

WHY STREETCAR SUBURBS WORKED WELL

In a large sense, Fulton Heights and the streetcar suburbs of other cities of the time represented a successful transition from the pre-industrial city of old to the post-war automobile-oriented suburbs of today. It is worthwhile to examine critical elements of these model developments more closely for the lessons they would teach:

Land Ownership:

Streetcar suburbs were often the first significant, unified development in a community to be planned and organized under single ownership and control. While many cities were founded on simple, rudimentary plans, nearly all cities up to that time grew in piecemeal fashion, oftentimes expanding outward from the city center one lot at a time.

Development Density:

While some combined lots were larger than the norm, most lots of the streetcar suburb era were still quite small by post-World War II suburban standards, allowing for a compact neighborhood and convenient access to public transportation (the streetcar line). In the case of Fulton Heights, there were 314 lots carved from only 100 acres of land, including streets and alleys.

Street Pattern:

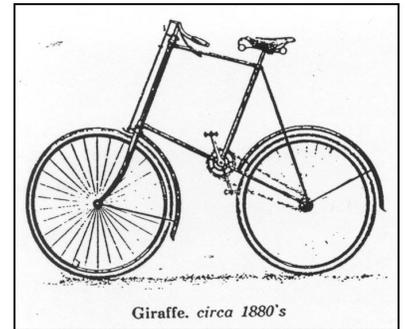
While the basic grid iron street pattern prevailed, designers of these suburbs did not hesitate to modify the grid to better fit the site context (e.g. note that the predominant bearing of Fulton Heights runs at a modest angle to the original bearings of the city). Alleys also continued in use, with a noticeable absence of front yard driveways in these pre-automobile neighborhoods.

Transportation:

The streetcar provided the means for residents to get to their work, shopping, and social needs. Even so, at either end of the streetcar ride, walking remained the primary means of getting around. For this reason, even under these early suburbs, the overall city form remained very pedestrian oriented. It is also important to remember that, at the turn of the century, the bicycle had become a very popular form of mobility for much of society.

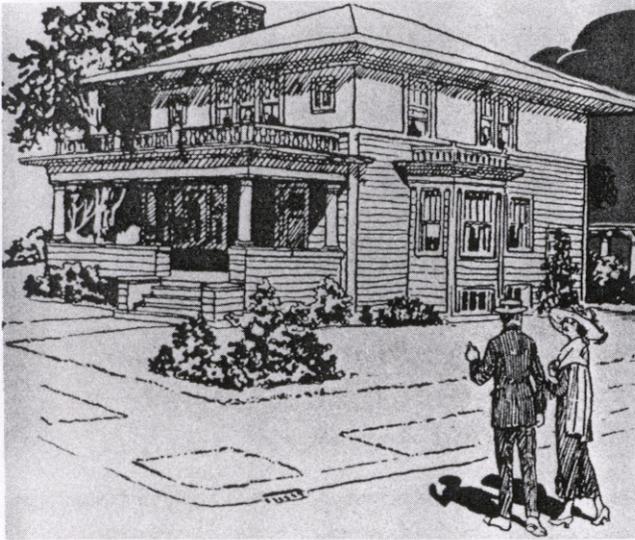
Sidewalks and Street Trees:

Streetcar suburbs usually included (in fact advertised) sidewalks and street trees as an essential part of the community. Sidewalks were necessary to avoid an unacceptable, perhaps muddy (or worse) walk to the streetcar on an unpaved street. Street trees were seen as healthful and critical to an attractive neighborhood. While these early developments often occurred on farmland or other cleared sites, the evidence of the street trees planted in can be seen today in the massive, overarching canopies found in these most attractive post-turn-of-the-century neighborhoods



Architecture:

Most new houses of the streetcar suburb era continued to employ front porches as a fundamental architectural and social element of the home. While building setbacks were increased modestly, there remained a strong linkage between the front door and porch of the home and the public sidewalk and street. Carriage houses, the predecessor of the modern day garage, were still considered unsightly structures and were relegated to the back of the property. Similarly, refuse cans and other utilitarian activities were geared toward rear alley access and service.



Sketch left: Note ample front porches, sidewalks, walk leading from porch to sidewalk, pedestrians, and absence of driveway and garage in front.

American Builder, August, 1920, presented a "modern home" on its cover.

Land Use:

These suburbs represent the beginning of separation of single-family residential areas from other land uses. The separation was not total, however, due to the limited scale of these developments, multiple street connections to adjoining areas, and the generally compact nature of cities at this time.

Economic and Racial Segregation:

These suburbs also represent the beginnings of separation of different income groups and racial classes. This separation was also not complete, however, due to the relative proximity of adjoining neighborhoods, the incorporation and mixing in of garage apartments, servants quarters, and other housing types, and the sharing of public transportation.

As will be seen in the next section, most, "modern", post World War II suburbs left the desirable design features of these early suburbs behind, while continuing to strengthen the separation of land uses and the segregation of economic and racial classes. Perhaps most significantly, the emergence of a society totally dependent upon the automobile would serve to accelerate and accentuate these trends.

MODERN DAY (AUTOMOBILE-ORIENTED) SUBURBS

During the 1920s, two features of American life and city growth were germinated which would shape the form of all American cities to the present day: (1) America's love affair with the automobile and (2) the emergence of zoning as the preeminent tool in controlling urban development. Later, in the 1950's and 60's, a third feature of the American landscape would have a powerful influence on many cities, including Salisbury: The Interstate Highway System.

THE RISE OF THE AUTOMOBILE

In 1910 there were 458,000 automobiles registered in the United States, primarily to the wealthy. A decade later this number mushroomed to 8,132,000. By 1925, Ford was producing 9,000 cars per day,¹ and by 1930, there were nearly 23,000,000 automobiles in the U.S.²

The automobile provided the final means of escape for the middle class family from the unhealthy environment of the industrialized, overdeveloped city. Escapes to the country, which began initially with the Sunday afternoon drive, became permanent after World War II.

Adding fuel to the dramatic movement of the American public to greater dependence on the automobile were government policies, which heavily favored the personal car over other forms of transportation. Most cities after the turn of the century, for example, used general tax levies to pay for the construction of new streets in the suburbs. Thus, the tax base provided by the older, existing city was used to subsidize suburban expansion. These subsidies, in turn, contributed to the demise of the older, central city during the latter half of the 20th Century.

Meanwhile, intercity rail and local streetcar service were viewed as *private enterprise*, and therefore undeserving of public support. In large measure, this viewpoint holds true today— public funds used in support of Salisbury's bus system, for example, are viewed as an outright subsidy, while the enormous costs of new road construction and maintenance, which disproportionately serve suburban interests, are viewed as a *public necessity*.

THE ADVENT OF ZONING

Around the turn of the century, the private sector paved the way for modern day zoning. Since municipalities had little or no power to regulate the location of various land uses, suburban developers began the widespread use of restrictive covenants as a form of private sector zoning. Such covenants typically prohibited non-single-family-residential uses from the development, established minimum building setbacks, and oftentimes set minimum costs for home construction. Many restrictive

The ordinary 'horseless carriage' is at present a luxury for the wealthy; and altho its price will probably fall in the future, it will never, of course, come into as common use as the bicycle.

Literary Digest, October 14, 1899



Motorcar manufacturers look forward confidently to the time when every family will have two, if not three, cars.

Lewis Mumford, April 1958

¹Jackson, Kenneth T., **Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States**, p. 161, Oxford University Press, NY, 1985.

²Coke, page 23.

covenants of the time also excluded Blacks from owning property in the neighborhood. (Such covenants regarding racial segregation can still be found in some old legal documents, but have long since been ruled unconstitutional and declared null and void.)

In 1916, New York City passed the country's first zoning ordinance. Soon, zoning ordinances were hailed as the answer to rampant commercialism and urban blight. To have a zoning ordinance was to be a community that was progressive, modern, and forward thinking. The popularity of zoning soon became evident. Just five years after New York's ordinance became effective, 76 cities had passed zoning. By 1926, the number of cities with zoning ordinances had reached 564 and by 1931, the number was 800.³

"Country Homes and Country Air,
Twenty Minutes from the Square."

MYERS PARK—

- is a place where people live.
- consists of eleven hundred acres on a hill, overlooking Charlotte and the surrounding country.
- includes in its plan of development definite provision for beauty as well as utility.
- offers exceptional opportunities for a healthy, happy life for every member of the family.
- was planned, developed and is maintained as a community of homes, protected against industrial and mercantile encroachments.
- is so situated in relation to Charlotte that it is the line of least resistance for the overflow of Charlotte's rapidly growing population.
- has a Service Department which directs the community activities and aids in all movements which have to do with the community welfare.
- has a well organized and enthusiastic Garden Club, the aim of which is to stimulate interest in home gardening and to promote community goodwill.
- has now and will have always the charm and atmosphere of the country. Wide streets, parks and large lots guarantee the permanence of the open spaces
- has all city conveniences, so combined with the natural advantages of the country that the benefits of both are enjoyed by those who live there.
- has completed at the present time more than 7 miles of street paving, 14 miles of cement sidewalks, 8 miles of water mains, 7 miles of gas mains, 9 miles of sewer mains and 2 miles of street car lines.
- has within its boundaries Queen's College for girls and young women, Horner's Military School for boys and a branch of the Ardyne Kindergarten for small children. Public graded schools and other private schools are just outside the Northern Gateway.

"Out of the Dust, out of the Heat,
A Country Home on a City Street."

That's MYERS PARK.

Statement from promotional brochure for Myers Park.

The great hope and promise of zoning was to protect single-family areas from commercial and industrial encroachment, while not interfering with the freewheeling, free market system of land speculation and development elsewhere in the community. This is essentially what the early ordinances did.

In Salisbury's case, zoning was first passed in 1948, just as the post war euphoria, baby boom generation, and increasing dependence on the automobile was about to come into its own. Unfortunately, this heavy reliance upon zoning to effect the total separation of land uses has resulted in suburban areas that are essentially unconnected to the rest of the community, except as the automobile may allow.

THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM

On June 29, 1956, President Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, calling for the construction of a national system of interconnected superhighways, and creating the largest public works program in the nation's history. Originally tagged as essential to the movement of military convoys for national defense purposes, the defensive role of the Interstate Highway System was soon overshadowed by its influence on the growth of the nation's urban areas. Wherever such roads were built and, more particularly, wherever interchanges were located, development followed.

For Salisbury, the 1953 opening of the new US 29 to the south and east, just across Town Creek, caused a radical shift in the orientation of commercial development in the City. Later designated as I-85, this new four-lane highway prompted significant new commercial development along Innes Street between the interstate and the downtown. At this time, East Innes Street was mainly...

³Coke, page 24.

“...a residential, tree-lined street connecting the central business district to the highway interchange built in the middle of a dairy farm, just over a mile to the east. Over time, land uses along Innes Street converted to automobile oriented development. Old houses were sold, torn down and replaced with fast-food restaurants, gasoline stations and suburban shopping malls. The resultant development was a sprawling morass of excessive signs, overhead wires and road-fronting asphalt parking lots.”⁴

SUMMARY OF POST-WAR SUBURBAN SPRAWL AND ITS EFFECTS

In much the same way that the technological advances of the industrial revolution led to the urban excesses of the late 19th century, America's disproportionate dependence on the automobile and over-reliance on “separation-of-uses” style zoning has also led to suburban development excesses which cities like Salisbury are now confronting. These excesses and their results can be summarized as follows:

Land Use:

The partial separation of land uses, which began in the 1910's and '20's, has become total in the suburban developments of the '70's, '80's and '90's. Today, large tracts of land are routinely developed exclusively for single-family residential purposes. Residents of these areas are totally dependent upon the automobile to take them to shopping, work, or social affairs. Children too must be chauffeured by their parents to virtually all activities. Bicycles, once the child's ticket to getting around their community or running an occasional errand, now seldom leave their street or immediate neighborhood. Not only are residential areas separated from non-residential areas, but in recent years there has been an increasing separation of single-family residential areas from other single-family residential areas by the use of development walls and fences.

Housing:

Market segmentation is the watchword of most of today's residential developments. In today's real estate market, there are developments which cater exclusively to various housing market “niches” for every stage of the life cycle: i.e. (1) group housing for college students, (2) apartment complexes for young professionals, (3) starter homes for young couples, (4) upscale communities for growing families, (5) retirement communities for active retirees, (6) assisted care living for the ambulatory elderly, the non-ambulatory elderly, etc. and (7) nursing homes for the elderly dependent.

Today a land-use master plan for a big city is largely a matter of proposed placement, often in relation to transportation, of many series of “decontaminated” sortings.

Jane Jacobs, 1961

Both in town and site planning it is important to prevent the complete separation of different classes of people which is such a feature of the ... modern town. Mrs. Barnett in her writings has laid special emphasis on this point and has referred to the many evils which result from large areas being inhabited entirely by people of one limited class.

Raymond Unwin, 1909

The current round of suburban growth is generating a crisis of many dimensions: mounting traffic congestion, increasingly unaffordable housing, receding open space, and stressful social patterns. The truth is, we are using planning strategies that are forty years old and no longer relevant to today's culture. Our household makeup has changed dramatically, the work place and work force have been transformed, real wealth has shrunk, and serious environmental concerns have surfaced. But we are still building World War II suburbs as if families were large and had only one breadwinner, as if jobs were all downtown, as if land and energy were endless, and as if another lane on the freeway would end congestion.

Peter Calthorpe, 1989

⁴ Morris, p.9

Economic and Racial Segregation:

In addition to the housing market segmentation mentioned above, there has also developed a stratification of new housing developments according to economic class and, by default, race. Thus, there is housing for the poor, the low income, middle class, upper middle class and upper class. Square footages and home prices are carefully guarded as the numerical gatekeepers of suburban neighborhoods, lest an inferior home of smaller size or value should sneak in and pull down property values. Despite the desegregation initiatives of the past three decades, our society has never been more fragmented in terms of the economic and racial makeup of our neighborhoods.

Density of Development:

Though lot sizes in some areas have been coming down in size, the predominant forms of development in the suburbs of Salisbury and Rowan County continue to be in one of two categories: (1) high density multi-family housing in apartments, condos, and town houses or (2) low density single-family residential development which is neither urban nor rural (i.e. 10-20,000 square foot lots). While there are exceptions, the higher density developments have typically been marketed to lower and middle-income groups, while the lower density, larger lot developments have been traditionally geared to the upper income buyer. (Interestingly, this pattern of suburban style marketing stands in stark contrast to the demand for higher density housing in the older pre-WWII streetcar era neighborhoods of many cities.)

Street Patterns:

Curvilinear streets are the norm for suburban developments today. Originally designed in the late 19th century to respond to site topography and natural forms, curvilinear streets are now done as much for style as for site conditions. Such street configurations can be disorienting to a visitor, unacquainted with the neighborhood. There is often no clear principal street axis for the neighborhood, no sense of street hierarchy, and no landmarks at street ends (e.g. a church steeple) to provide a sense of direction.

Neighborhood Connectedness:

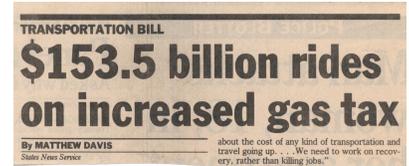
Neighborhood streets in today's suburbs are not connected to those of adjacent developments. This leaves residents with no option other than to use the closest major thoroughfare— even for local errands. It immobilizes children and makes them totally dependent upon their parents to go anywhere outside the immediate neighborhood. Beyond that, it is not unusual for a development of several hundred houses to have only two or three ways out onto the major street system. This can create bottlenecks at the outlets, as well as overloading the few main streets upon which nearly all cross-town traffic must depend.

Construction and Maintenance of Urban Infrastructure:

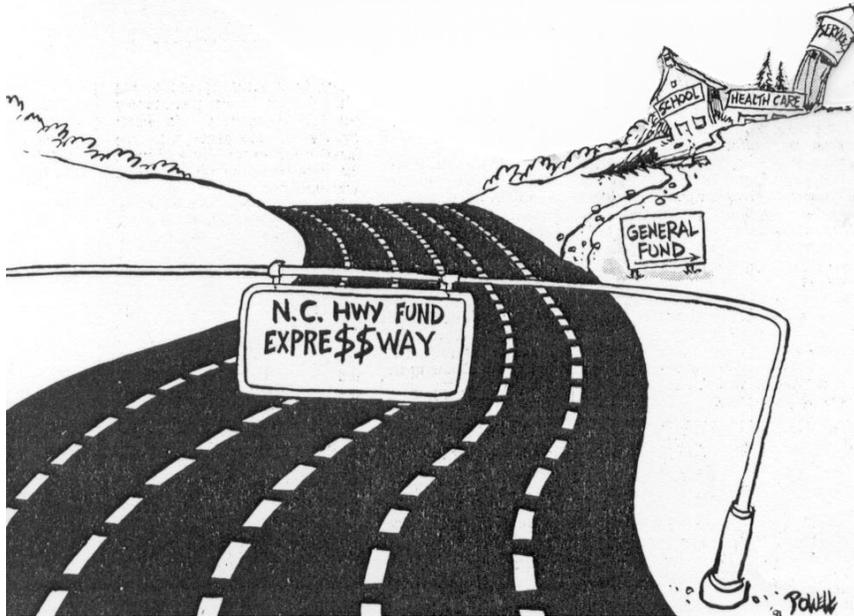
Water lines, sewer lines, new roads, storm drainage, natural gas lines, electricity, and phone service are all more expensive to build and maintain in today's new suburbs. The cost of maintaining the street system alone is straining the ability of federal, state and local governments to keep up. Governments are especially hard-pressed to

For the current American way of life is founded not just on motor transportation but on the religion of the motorcar, and the sacrifices that people are prepared to make for this religion stand outside the realm of rational criticism.
Lewis Mumford, April 1958

find monies to build new highway facilities (e.g. Interstate 85 is currently undergoing a massive widening project through Salisbury and Rowan County that will exceed \$20 million). At the same time, the cost of the City's sewer system continues to escalate in the face of low development densities and the resulting fewer customers per linear unit cost of sewer line.



Editorial



Raleigh News and Observer, April 18, 1991

Delivery of Public and Private Services:

Public transit, postal delivery, trash pick-up, police protection, and school buses are a few of the services which have become expensive and inefficient to operate in today's low density suburban areas. The bus system in particular becomes especially expensive to operate in the suburbs, where there are few identifiable concentrations of residential development density.

Scale of Development:

New commercial uses have grown in scale and proportion to the point that it is not surprising that residential neighborhoods disdain them as neighbors. Retail commercial uses, in particular, with their attendant eye-grabbing signage and large, floodlit parking areas are especially disfavored. As a result, these uses are either stripped along major streets or clustered in shopping centers. In either case, they are only accessible by the automobile.

To have a minimum amount of communication and sociability in this spread-out life, his wife becomes a taxi driver by daily occupation, and the amount of money it costs to keep this whole system running leaves him with shamefully overcrowded, understaffed schools, inadequate police, poorly serviced hospitals, underspaced recreation areas, ill-supported libraries.
Lewis Mumford, April 1958

Commercial Architecture and Building Character:

"Monolithic" and "lacking detail" are two general descriptors of automobile-oriented architecture. Human scaled, pedestrian-oriented architecture with its associated architectural details, street furniture, and signage, has given way to modular, monolithic construction practices. New public buildings, such as post offices and schools generally reflect this lack of quality in design both in terms of their undistinguished locations and their architecture. Public revenues, which might have been available in the past to create civic buildings of merit and distinction, are instead expended on the costs of building and maintaining the massive infrastructure necessary to support a sprawling, partially developed urban area.

Residential Architecture and Building Character:



"McMansion" is an unflattering term sometimes employed to describe much of today's suburban residential architecture. While overall square footage and interior appointments (i.e. entertainment rooms, luxury baths, well-equipped kitchens, etc.) have continued to improve, the relationship of new houses to the neighborhoods in which they are located has often left much to be desired. Homes which once pulled up to the street, thereby creating a streetspace and sense of place, are now set back as far as possible, aloof and distant, but impressive. Front porches, which once looked out upon the public realm of the street, inviting neighborly visits, have now been replaced by private decks and patios to the rear. Garages, cars and trash receptacles, which were once relegated to the rear of the property, now dominate the streetscape and are often the most visible aspects of the homesite.

Sidewalks:

Most suburban developments of the last few decades have done away with sidewalks altogether. Without front porches to encourage neighborly dialogue, and with no destinations (e.g. a community park or corner store) within walking distance, sidewalks have no purpose. Low density, sprawling development patterns have rendered pedestrian mobility and therefore, sidewalks, an irrelevant expense.

Street Trees:

Originally provided by the developer as an integral element of a new residential neighborhood, the planting of street trees is today largely left up to the discretion of the individual homeowner. Where the consistent planting of street trees once created an attractive overhead canopy for the common "room" of the street, today's random planting of (oftentimes ornamental) trees seeks to draw attention away from the street and to the glorification of the individual property. Further, without disciplined rows of street trees, many suburban streets are hotter in the summer than they need be due to the effects of exposed asphalt and lack of shade.

Single function, land-use zoning at a scale and density that eliminates the pedestrian has been the norm for so long that Americans have forgotten that walking can be part of their daily lives.
Peter Calthorpe, 1989

TEN GENERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The foregoing discussion of historic growth phases and associated development features offers many insights regarding the best and worst aspects of past and present growth. After considering these insights, the following ten general policy recommendations (GPR's) may be set forth regarding the future development and redevelopment of Salisbury.

GPR-1. Complete neighborhoods, rather than monolithic subdivisions, should be encouraged. Neighborhood designs should foster a mixture of compatibly scaled housing types on compact, urban lots. Appropriately scaled and designed shopping, working and gathering places should be integrated into the design and redesign of complete neighborhoods.

GPR-2. Demand for large scale commercial, institutional and manufacturing facilities should continue to be met in locations buffered from neighborhoods. Buffering may be accomplished by transitional land use (preferred), by screening, or by distance, if necessary. Access to these areas by means other than the private automobile, should be designed into the original development plans.

GPR-4. Provision for public transit and other alternatives to the private automobile (i.e. bicycling and walking) should be encouraged within the development and redevelopment of all residential, shopping, gathering and work places.

GPR-5. Street patterns should be carefully configured to allow for multiple outlets from neighborhoods, and for connections between neighborhoods, without encouraging through traffic from outside adjoining neighborhoods.

GPR-6. A network of planned walkways and bikeways should be implemented as an integral part of city growth and development. Sidewalks, and where appropriate, bikeways, should be required as part of the necessary infrastructure for new development.

GPR-7. Regularly spaced street trees, selected and planted in accordance with a city street tree master plan, should be required in new developments, whether commercial, office or residential.

GPR-8. New public and private buildings of architectural significance should be placed in locations of prominence and visual importance. Such uses might include post offices, branch libraries, schools, community buildings, firehouses, and places of worship.

GPR-9. Each neighborhood area should have adequate open space designed into the development from the start. If possible, this should include a central open space in the form of a public square or commons suitable for outdoor gatherings and quiet enjoyment.

GPR-10. Residential architecture should respect the value of the street upon which it faces, and contribute to the sense of community. This generally means houses pulled up to the street, porches in front, a front walk connecting to the sidewalk, and garages to the rear.



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