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Wednesday, Dec. 19, 2007

## How Green is Your Neighborhood?

By Bryan Walsh

Technology has gotten us into the climate change mess, and we assume that technology will get us out of it. Hybrid cars, wind turbines, algae biofuel — businesses and policymakers alike are searching for the technological fixes that will decarbonize our lives. But the deeper problem may be how — and where — we live our lives. The dominant pattern of development in America — large houses and sprawling, auto-dependent suburbs — requires a heavy input of fossil fuels and an output of carbon emissions. The adoption of cleaner technologies will take us part of the way, but what we really need to do is change our habitat, not just for the environmental benefits, but for our health, lifestyle and happiness.

Andrés Duany is writing the blueprint for a greener human habitat. The Miami-based architect is the co-founder, with his wife Elizabeth Plater-Zybek, of the firm DPZ, and over the years he's become a leader in what's called New Urbanism. It's a philosophy of design that tackles not so much buildings themselves as the entire built environment. Duany and his peers in New Urbanism want to stem suburban sprawl in favor of medium-density towns and neighborhoods where houses, offices, shopping and leisure activities would all be within a walkable space. The automobile — which is responsible for a significant portion of most Americans' individual carbon footprint — would become an option, not a lifeline. "This goes beyond simply having cars that will pollute less, like hybrids," says Duany, a voluble 58-year-old who grew up in Cuba before moving to the U.S. in 1960. "It means not having to drive." (Hear Duany talk about New Urbanism on [this week's Greencast](#).)

For most Americans outside a handful of urban areas, not driving is not an option. But auto addiction takes a hidden toll. There's health: The average American walks as little as four minutes a day, in part because little is within walking distance. That sedentariness has contributed to the rise in obesity over recent decades. Next is the theft of time: More driving means more hours in the car, especially with traffic worsening. The population of extreme commuters — those who travel 90 minutes or more each

way — has hit 3.5 million, double the number in 1990. But the worst effects — the ones that affect us all — are environmental. As long as the car is central to the American lifestyle — one we're in the process of exporting to developing countries like China — making the necessary, drastic cuts in carbon emissions will be very difficult. "What is causing global warming is the lifestyle of the American middle class," says Duany. "It's terrible for nature and for humans."

The miracle of New Urbanism is its simplicity. Duany has designed whole towns under the movement's principles — like Seaside, Fla., or Kentlands, Md. — and to walk their streets is to be transported back decades, before McMansions and SUVs. Houses are more human-sized, in part because the designs create vibrant, walkable public spaces, where people can eat, work and have fun. The explosion of the American house — up from 1,385 sq. ft. on average in 1972 to 2,140 sq. ft. in 2000, while the average number of people living in it has decreased — is, in Duany's view, a consequence of our practice of virtually eliminating the public space outside of major urban areas. "What has blown up the McMansions is the lack of community," says Duany. "We need to externalize those social needs, rather than privatizing them."

It's important to note that New Urbanism is different from green building, that other environmental trend that's never far from the news. For better or worse, environmental design has come to be defined by the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Design (LEED) ratings. A point system, LEED rewards technological fixes like rooftop solar panels or energy-efficient insulation. That's great, and there are enormous energy savings that can be achieved with basic improvements in building design, but the LEED system doesn't take into account the context of a building — where it is. A design could win a Platinum LEED rating — the highest possible award — but it can't really be described as environmentally friendly if it's part of a sprawling neighborhood that just adds to car dependency. "It doesn't matter how green you are if your house in the suburb still generates 14 car trips a day, which is the American average," says Duany. "But that's complicated to get across, because it's not high-tech."

There are encouraging signs that New Urbanism is beginning to take root in American design. The U.S. Green Building Council has begun using a pilot system called LEED Neighborhood Design (LEED-ND), which will include location and transportation use in its green ratings. Duany and his peers in the movement are helping city and town planners to dismantle the postwar zoning regulations that helped make the car king, and you can find New Urbanist projects sprouting across the country.

Still, it's an uphill battle. Americans may say they hate their long commute, but there's little evidence that they're eager to abandon a lifestyle built around the car. If one city could represent the opposite of New Urbanism, it would be sprawling, decentralized Atlanta, where extreme commuting is fast becoming the norm. (Coincidence or not, Atlanta is one of the fastest growing metro areas in the U.S.) And sprawl is spreading overseas, to developing nations like China that are fast abandoning traditional, dense neighborhoods as they fall in love with the car. "We'll design a community for [Chinese clients] that is essentially Chinese, which has served them well for centuries," says Duany. "They say, 'No, we want Orange Country.' They're desperate to live in the dopey American way."

If we can change that way, we can save ourselves — and much of the rest of the world. That will require the leadership of architects like Duany, who has dedicated his career to New Urbanist principles. But it will also require something of the rest of us: actively valuing what we profess to value, like more time out of the car and with our families, and choosing to live in neighborhoods that make those ideals possible. If that happens, the benefits to the fight against climate change — and our own sanity — would be immense.

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