

Neighborhood Planning Studio

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Question 1: What factors are driving the housing development described in the New York Times article?

The housing developments described in the New York Times article are being driven primarily by the prevailing western mode of corporatist capitalist production. The Toll Brothers and other publicly traded housing developers are entering into the vicious cycle of aggressive, corporate, capitalist behavior, of which society can draw parallels of the replication of this phenomenon across all industries from retail to technology, to the control of global water sources and food supplies. These companies consume, accumulate, and grow thus aggrandizing their capital holdings at an exorbitant rate; their expansion is supported by the destruction of the natural environment, social structures, small economic rivals, and basic community sustainability. The sheer existence of these large-scale, monolithic yet vague and confusing corporate structures depends upon the deterioration of local economies, person-to-person interactions, and relationships that exist on a more human scale.

These housing developers treat the environment, "ground", as a mere hot commodity that must be snapped up at once, hoarded, and protected from encroachment by the competition. The nature of capitalism is competitive, thus ensuring one's own survival (the survival of the corporation) translates into the destruction of the competition, achieved through complete annihilation (bankruptcy) or acquisition (annexation/absorption). So is the case with these housing developers. They are operating on a scale in which humanity, harmony, and true wealth are sacrificed in the face of immediate profits. By this I am referring to harmonizing with the environment and ecological systems in which the housing constructions share physical "place". True wealth might be conceived of, or conceptualized as, living in a manner that is on a human scale, in which water sources are not polluted by chemical particulates and traffic runoff imposed as a byproduct of sprawl and consumption of "ground". Additionally, the housing market is likely inflated by the purchase, rapid appreciation, and resale of these homes. The huge profits made by the sellers are then re-invested into more expensive housing, and the cycle is repeated again. This is a false economy. Nothing is being produced or sold, it's just Americans surfing on credit, buying, buying, buying, and increasing their debt.

Question 2: How can development be controlled in order to accomplish coherent metropolitan development?

Upon completing the Kevin Lynch article, I must respond to this question by asking if there is such a thing as coherent metropolitan development. The Lynch article, while describing, analyzing, and identifying the various elements that compose an image of the city, left much to be unresolved. Ultimately, the impression I drew from his presentation was that individual experience and subjectivity were key factors at play. He did identify several critical themes, such as paths and nodes, districts, edges, and landmarks. However, for each example Lynch presented, he seemed to present a counter example that was equally as sound, even though opposite. I'm not sure if coherent metropolitan development has ever been achieved, even though it is indisputable that some areas obviously function better than other areas for numerous reasons.

In the context of controlling development to achieve coherent metropolitan development, zoning and regulatory controls that were imposed in the past are now the formula for creating sprawl. The policies, principles, and regulations that seem appropriate today might indeed be the downfall of tomorrow. Transportation seems to be a key in the equation, considering Lynch's analysis of paths, nodes, boundaries, etc... It is no secret that development follows transportation routes. New Urbanist principles of higher density and mixed use development in traditional street grids with nodes of activity and commercial use seem to be a starting point toward controlling development. However, when considering New Urbanism, it is important to note that these developments are driven by a commonly accepted shared set of principles, which can be altered and allow room for flexibility. Zoning, policy, and regulation might prevent the necessary adjustment of practice through lessons learned. However, the lack of top down control and unchecked growth can also be detrimental. Ultimately, I am lead to the conclusion that it is through education, intentionality, and constant analysis of developments and change that we can progress. Even so, who is to say that 100 years from now, no matter how much effort we go to, that the future generations will not look back at our decisions and balk at our inability to anticipate and accommodate the realities of their daily existences?