whether the suburbs take a form that will accommodate public transit. The failure of Phoenix to maintain a pedestrian-scale downtown that supports civic life stems directly from the fact that

\* David Rusk has confirmed this point statistically in his book *Cities Without Suburbs*. But the focus on keeping all revenue within the municipal boundary still begs the question of how long an urban organism can sustain itself as it sprawls inefficiently outward while abandoning its own center. David Petersen of Price Waterhouse has gone one step further and demonstrated that a sustainable urban area requires a critical mass of residential, shopping, and entertainment uses within one mile of the downtown (David Petersen, "Smart Growth for Center Cities," 51).

very few people can get there without their cars. It is virtually impossible to generate urban density under the tyranny of today's excessive roadway and parking requirements. Between one third and one half of urban America's land is typically dedicated to the driving and parking of vehicles. In Los Angeles, that ratio jumps to two thirds. Houston provides the equivalent of 30 asphalt parking spaces per resident.<sup>1</sup> The suburban-scale carscape that constitutes the vast majority of downtown Phoenix is the inevitable outcome of the fact that its suburbs cannot efficiently accommodate transit. The same shortcoming is also why, when one asks to see the social center of Houston, one is taken to a mall.

As we've already made clear, the only urban form that efficiently accommodates mass transit is the neighborhood, with its mixed-use center and its five-minute-walk radius. Only within a neighborhood structure will residents readily walk to a bus stop or tram station. The sole alternative to neighborhood-based transit is the park-and-ride, which could bring suburbanites into the city on transit, if it only worked. Unfortunately, park-and-ride is just another way of saying "intermodal shift"—switching from one form of transportation to another. This is a transit engineering bugaboo, since most commuters, once they've settled into the driver's seat, will tend to cruise all the way to their final destination. If transit is to work, its users must start as pedestrians. While park-and-ride has been effective along old established rail corridors such as Philadelphia's Main Line and the Long Island Railroad, it has not had much success

<sup>1</sup> This may not last, as a nascent back-to-the-city movement could soon give Houston a downtown that can compete against its fabled Galleria. Interestingly, unlike in most East Coast cities, in Houston the urban settlers are less brash pioneers than disgruntled suburbanites who have given up on a failed freeway system. The recent huge investment in downtown housing should improve this situation quickly.

elsewhere. If driving and parking downtown are anything other than a nuisance, park-and-ride will never be a popular alternative.

Besides placing transit stops within walking distance of most houses, how can suburbs contribute to the well-being of a city? The first step must be to acknowledge that the two are interdependent. An entire discipline called *regional planning*—about which very much is known and very little is put into practice—has emerged to address this reality. The few cities that have begun to plan regionally, such as Portland, Oregon, are already becoming popular relocation destinations.

Regional planning manages urban growth at the scale of people's daily lives. Planning at the scale of a single town or city is rarely effective, because working and shopping patterns routinely take most people across municipal lines. What good is it for a New England village to outlaw Wal-Mart to save its main street when the suburb down the highway welcomes it with open arms? Any municipality that tries to limit sprawl typically risks the loss of its tax base to surrounding towns. Only at the regional scale can planning have a meaningful impact.

The absence of regional vision plagues neighborhood-oriented planners, especially in sprawling cities like Atlanta. They move heaven and earth to secure dozens of zoning variances and rewrite the engineering regulations, all in order to build walkable mixed-use neighborhoods. Yet, even with the improved lifestyle offered by these communities, it is impossible to go anywhere else without a car. Only when these neighborhoods are linked to a regional transit system will the broader world become truly accessible. Meanwhile, all of the surrounding subdivisions are designed in a way that makes public transit too expensive to provide.

The difficulty in establishing a regional planning authority derives primarily from the fact that few municipal bodies exist at the regional scale. Cities are too small, states are too big, and county lines are ignored under the creep of sprawl. Of the few significant regional planning authorities, most were put together to address single problems—environmental crises, usually—that are only incidentally of regional concern. For example, the South Florida Water Management District, organized to preserve the Everglades, is the only authority with a jurisdiction large enough to plan the megalopolis that stretches from Palm Beach past Miami. Similarly, metropolitan Los Angeles is fighting air pollution at the regional level through the Southern California Association of Governments. Where such organizations can be found, they have come to recognize their relevance beyond their original mandate and have joined the battle against sprawl. But there are few of them, and there is little demand for more.

At the federal level, it is generally understood that municipalities are interdependent with regard to a few obvious issues like transportation, which is why there is a new regional Metropolitan Planning Organization to coordinate transportation funding. But regional-scale social and economic problems are less quantifiable and have yet to receive recognition, let alone resources. And the idea of establishing an additional layer of government within the federal/state/county/town hierarchy is hardly popular.<sup>•</sup>

<sup>•</sup> Less formal versions of regional consolidation may be easier to institute, such as the New York Regional Planning Association, an influential nonprofit agency established in 1929 to provide more coordinated growth across the political boundaries of the Tri-State area. The RPA continues to evolve in its guidance; one of its most recent initiatives is the promotion of suburban-ring transit connections. One indication of how difficult formal regional planning can be is Kansas City Mayor Emmanuel Cleaver's recent

Regional planning is also made more difficult because, by definition, it often runs up against local issues. The best plans are usually degraded by the short-term concerns of local residents and business interests. For example, there is a highly visible civic initiative in South Florida called *Eastward Ho!*, which encourages urban infill projects to counter the area's westward sprawl into the Everglades. In response to that initiative, in one city in one year, twenty-seven separate projects were proposed by developers, all bucking the tide and trying to do the right thing. Of those, not a single one was approved, thanks to a local government unwilling to stand up to a few noisy neighbors. Twenty-seven well-intentioned developers wasted a full year, and are now convinced that doing the right thing does not pay.

Another example: In 1985, Miami built its elevated Metro-Rail transit system at a cost of \$1.3 billion. Visitors often ask why it serves neither Miami International Airport nor Miami Beach, two of the city's most common destinations. It turns out that Metro-Rail's ultimate trajectory was strongly influenced by the city's taxi lobby, which had everything to gain from making the transit system as useless as possible. Obviously, effective regional planning is not possible in the absence of effective regional political leadership.

Given the difficulty of implementation, it is of some comfort that at least the principles of regional planning are straightforward. Their primary purpose is to organize the growth of metropolitan areas on behalf of environmental health, social equity, and eco-

---

signing of what has been called a "Non-Aggression Treaty" with his surrounding suburban governments. Of course, even the smallest first step toward regional-scale thinking deserves commendation.

conomic sustainability. Recognizing that it sounds easier than it really is, we present below an eight-step process for Regional Planning, admittedly in its ideal form.

### THE EIGHT STEPS OF REGIONAL PLANNING

*1. Admit that growth will occur.* The first step of any recovery program is to acknowledge that a problem exists. In regional planning as well, it is a form of denial to presume that urban expansion can be stopped. No-growth movements, when successful, last for only one or two political generations, and often serve as an excuse to avoid planning entirely. When they are eventually reversed, as they inevitably are, growth quickly resumes in its worst form.

The reasons behind this common sequence of events are economic. Growth moratoriums eventually create such a scarcity of real estate that prices become severely inflated. Meanwhile, the potential profit to be made on new development grows so high that the building industry is motivated to mount a huge lobbying effort, which seems justified by the housing shortage. Such political pressure is difficult for public servants to ignore.

Acknowledging the inevitability of growth leads to a further admission, that growth is a problem whose solution must be shared by multiple jurisdictions. Metropolitan growth nowadays is typically accompanied by the loss of population, jobs, and tax income in the core city. The social inequity that results from separating new development from old deterioration can be addressed only by governments working in concert. Since governments prefer absolute political autonomy, there is little motivation for them to do so.

*2. Establish a permanent Countryside Preserve.* One of the most disastrous consequences of sprawl is the way that it consumes the farmlands and wilderness surrounding populated areas. Cities and towns that were once able to satisfy their food needs locally no longer can; indeed, a brief breakdown in our transportation infrastructure would quickly demonstrate how far we have drifted from self-sufficiency. Similarly, most American cities once provided their citizens with easy access to nature, but ever-greater efforts are becoming necessary to escape the urban envelope. In his books of near-future science fiction, William Gibson refers to BAMA, the Boston–Atlanta Metropolitan Axis, an uninterrupted carpet of sprawl. Trends suggest that such an outcome is quite possible.

The preferred technique for preserving countryside is the Urban Growth Boundary: a line defining the edge of the metropolis, most famously employed in Portland, Oregon. While these boundaries have sometimes proved effective, they are rarely a long-term solution. Political pressure forces them outward eventually—even Portland's lauded boundary faces constant legislative challenges.\* A more realistic technique is the Countryside Preserve, which sets aside multiple parcels of conservation land independent of their relationship to the center city. Unlike the Urban Growth Boundary, the Countryside Preserve is drawn using objective environmental

\*Actually, Portland's growth boundary does not deserve to be accepted uncritically as an unqualified success. It was originally drawn not at the edge of urbanization but at a distance many miles out, anticipating and effectively sanctioning twenty years of bad growth. Currently, thanks to the removal of a highway, the introduction of light rail, and considerable wise investment, the downtown is indeed in excellent shape. But the growth boundary contains *within it* thousands of acres of the most mundane sprawl. And now that the edge has finally been reached, Portland's suburban developers—who have never been told “no” before and are thus particularly unruly—fight relentlessly for its expansion.

criteria, and therefore is not as susceptible to the development pressure straining against a typically arbitrary edge. It is effectively a rural boundary, drawn on the basis of criteria that can stand up in a court of law. Areas to be designated as permanent countryside include waterways and other wetlands, habitat for endangered species and communities of species, forests and large woodlots, steep slopes, cultural resources, scenic areas, view-sheds for highways, agricultural land,<sup>•</sup> and current and future parks. If at all possible, the Countryside Preserve should form continuous greenbelts to best accommodate wildlife mobility requirements. A Countryside Preserve line will probably end up looking different from an Urban Growth Boundary line, since it will be drawn according to the demands of the terrain. The environmentalist Benton MacKaye described such countryside preserves as "dams and levees for controlling the metropolitan flood,"<sup>2</sup> and argued that these green areas should penetrate deeply into the city to be integrated with its urban park system, as they do in Washington's Rock Creek Park.

3. *Establish a temporary Countryside Reserve.* Unlike the permanent countryside, the Countryside Reserve is available for future high-quality development, when such development is justified. It

<sup>•</sup> A gloomy discussion is currently making the rounds about how to preserve agricultural land in the face of development pressures. While it is said that we are approaching a population crisis in which the planet will fail to feed its inhabitants, fear of that crisis has yet to raise the value of farmland. It is fair to say that many American farmers in suburban locations are seriously considering the "developer sellout retirement plan." Since the loss of farmland to development is, for all practical purposes, permanent, it would seem wise to create a program for mothballing a certain percentage of this land until it becomes valued for its production capacity alone. Similarly, an acknowledgment of limited resources would recommend an approach to farmland distribution that allocates a minimum local agriculture reserve around each city, so that it can meet its food needs without excessive transportation or energy costs. This approach was plainly articulated by Ebenezer Howard over one hundred years ago.

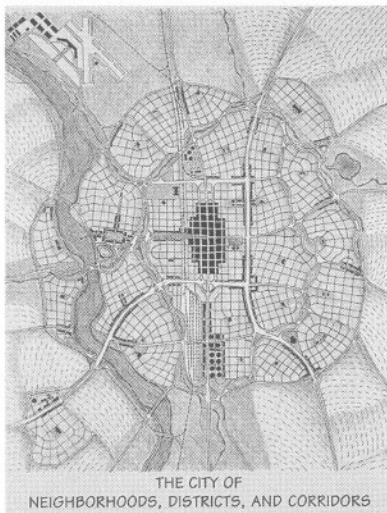
OOO  
WATER  
SORT, I'AM LATE

consists largely of fields, pastures, and small woodlots within easy reach of existing infrastructure. Reserving this land for high-quality development means compact communities based on the neighborhood model, not luxury houses on two-acre lots. Incredibly, many municipalities attempt to preserve open space by mandating large-lot development only, which of course only ensures that the landscape will disappear all the more quickly.

4. *Designate the Corridors.* Corridors are the regional-scale elements that serve both to connect and to separate different areas. They can be natural or man-made, and include waterways, wildlife corridors, continuous greenways for pedestrians and bicycles, parkways for cars and trucks, and rights-of-way for rail lines. Rail corridor designations are particularly significant, as they provide an opportunity for transit-based development, the ideal way to organize growth. Whenever possible, future development should be organized along a transit corridor, in the manner of our historic streetcar suburbs.

5. *Establish Priority Development Sectors,* and an incentive program that eases development within them. The obvious goal here is to counteract the existing government and market forces that make it less profitable for developers to work in the city ("urban infill") than on the rural "greenfield" fringe. Priority areas include, in order of preference: urban infill sites, suburban infill sites, existing and future rail stops, urban extensions adjacent to existing neighborhoods, and major roadway intersections. Ideally, approval agencies would accept development applications following this order. For example, any applications for urban extension should be put on hold until all applications for urban infill are processed.

6. *Establish a proactive permitting process for development that follows the neighborhood model,* such that developers proposing



*A healthy city as the basis for a healthy region: expansion occurs in the form of complete neighborhoods* (Drawing by Thomas E. Low, DPZ)

complete neighborhoods—or completions of existing neighborhoods—within the developable area are assigned a municipal regulator. This official, rather than creating bureaucratic friction, would be charged with walking the project through an accelerated process. Getting permits for neighborhoods must be understood to be considerably easier, quicker, more predictable than getting permits for sprawl. These neighborhoods must comply with an eligibility review based upon an objective instrument such as the Traditional Neighborhood Development Checklist, included in Appendix A. Or better yet, they should be permitted according to a new zoning ordinance specially written to encourage mixed-use neighborhoods, such as the Traditional Neighborhood Development Ordinance, discussed in the final chapter. This pro-neighborhood policy must apply to all sites, whether in a Priority Development Sector or in the temporary Countryside Reserve.

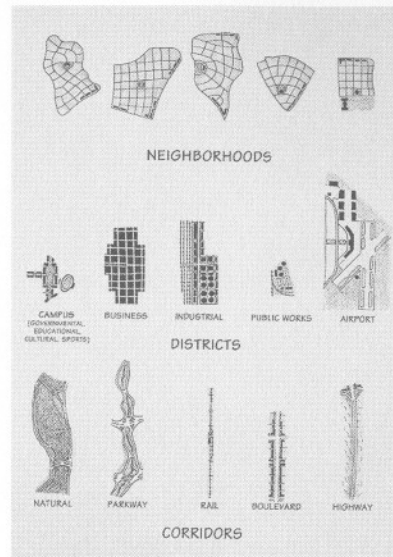
7. *Designate all other types of development as districts*, to be permitted only through a rigorous public process of documentation and justification. Districts are sectors where a single use dominates, typically because a thorough mix of uses is not practical. Acceptable districts focus on civic, medical, or educational campuses; large or noxious agricultural or industrial facilities; depots or terminals; and entertainment zones. Undesirable districts include the components of sprawl: housing subdivisions, shopping centers, and office parks; such unjustified single uses should ideally be prohibited, but designating them as districts would at least make them more difficult to develop than neighborhoods.

8. *Fairly distribute the Lulus*. Locally Undesirable Land Uses range from the dramatic (garbage dumps and power plants) to the mundane (the large high school made noxious by the traffic it gener-



ates). Affordable housing, homeless shelters, and other facilities serving the poor are often the most hotly contested of Lulus; everyone agrees that they are necessary, and they also agree where to put them: in *someone else's* neighborhood. Responsible regional planning recognizes that even the most privileged—especially the most privileged—must carry their fair share of community service facilities regardless of how unpopular they may be. Lulus must be distributed independent of the pressures of local politics, or they are likely to end up in the wrong places. For example, without a regional distribution mandate, affordable housing is typically rejected by middle-class neighborhoods, even though it is precisely in such neighborhoods that affordable housing has the best chances for success. Responsible regional planning is based on a foundation of spatial equity.

This eight-step program, unlike some of the wishful thinking currently being promulgated by anti-growth groups, accepts the realities of the American real estate business. The most practical—and popular—aspect of the program is that it encourages good development rather than attempting to outlaw all development, which is tantamount to political suicide in most jurisdictions. This process recognizes and capitalizes on the one resource readily available to bureaucracies: time. Because most permitting agencies have trained their local developers to wait months or even years for a permit—in a business in which time is money—they essentially have the opportunity to grant large monetary awards by offering quicker permitting to the appropriate projects. In such an environment, bad development need not be outlawed; it need only remain subject to the same



The components of a healthy region: neighborhoods, districts, and corridors (Drawing by Thomas E. Low, DPZ)

drawn-out process it currently follows, a process that becomes all the more painful in comparison to that which is available to neighborhood development.

Of the eight steps, the sixth one—encouraging the construction of true neighborhoods—is perhaps the most important. But it is also the most easily forgotten. In the absence of a neighborhood structure for new development, even the best planning efforts can be fruitless. Miami once again proves an instructive example. By any common measure of planning wisdom, the city has done a stellar job. It has had a single regional government (Miami-Dade County) since 1957. It has a consolidated school district serving the entire county, so that school quality will not cause relocations. It has an urban boundary that was drawn tight to the edge of existing growth in 1976. And it has a top-of-the-line regional transit system, including a downtown People-Mover tram, a complete bus network serving locations many miles away, and the already mentioned twenty-seven-stop elevated Metro-Rail.

Yet, by any common measure of planning success—environmental quality, social equity, or quality of life—Miami is far from where it should be. One need not marshal statistics to support this assertion; a single afternoon driving in the city's western suburbs will convince anyone. What is missing in the Miami plan is neighborhoods: the organization of growth into mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, transit-ready communities. Without neighborhoods, the city could double its rail service and still not lessen its harsh traffic.

While the above eight-step program is open to dispute, the fundamentals are well accepted. As growing pains become severe, the problem lies not just in agreeing on a course of action but in developing the regional-scale coordination necessary to implement it. The will to do so seems to be mounting, thanks to some well-

publicized examples, both good and bad. Cities are looking with envy at the success of Portland's regional plan, and with fear at Atlanta, where decades of laissez-faire construction have led to a traffic and air-quality crisis. Indeed, Atlanta recently created a regional transportation authority to confront this crisis, proof that regional planning cannot be avoided, only postponed.\*

It is wise to be suspicious of any solution that implies *more government*, but this is not one of them. Regional governance can best be achieved not by adding more bureaucracy but by redistributing existing responsibilities.† Those towns and cities that are reluctant to think regionally would be wise to consider how many of their problems, from crime to traffic, are generated from outside their municipal boundaries. These problems will never be solved in the absence of regional coordination.

#### THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT AS A MODEL

While bemoaning the current confusion surrounding the American landscape, we take some solace from the words of Winston Churchill: "The American people can be counted on to do the right thing, after

\* On the day of this writing, the Atlanta government has advised all of the city's residents—not just asthmatics—to stay indoors because of a severe air-quality crisis.

† The regional-scale issues of environmental conservation and restoration, transportation, social services, affordable housing, the location of Lulus, and economic development, to name a few, should be managed by a single regional jurisdiction, or by existing regional agencies working in close coordination. Meanwhile, middle-scale issues such as local planning and zoning, policing, and maintenance should remain in the hands of municipal government, while local issues such as community enhancement and redevelopment, quality of life, and tourism should be attended to by neighborhood organizations. This redistribution recognizes that the success of governance at every scale depends on the assignment of responsibilities to the smallest jurisdiction that can handle it comprehensively.



The natural habitat: after only twenty years, near the top of the political agenda

they have exhausted all the alternatives.” Indeed, this country has shown an uncanny affinity for self-correction, and it seems reasonable to expect that this ability will eventually make itself felt in the design of the built environment. Still in question is how long this will take, but there are reasons to be hopeful.

In 1962, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, sparking the environmental movement. Less than two decades later, the Environmental Protection Agency had become the largest regulatory body in the United States government. Environmental consultants now take a prominent place at the table in planning sessions, equal in stature to traffic engineers and fire chiefs. A typical large project in Florida has to secure approval from six overlapping agencies on the subject of wetlands alone. While such drawn-out processes can be a nightmare, we are encouraged by the speed with which America has placed the environmental movement near the top of its political agenda.

While environmentalists had to overcome centuries of misunderstanding of the natural world, the urbanists' task is not so daunting. After an aberrant period of only fifty years, America should not find it particularly difficult to return to its tradition of community-making. Many Americans still live in real neighborhoods, and even more remember them vividly from childhood. Here, unlike environmentalism, no sacrifices are necessary—no shorter showers, no sorting through rubbish—only a willingness to lead a more varied and convenient life, in the kind of urban environment that has successfully housed the human species without interruption for thousands of years.

Environmentalists are beginning to understand the compatibility of these two agendas. Now that they have achieved some signifi-



The human habitat: also in dire need of protection

cant victories in the protection of flora and fauna, they are extending their purview a bit higher up the food chain, to the protection and projection of the traditional human habitat: the neighborhood. Environmentalists have already begun to mount an attack against sprawl, as they recognize the dangers posed to farms and forests by low-density, automobile-oriented growth. The Sierra Club has launched an official anti-sprawl campaign, producing such publications as *Sprawl Costs Us All: How uncontrolled sprawl increases your property taxes and threatens your quality of life*. As *The New York Times* put it, "Sprawl, in sum, is the new language of environmentalism."<sup>3</sup> Of course, environmentalists have always been concerned with the survival of the human species, but only lately have they recognized that the neighborhood itself is a part of the ecosystem, an organic outgrowth of human needs. If all the energy and goodwill of the environmental movement can now be applied within the urban boundary, the results will be dramatic.