

Growth experts push new zoning to spark aesthetic renaissance

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SAN DIEGO – For nearly 60 years, Americans have eagerly traded their Main Streets, front porches and walkable old neighborhoods for lookalike suburban homes, multi-car garages and colossal freeway shopping centers with acres of parking.

Now, arguing that the nation lost its aesthetic soul in the process, a small cadre of experts is mounting an attack on the rules that govern Sunday's development and drive what's commonly called "sprawl." They're proposing one of growth's most curious reforms in decades: new "smart codes" to restore an era when less regulated builders created countless towns and cities such as Santa Barbara and Charleston, S.C., all now beloved by tourists.

This emerging idea of new rules to spark a market-driven renaissance of older time-tested growth patterns has gained its biggest following in California, Florida and New York, and is being widely considered in fast-growing Virginia.

In California, the Sonoma County town of Petaluma became the nation's first city last July to toss out its old zoning ordinances and adopt a "SmartCode" for 400 acres of old grain elevators and warehouses near its downtown. Now, after seven years of war politics between citizens, developers and environmentalists, a new theater district has begun construction under codes that focus less on preventing a variety of uses and more on approving mutually agreed-upon visions.

Architects, planning consultants and city officials meeting in San Diego this week said a century's accumulation of zoning laws meant originally to separate factories and meatpacking plants from homes have made many of the nation's favorite postcard cities impossible to build today. Across two days, 150 delegates from 21 states and as far as Guatemala City, Guatemala, considered an overthrow of conventional zoning that in most growth areas requires rigid separation of stores, offices and homes – and even \$300,000 homes, they said, from \$200,000 homes.

As a largely Baby Boom-era group that has formulated these ideas for more than a decade, some members said the goal is no less than to eventually reinvent growth in up to 80 percent of the nation's suburbs. They also want to take on the environmental movement, saying its "embedded" defense of animals and nature over even dense urban human habitats is "preventing the building of cities" and becoming a key driving force of suburban sprawl.

"I wake up upset that we can't build Charleston again because of environmental laws," said Andres Duany, the Florida architect who helped design Seaside, Fla., the quaint small-town setting for the movie, "The Truman Show." Duany said environmentalists today would never allow the building of downtown San Diego, nor the most densely populated parts of Boston, because both are on wetlands. The same is true, he said, for other cities that have piped over waterways or, like Paris, banked rivers.

"This is a crisis in environmental law," Duany said. "The beloved places that environmentalists love can't be built."

These arguments come as more Americans now live in suburbs than cities, and continue to make them the fastest-growing parts of the country, consuming 50,000 acres of irrigated farmland every year in California alone. They also come as notions to scrap conventional zoning meets resistance among planners, builders and political officials accustomed to today's rules and unfamiliar with older styles of growth.

"There's been an amnesia since 1945 about how to do things this way," said Rick Hall, a Colorado-based traffic engineer who advocates narrower streets to calm suburban traffic and encourage walkers.

While Duany and others don't propose to stop suburban growth, they said it has vast room for improved design. They want it to become less of a "monoculture" and more like American towns before World War II with a mix of incomes, housing styles and town centers reachable on foot. Their vision is generally called "new urbanism."

Duany's "SmartCode" greatly simplifies zoning practices by which local governments determine a particular use for each piece of land and add long lists of what can and can't be done on it. SmartCode proponents argue that modern zoning stifles innovation, prevents an old-fashioned mixing of stores, homes and workplaces and freezes suburbs exactly as they are born rather than letting them evolve as older cities do.

In place of zoning's statistical emphasis and long lists of do's and don'ts, the new codes rely more on pictures and older building patterns that have evolved over centuries. In short, said Santa Rosa, Calif., planning consultant Laura Hall, it helps people see more clearly what they're getting.

"It's setting a new common language among planners," said Hall, who introduced the idea to nearby Petaluma and has seen interest in other cities in California, including Cotati, Santa Rosa, Hercules and Azusa.

While still far from a common idea nationally, varying versions of the new codes have taken root in Florida's Sarasota and Hillsborough counties and Onondaga County, N.Y. A first conference on the topic last autumn in Maryland also drew dozens of architects, builders and city officials. But Vicksburg, Miss., also recently balked at a proposed new code while on the very verge of passing it, proving the uphill struggle of establishing a new idea against the familiar.

Duany called it a "long march" and said every new trial provides another model to compare with growth's conventional wisdom. "This is about leveling the playing field," he said, "so the market will decide."