

**American Planning in the Context of Sustainable Planning Paradigms**

*Does America Deserve the Blame?*

## Working Paper 201

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It is the author's desire that the information contained herein be publically available and accessible as an educational aid. Every reasonable effort has been made to conduct scholarly research and present relevant findings in a meaningful and unbiased way.

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## **American Planning in the Context of Sustainable Planning Paradigms**

We are often told how wasteful and un-sustainable<sup>1</sup> American cities and lifestyles are compared to the rest of the world. Americans use six times the average energy per capita and drive personal autos 3 to 5 times as much as Europeans and Asians (9/15/08). There are many studies and statistics to indicate that America consumes more resources and contributes more to environmental decay than other countries, and this paper has no intention to refute these. Yes: America needs to change its ways. But there are significant political and economical complexities involved in such change which must be aligned if we as a country are to achieve sustainable existence.

The goal of this paper is to show that successful sustainable planning paradigms do not contradict economic principles or require a net “sacrifice” on the part of the individuals involved. In other words, while sustainable planning is good for the entire earth, in the places where it has been most successful it has always been aligned with other political interests. This can be seen in the cases of Singapore, the Netherlands, Portland, and Harvard’s Allston development, as well as in the Clean Air policies of the 1970s.

When people talk of global warming and the need for all of us to be “more sustainable,” it usually boils down to a demand on each individual to pay a price for the sake of the greater good of humanity. If each of us will learn to drive less, consume less,

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “sustainable” synonymously with “green” and “environmentally-friendly” to denote a way of living that is harmonious with nature and could theoretically be sustained perpetually. It is *NOT* entirely synonymous with “smart growth” or other planning initiatives which entails social/economic considerations in addition to environmental ones.

and perhaps pay a premium for natural energy and natural produce, then as a society we will be able to continue enjoying our earth in the decades to come. Though these requests may seem reasonable to many of us who voluntarily adhere to them, they contradict human nature and the principles of capitalism upon which America was founded. Generally speaking, people seek their own betterment and make decisions based on personal cost/benefit evaluations. The thought that one should *voluntarily* forego luxuries and resources that he/she is otherwise able to enjoy—for the sake of someone else—is not entirely rational. After all, what is wealth if not the entitlement to more than one's fair share of resources and privileges?

Those who claim that Americans are selfish and wasteful of energy are not wrong to do so. American cities and lifestyles do need to change. But as long as such change is contradictory to capitalism or personal cost/benefit analyses, how can Americans be expected to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of the rest of the world? Have any other countries or communities done the same? It is true that other countries are indeed more sustainable than America. But as this paper will illustrate, they became that way due to social/political/economic constraints and self-interested pursuits—not out of concern for the earth or self-sacrifice for the greater good.

## **Singapore**

Singapore is perhaps the best example of bold, successful sustainable planning. What Singapore has accomplished is impressive, and surely benefits the whole earth (environmentally speaking). But the reason Singapore chose to pursue strict environmental planning was not for the sake of the earth so much as for the sake of its own betterment.

The key to Singapore's success is that it was able to find a synergy between environmental policy and economic success (11/26). Whereas strong, integrated planning is often considered to be mutually exclusive with robust capitalism, Singapore was able to align economic and environmental interests. By taking care of the environment, Singapore was taking care of itself—of its people, its places, and its economy. Since 1960, Singapore has had the highest rate of real economic growth in the world (7.8 percent/year), and is now the richest tropical country in the world (11/26). When investors and multi-national companies visit Singapore, the beautiful environment and well-planned city encourages them to establish branches and invest money in Singapore. By establishing strict regulations related to public cleansing, street vendors, and disease vectors, the government has been able to minimize the spread of disease (Leitmann 4) so that the country now has the lowest mortality rate in the world for children under 5 and an average life expectancy of 80.6 years (11/26). For Singapore, sustainability is not a sacrifice for the sake of the planet, but a smart choice with real benefits.

In comparing Singapore's situation with that of the U.S., it is important to note certain political and geographical differences that make environmental consciousness a natural choice for Singapore. For one, unlike the U.S., Singapore has a tiny land area

(647 sq. km., approximately five times the size of Boston, excluding water). It has no choice but to plan efficiently (Hean 51). There is no land to waste, or even land to *put* waste. Comprehensive planning is critical in order to accommodate all the necessary city elements, and to minimize waste in order to save on exorbitant costs for exporting/dumping waste (Leitman 14; Hee 55) and to avoid infectious diseases from untreated refuse in Singapore's tropical climate (Hee 54). The fact that Singapore is small also necessitates dense development, which makes public transit feasible. Since the government provides most of the housing and controls all vacant land, it can build whatever it deems suitable and can coordinate housing developments with infrastructure development and specific planning objectives. This is a dream of planners in the U.S., but is politically impossible.

Another striking advantage is that Singapore has had fifty years of one-party rule. Whereas in the U.S. politicians have to act in a way that will ensure re-election and will produce immediately visible results, leaders in Singapore are not under these constraints and can afford to think long-term. The ability to plan long-term and to sustain momentum over decades—as opposed to 2 to 6 year terms in the U.S.—is no small advantage. As can be seen with the Clean Air policies of the 1970s, it is almost impossible to sustain endeavors over many years and multiple parties, even when they are written into law (11/12). Without continued support (which is highly improbable on controversial issues such as environmentalism), long-term visions die.

The fact that Singapore is small enough to be controlled by a centrally-organized government has also proven critical to their success (Leitman 5). In the U.S., even if one party (or one vision) could be sustained for decades at the Federal level, the decentralized

and fragmented nature of our government would frustrate the nation from being able to take major steps in one direction. The Constitution was written before globalization and global warming were concerns, and intentionally limited the power of the Federal government for fear of tyranny (9/19). With 89,500 local governments in the U.S. and most land held at the local level by local governments and private individuals, it is extremely difficult to institute change in the U.S. without the *continual* consensus of the majority.

Finally, the fact that Singapore is not a major auto producer, and that it imports its oil enables the government to severely limit auto use and to tax automobiles and gas severely. For the U.S., whose economy in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very much based on oil and auto production, such constraints on auto use would never have been politically possible. Even if the government could have limited auto use and ownership, this would have been contradictory to the economic interests of the country. (The situation today with auto manufacturers being “bailed out” by our President and our public tax dollars is telling.) American cities were designed to take advantage of the automobiles and oil we were producing, and the vast expanses of cheap undeveloped (and largely unregulated) land available. If America were just developing today in the wake of environmental concern, things would probably be much different.

## **The Netherlands**

Like Singapore, the Netherlands is also known for strong planning, and shares several fundamental commonalities with Singapore. It has always been limited by land area, and being small, is substantially governed at the national level (Metz, 12/1). Unlike the U.S., which was constituted of relatively independent states with little motivation to work together until the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the World Wars, the Great Depression, Medicare/welfare, etc.), the Dutch have always had to cooperate to protect their land and to reclaim it from the water (12/1). High taxes have long been a part of life.

Dutch planning evolved as a corporate response to the tenuous relationship between land and water, which could not be solved by individuals alone (12/1). Though perhaps not related to global warming, the Netherlands is a perfect example of citizens cooperating to protect the environment—much like today’s environmentalists advocate. However, their actions were not for the sake of the environment itself, but for their own interests. What is telling is how this strong planning paradigm is now breaking down as wealth increases and tension grows between prosperity and planning principles (12/1). This phenomenon reinforces the idea that strong sustainable planning only survives as long as it aligns with economic forces and majority benefit. As soon as the costs outweigh the individual benefits, the planning system finds itself in jeopardy. In addition, without large projects to complete, people have become less supportive and more divided (12/1). With increased wealth there are also more cars, which compromise the carefully and environmentally planned cities. It seems that now individual benefits are being enjoyed at the expense of the collective good in the Netherlands, much like the situation in the U.S.



## **Portland, Oregon**

Portland is often considered to be the model for sustainable city planning in the U.S. There are many excellent analyses and articles about the pros and cons of Portland's strong planning. The point of this paper is not to reiterate the discussion, but to point out that—just as with Singapore and the Netherlands—Oregon's sustainable planning initiatives were established in self-interest. Portland was not sacrificing itself for the sake of the environment, but was following its residents' best interests in creating a restricted but pleasant living environment with many benefits. There are several bases for this claim.

First, the planning measures that were put in place by the government were not forced upon the residents of Oregon by the government, but were a response to popular demand (Abbott 196, 206). The fact that the planning system and Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) lasted for thirty years without interruption is a significant testimony to its widespread support. If the people of Oregon did not consider the benefits of the planning restrictions sufficient, Measure 37 would have come much sooner. Even when the Measure 37 backlash did occur in 2004, it was only four years before the majority of Oregon's residents responded with Measure 49 to reinstate the strong planning principles which had been taken away (Flint 172; Lowry 9). As it is, Portland is considered a "legendary paradise" (Leo 366), a "demonstration that Americans can change the way they build their cities" (Abbott 198).

It is important to note that Portland's economy is not suffering as a result of its strict planning. Some individuals may have been harmed, but overall the city and the residents seem to have benefited from the measures. Most of the studies convey a strong

admiration of Portland's planning principles by its residents, and appreciation for its beauty, public transit, walkability, and sustainability.

### **Harvard's Allston Development**

Harvard is not just teaching about sustainability; it is also trying to develop sustainable buildings. The university has voluntarily agreed (at the state's suggestion) to cut emissions significantly below the national standard requirements for its new science complex (Barringer n.p.), and to obtain a minimum of LEED Gold certification on all of its Allston development (Spiegelman, 12/8). (Allston is a 250-acre expansion Harvard has recently initiated, across the river from the original campus.) These are not insignificant promises, and arguably imply certain upfront costs (as much as Harvard may deny this). One might claim that Harvard is willing to pay these costs in order to "practice what it preaches," or that the university is truly dedicated to environmental preservation. But when one considers the political benefits involved, it appears that Harvard too is acting in its own best interests and reaping net benefits for choosing sustainable designs.

As a private university, Harvard is essentially a business which must attract customers and investment. Branding is critical. In recent years, Harvard's medical programs have been falling behind schools such as Stanford and MIT. On the one hand, the new Allston campus will provide the facilities to bring together Harvard's currently fragmented "fiefdoms" and revolutionize the way Harvard does scientific research (Lawler n.p.). Not only will Harvard have expensive new facilities to attract and accommodate students; it will also be able to boast of having the most sustainable

facilities in the U.S., and of being a cutting-edge school that really cares about the environment. What better way to market oneself as a progressive, high-tech, globally-conscious university than to invest in high-profile sustainable buildings designed by European architects? This is not only to help Harvard attract top students, but to attract government/industry investments as well. Considering that research grants for top universities can exceed \$1 billion per year, and that Harvard is missing out on much of this (Lawler n.p.), it seems that the premium cost for sustainable design is justified. The fact that Harvard will own and occupy these buildings for many decades means that it can recoup the upfront costs by virtue of long-term energy savings, unlike most private developers who build for immediate sale.

Not only does Harvard benefit from being a green pioneer; the city of Boston benefits as well. Boston shares in being seen as a progressive, globally-conscious city, and can use Harvard as a precedent for all future developments. Because Harvard is involved in a long-term relationship with the City and the Allston community—and because its development of institutional uses is not as-of-right—it is important that Harvard keep the City and the community happy. Especially when starting on a 50-year, 250-acre (8.1 to 9.0 million s.f.) development, it helps to reassure the community that what is being developed is being done responsibly (Slack n.p.). Surely Harvard will be required to provide many additional public benefits, but strong voluntary commitment to the environment is a politically suave first step. It is great for generating positive press coverage, which has many benefits. As Kathy Spiegelman warned, whether or not the press gives facts or lies, it is the means by which most citizens and elected officials learn

about situations and form personal opinions. The importance of good press can never be overstated.

Positive press may improve public relations, but it does not solve the internal conflicts Harvard faces. Harvard may have a lot of money and power, but it also has a lot of stakeholders and independent thinkers. There are many points of internal contention, including how the new campus should look and what style the buildings should be. Architects and some faculty/students want radical (i.e., contemporary) buildings; donors, alumni, and many students prefer traditional (i.e., neo-Georgian) buildings (Spiegelman 12/8). In the case of the new science center, advocates successfully “played the sustainability card” as a concept strong enough to justify a contemporary, non-brick building (12/8). The fact that sustainability could be leveraged to overthrow internal opposition is a political benefit worthy of note.

Finally, it is important to step back and consider what “smart growth” or sustainable planning really means when a developer proposes it. Architecturally speaking, it may mean more expensive buildings—a bad thing. But to a city or community, it certainly sounds good and carries all the positive connotations of earth-friendliness and responsible development. Ironically, in the end “sustainable planning” can be a euphemism for increased density and increased height. Calling for increased height or density is sure to engender community resistance. But calling for environmentally-friendly development is much the same thing, with less resistance. What developer would not want increased height/density allowances? It makes the land worth more. If the developer can classify these “evils” as a necessary part of planning responsibly in this age of global warming, then sustainable planning has become a

profitable enterprise. Profit—not sacrifice for the earth and the greater good—drives the decision.

## **Conclusion**

There is much more that could be said about Harvard, Portland, or any of the other examples of successful sustainable planning—but the point is hopefully made. In each of these cases, taking care of the earth was not the result of sacrifice. Rather, it was the by-product of enlightened self-interest. Environmental considerations were aligned with economic forces and resulted in net benefits for the localities/parties involved. The models did not rely on voluntary sacrifice or abstinence from privilege. This is what sustainable planning must become if it is to survive politically so that it may revolutionize American cities and American ways.

## **References**

*Note: For legal and protective reasons, the references have been removed.*