

# *Seeds of Community:*

## *Retrofitting the North American Continent*

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North America was settled in a mad rush of development called “manifest destiny.” The continent was so large, and so relatively unsettled, that it took a determined effort to fill it in as quickly as possible. The goal, of course, was to convert wilderness into productive commercial activity, to convert natural resources – including space – into cash; and so the resulting built environment of the continent reflects what they call a “functional utilitarianism.” It was speculative capitalism that did the job of colonizing the continent. The usual routine was to call in surveyors to mark off a square grid, and then begin selling lots. Later, developers with access to pools of credit would buy large tracts and begin laying out their single-use residential subdivisions. Land would be subdivided and then subdivided again in an attempt to extract as much profit as possible. The entire project was ‘market’ driven: considerations like enriching culture, nurturing community, or even creating beautiful and endearing places worth caring about did not enter the picture – and *could* not, for such sentiments only detract from profit.

The mad rush of development that characterized the (un)settling of North America appears to have run its course: There are now entire subdivisions on the fringe standing vacant.

Commercial corridors cannot find tenants. The pools of credit have dried up. Massive foreclosures indicate that people can no longer afford the inflated prices of real estate. The subdivided land appears to have been subdivided to its limit. The conclusion is clear: the game is over. We have now entered an entirely new phase of development in North America.

From this perspective of having peaked, we can pause for a moment and survey the results of a built environment created by the profit-driven dictates of speculative capitalism.

The first thing to note is how incoherent it all is – and by ‘incoherent’ I mean disordered, unconnected, inharmonious. There are literally millions of random developments with no relationship to one another. Zoning was an attempt to bring order and stabilize real estate values; yet it more visibly succeeded in arbitrarily compartmentalizing the landscape into different functional uses, widely scattered. With no coherency, there is no unifying purpose.

A second glaring outcome is how energy intensive it all is. Everything is so spread out that most people literally depend on gasoline-powered automobiles for their very survival. Of course, this dispersal is largely a product of the randomness inherent in speculative capitalism; yet it also is indicative of the general mood of hyper-individualism that influenced the settling of the continent. As we move further into an era of 'energy descent,' as fossil fuels become increasingly expensive as demand begins to outstrip supply, the dispersed and energy intensive built environment of North America will prove to be increasingly dysfunctional.

A third obvious – and unfortunate – characteristic of living in the built environment created for North America is how superficial it all is, lacking roots. For example, people don't purchase 'homes;' they invest in 'real estate.' People move freely from one location to another without, generally, committing themselves to any one place in particular – and maybe that's because all the places look the same! On any commercial strip in America you'll find the same corporate chain stores, the same fast food joints, the same paved-over look. This rootlessness that is intrinsic to the settlement pattern is a major reason for the disturbing lack of community found in North America.