

Restorative Development and Integrated Revitalization

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o6 Restorative Development & Integrated Revitalization

Sustainable Redevelopment is more sustainable than Sustainable Development.

Smart Renewal is smarter than Smart Growth.

Renewed Urbanism is better than New Urbanist sprawl.

Green Rebuilding is greener than Green Building.

These four wonderful dialogues set the stage, but all are due for a major overhaul that will be powerfully influenced by the global trend towards restoration, reuse, and regeneration.

By Storm Cunningham, December 31, 2006.

PREFACE

Ever since *The Restoration Economy* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, November 2002) was published in November of 2002, one of the most common requests from readers has been to examine the relationship of restorative development to trends such as smart growth, green building, new urbanism, and sustainable development. No surprise there: People interested any of those subjects are usually interested in the others, since they all have to do with more-responsible development and improved quality of life.

All four of those above-mentioned trends have their critics, but not restorative development. It seems that restoration, adaptive reuse, remediation, and revitalization are universally admired and desired (though poorly-managed individual projects can certainly draw criticism.) While some criticisms of “green”, “smart”, “sustainable”, and “new urbanist” approaches are motivated by a perceived threat to established industries, some are valid. Most often, valid criticisms involve specific projects that live up to their claims of being “smart”, “sustainable”, “green”, “socially responsible”, etc. A common cause emerges upon examining such projects: The failure to distinguish between sprawl (new development) and restorative development.

[I should confess up front that I have been a passionate proponent of sustainable development, smart growth, and green building (and new urbanism, to a lesser degree) almost since their beginnings, and I remain so. Any of the following comments that sound critical should be interpreted as those of a lover whose intimacy has led to awareness of their limitations; not as those of an enemy, nor those of someone who undervalues their contributions to the world.]

INTRODUCTION

Human civilization is at a crucial, but thoroughly predictable, crossroads: After some 5000 years of growing our economies by expanding our domain, we must suddenly make a belated transition to a economic model that's based on being long-term residents...a model that recognizes that there are no new continents or significant new virgin resources to be discovered (on or near the surface of this planet, anyway). Some folks came to this realization a couple of decades ago, and the sustainable development dialogue was born, in the hopes of creating a more intelligent development model.

When sustainable development failed to take hold in the U.S., Americans created the Smart Growth dialogue, hoping that the focus on urgent metropolitan issues would help people perceive the relevance of using more sustainable approaches. Now, the tide has turned against Smart Growth, as anyone in the leading smart growth states like Maryland, New Jersey, and Oregon can attest to. Did sustainable development and smart growth fail? Not at all: They were tremendously successful dialogues.

The “failure” was in forgetting that they were “only” dialogues: Trying to turn them into “real” modes of development revealed their lack of rigorous theoretical base, their lack of useful taxonomies, and their problematic terminology. Their great success

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was that they both catalyzed an appreciation for the superior value of activities beginning with “re”: redevelopment, remediation, restoration, revitalization, renewal, renovation, reuse, regeneration, etc.

Let’s back up a bit. All human civilizations--and all complex adaptive systems in general--have three overlapping development modes:

1. New development, whereby the civilization arises and creates its initial farms, buildings, and infrastructure. Economic growth during this “frontier” mode is based on developing raw land and extracting virgin resources.
2. Maintenance/conservation, whereby the civilization’s built environment is maintained and its natural resources are conserved. This mode is always present, but never dominant, since it doesn’t have the dramatically rapid wealth-creation dynamics of either new development or restorative development.
3. Restorative development, whereby the civilization revitalizes itself by replacing, renovating, and/or reusing its aged built environment, and by restoring its exhausted, contaminated, and damaged natural resources. Restorative development is defined as “socioeconomic revitalization based on restoring the built and natural environment.”

This three-mode view of community (or national) growth--when reflected in the economic development structure of the community--is referred to as the trimodal development perspective. Adopting this perspective is essential if we care to move from dialogue to systemic change.

To increase funding of restorative development by government agencies (such as the \$1.6 trillion U.S. infrastructure renovation backlog documented by the ASCE), and to eliminate the indirect public subsidies that make sprawl artificially profitable, a fundamental but relatively painless change to our planning, policymaking, and budgeting processes is desperately needed. We must adopt a trimodal development perspective: plans, budgets, and policies should clearly distinguish among the three modes of development: new development (frontier mode), maintenance/conservation (sustaining mode), and restorative development (renewal mode).

SMART GROWTH & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Smart growth and sustainable development are both “larger” concepts than restorative development, in that they include all three modes of development. Most smart growth practitioners, for instance, assume that some sprawl (new development) is inevitable--and it is, in some cases--so their plans try to minimize the sprawl and maximize the restorative development (such as infill, brownfields, historic, etc.). This has been a wonderful step forward for city planning, but smart growth presently lacks both rigor and a useful taxonomy. The restorative aspects of “smart” and “sustainable” are by far the most valuable, both economically and to society, but this rather obvious fact is usually obscured.

That the smart growth and sustainable development dialogues are reaching the end of their useful lives, in their current form, shouldn’t come as a complete shock (except, maybe, to those excellent organizations that has been entirely based on them). After all, everything has a lifecycle. The evolution of a valuable new characteristic in a species can change its environment in such a way that it threatens the survival of that species.

Likewise, public movements and organizations devoted to social change find that their successful efforts have created a new world where they are no longer needed. If they don’t evolve to serve a new goal, they can sometimes even become hindrances to the very goals they once advanced. In fact, the only way many change-movements can continue indefinitely is via failure to achieve their goals (such as organizations set up to find a cure for a specific disease). In fact, the successful execution of any organization’s strategy can change the market in a way that renders the strategy obsolete.

Our budgets currently divide development into only two categories: building new stuff and maintaining what we’ve got. Revital-

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ization—that essential third mode of the natural lifecycle that governs all living beings and all complex adaptive systems—remains an afterthought. This results in grossly under-funding the remediation, restoration, and redevelopment of our built and natural assets. Most restorative projects thus take us by surprise, necessitating special fundraising activities, bond issues, legislation, etc. Despite these inhibitors, restorative development accounts for around \$2 trillion dollars annually worldwide: Intelligent developers and entrepreneurs have realized that it can be every bit as profitable as new development in the short term, and almost always more profitable in the long term.

Thanks to the smart growth and sustainable development dialogues, we now have a better appreciation that new development's (sprawl) time is past, and that restorative development's time has come. They've done their jobs—and we're ready to start making the systemic changes needed to reflect this historic transition—but neither smart growth nor sustainable development can provide the necessary underpinnings of those changes to policy making, planning, budgeting, research, education, and other socioeconomic systems that are still largely based on the old “frontier mentality.”

Before pointing out the current deficiencies in the sustainable development dialogue, let me point out that sustainable development—in theory—is the larger envelope in which new development, maintenance/conservation, and restorative development operate. All three of those development modes need to be made greener and more sustainable. When sustainable development advocates (of which I am one) are able to define and point to examples of sustainable new development (guaranteed to be rare), sustainable maintenance/conservation, and sustainable restorative development (likely to account for the vast majority of real sustainable development), then we will know that the sustainable development dialogue is maturing and becoming truly practical.

Sustainable development—as it normally manifests—fails to properly prioritize the monstrous catalog of damaged and depleted natural resources, the huge inventory of contaminated land, and the gargantuan backlog of restoration, renovation, and replacement required by our built environment. We've got a few centuries' worth of restoration to accomplish before we can even think about switching to a mode of “merely” sustaining. We need to rapidly heal and renew, not just slow down the rate of damage (which is the end result of most sustainability initiatives that reduce pollution, energy consumption, and waste).

Sustainable development—while easily justifiable (economically) when looked at on 10-30-year timelines—generally fails to excite developers, industrialists, planners, and politicians, most of whom are addicted to rapid growth and impressive quarterly results. Granted, much more progress has been made in Northern Europe than in the U.S. and most other parts of the world, but even European progress puts far too little emphasis on the value of renewal of land, infrastructure, and buildings. Nor is it commensurate with the daily rate of greenfield destruction or industrial and consumer-based environmental degradation. We desperately need an economic model that repairs as vigorously as the current model destroys. That model is restorative development.

Sustainable development—to a much greater degree than smart growth—fails to systematically differentiate between new development and restorative development. As a result, we end up with slightly-greener industries and sprawl developments calling themselves “sustainable”. That's akin to developing a healthier form of cancer, rather than searching for a cure.

As with “smart” (see above), “sustainability” is largely a matter of opinion: Sustainable for how long? 100 years? 100,000 years? Sustainable under what population assumptions? 10 billion humans? 20 billion humans? The fact is, we can't achieve what we can't measure (or even define). “Prospering in a way that allows future generations to prosper” is an inspirational theme for a dialogue, but offers little to leaders who are looking for practical tools for everyday planning, budgetary, and policy decisions.

Brownfields remediation, infill development, adaptive reuse, historic restoration, infrastructure renovation, wetland restoration, farmland restoration, watershed renewal, and other forms of restorative activities have exploded in the past 10-15 years. This was—in large part—thanks to the sustainable development and smart growth dialogues. Some of these activities are entirely new industries (such as brownfields and ecological restoration), while others are well-established industries that have greatly accelerated (such as historic restoration and infrastructure renewal).

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Why don't most people know we have a fast-growing, trillion-dollar-per-year global restoration economy? Because we're shrouding many of these restorative activities under the imprecise labels of smart growth and sustainable development, which don't effectively distinguish between new and restorative. These formerly-essential dialogues are now obscuring this trillion-dollar "restoration economy", thus inhibiting the systemic changes necessary to turn it into our dominant mode of development.

As with sustainable development, there's no generally-agreed-upon definition of "smart growth". Smart growth dialogues tend to focus on protecting natural resources, preserving open space, stimulating downtown revitalization, mixed-use development, infill, greater density, and increasing public transportation. The goals are to maintain a high quality of life by decreasing air and water pollution, preserving open space, decreasing traffic congestion, improving land use planning. Recent years have seen a lessening of bipartisan support, as pro-sprawl interests (such as publicly-traded housing firms, which "need" to build at least 1000 homes at a time) have funded successful PR campaigns aimed at confusing the public (and politicians) into equating smart growth with no growth, and with the infringement of private property rights. This reversal of public support for smart growth was most dramatically illustrated in Portland, the poster-child of smart growth.

Integrated revitalization is what's replacing smart growth (and, to a lesser extent, sustainable development). Properly integrated revitalization strategies do not depend on political support or legislation (though such support is certainly desirable). They create a self-sustaining socioeconomic renewal based on restoration of an area's built, natural, and social assets. The integrated revitalization program becomes the flywheel providing continuity, with each restorative project adding momentum to it. Integrated revitalization will supplant smart growth as the community dialogue, because it provides a clear, logical structure for the actions and systemic changes necessary to launch and sustain the results of that dialogue.

Without a trimodal budget process, it's impossible for a city council to make a declaration as simple as "for the next 20 years, we're going to put 20% of our budget into new development, 40% into maintenance and conservation, and 40% into restorative development." Once a trimodal development perspective is adopted—and restorative development becomes one of the three standard categories for a community's plans, policies, and budgets—political support and indirect subsidies for sprawl automatically decrease.

The many overlaps between Integrated Revitalization and Smart Growth are evident when one views the EPA's official definition: "Development that grows the economy, enhances the community, and protects public health and the environment." Their ten principles blend restorative development with New Urbanism & TOD:

1. Mix land uses.
2. Take advantage of compact building design.
3. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices.
4. Create walkable neighborhoods.
5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas.
7. Strengthen and direct development towards existing communities.
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices.
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair and cost-effective.
10. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions.

There's nothing "wrong" with smart growth, per se: The problem lies in the fact that the phrases "smart growth" and "sustainable development" were invented as dialogue tools. We needed a broadly-acceptable terms that would help get business, environmental, and government stakeholders around the table together. "Smart" and "sustainable" appealed to the environmentalists and those concerned with quality of life, while "growth" and "development" appealed to the business and political interests. Smart

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growth is a wonderful dialogue, but it wasn't originally designed to become "real", in the sense of being able to point at a structure or budget item and instantly know (without engaging in discussion) that it's "smart" asset (as we can with new assets, maintained assets, conserved assets, and restored assets).

We're not likely to divide our plans and budgets into "smart" and "dumb"—or "sustainable" and "unsustainable"—so neither are likely to go beyond being catalysts for change: They offer no logical, formalized taxonomy for our systems. On the other hand, it makes all the sense in the world to divide budgets and projects into the three natural modes of development: "new", "maintenance/ conservation", and "restorative".

Few people ever object to having their neighborhood restored or revitalized (unless gentrification issues haven't been effectively addressed), but "Smart growth is an orphan when it comes to having a constituency," said (Fairfax County, VA) Board Chairman Gerald E. Connolly (D)... "It's something many people can support until it comes to their neighborhood." (Washington Post, 12/7/2004).

The word "smart" obviously conveys a mere matter of opinion, so any economic system based on smart growth would rest on a shifting foundation of sand. The term further suffers from innate divisiveness: Any development not qualifying as "smart" is--by inference--"dumb". While that might in fact be an accurate descriptor, this hardly lends itself to effective collaboration.

A good example is Maryland, an early smart growth leader in the U.S. (along with Oregon & New Jersey). In an unreleased 2002 memo to the team of incoming Governor Robert Ehrlich, outgoing Governor Parris Glendening's planners confessed, "The rate at which farm and forest land is being developed has not slowed. Our current smart growth laws and programs may not be sufficient to overcome the many obstacles that have made sprawl the dominant form of development."

The challenges are complex, and it would be easy to oversimplify, but it's probably safe to say that a major reason for smart growth's limited success in Maryland is that smart growth remains an overlay on a system based solely on only the first two modes of the development life cycle: new development and maintenance/ conservation. That leaves such programs extremely vulnerable to a change of political leadership.

Many very smart people are trying to create "smart" and "sustainability" metrics, and useful tools are likely to emerge from those efforts, but they will always be hamstrung by the inherent lack of rigor in the underlying concept. Restorative development—on the other hand—is eminently measurable. There's no problem whatsoever in calculating the level of decontamination of a brown-field site, the increased value of a restored historic building, the enhanced quality and quantity of water from a restored watershed, the boosted tax revenues from a revitalized neighborhood, the elevated harvests from a restored farm or fishery, etc.

Again: Smart growth and sustainable development are dialogues we desperately needed. They speeded the inevitable (and belated) transition from the frontier-style new development model (based on conquering new lands and extracting virgin resources) to its natural successor, restorative development (based on renewing what we've already developed and repairing the damage we did along the way). Smart growth has more natural overlap with restorative development than any other dialogue: It focuses strongly on making better use of what we already have, so that we don't continue to destroy what we don't want to lose to make room for what we don't want more of.

Many valuable organizations, agencies, educational programs, policies, and networks have arisen from these dialogues, but all are growing more slowly than was originally hoped. It's now time to start building rigorous research, planning, regulatory, and budgeting systems that can support smart and sustainable goals. That will require a painful abandoning of cherished terminology that can't get us to that essential next step.

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GREEN BUILDING

What about the green building movement? The move to green residential, commercial, public, and industrial construction (and, to a lesser extent, facilities management) has made tremendous progress in the past decade, after two decades of frustrated, haphazard efforts. The slow progress isn't surprising, as construction might well be the most disorganized major industry on Earth (its only major competition for that honor is healthcare).

The green building movement suffers far less from the definitional problems afflicting smart growth and sustainable development: Concepts like “less toxic”, “more energy-efficient”, and “recycled content” are all eminently definable and measurable, so green building is a trend that is here to stay. The U.S. Green Building Council's LEED certification system has greatly accelerated the adoption of green designs, materials, and processes by making “greenness” far easier for owners to specify, and far easier for designers and contractors to deliver. Green building is an emerging discipline that provides quantifiable benefits to both health and productivity, making it attractive to industry and government alike. In other words, it's real.

The green building's three major problems (easily fixed) are:

1. Lack of trimodal perspective: The green building movement doesn't sufficiently value the restoration and reuse of buildings, or the remediation of contaminated real estate. LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) originally didn't consider it at all (to my knowledge). That oversight has been corrected to some degree, but it's greatly under-weighted.
2. Environmentally-sound locations: Until very recently, few attempts had been made to appropriately weight the “greenness” of location: Putting an energy-efficient shopping mall on top of an endangered ecosystem, critical watershed, or viable farmland makes the project look like hypocritical fluff. Locating on an urban brownfield site that is currently producing zero tax revenues, no jobs, and no housing—but which is nicely connected to existing infrastructure—not only makes economic sense, but likely has tremendous long-term environmental benefits that can greatly overshadow any greenness of the building's design or materials.
3. Integration with cultural value: Tearing down a historic building of cultural importance to the community to make room for a “green” building reveals a shocking lack of integration, collaboration, and sensitivity. More than a few ecological and cultural disasters have been celebrated as “green”.

The green building trend has a lot to offer the restoration economy, because restorative development is NOT synonymous with green development. While restoring property is inherently more environmentally sound than sprawl, the process of restoring buildings and infrastructure is in great need of being “greened”. For instance: Many toxic substances are used in restoring metals and masonry, and not all restorers are conscientious about what they do with renovation waste. And, as inherently green as brownfields remediation is, many of the current techniques and technologies are in great need of “greening.”

Restorative development can improve construction practices by advancing “restorability” as a design goal. While many of our public buildings are still built to last, a large portion of our new commercial and residential buildings aren't expected to last much more than 30-40 years, and are built in such a way as to make restoration physically or economically impractical. New development will never go away completely (there's always subterranean and lunar development...), and many new buildings are part of restorative projects (such as brownfield redevelopment, infill, etc.), so building in such a way as to leave a restorable legacy for future generations is a worthy goal.

NEW URBANISM

If you've read the comments (above) on Smart Growth and Sustainable Development, you can predict some of the following comments regarding new urbanism, the movement to design more livable neighborhoods. There's no question that our automobile-oriented, single-use zoning communities are shamefully dysfunctional, unhealthy, wasteful, and ugly. New urbanism is a dialogue that has greatly advanced alternative thinking in this arena.

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The published principles of new urbanism contain many references to restoration, reuse, and revitalization, but these aspects have been significantly less present in practice. As with green building, the importance of location has been undervalued. More than a few new urbanist developments are destructive sprawl, plain and simple. They fragment landscapes while destroying natural resources that have been supplying humans and wildlife with clean air, water, and food for millennia. They destroy cultural resources like family farms and historic sites. They suck the life out of historic downtowns and community centers, destroying family businesses and setting the stage for big-box retailers to move in and exacerbate the damage.

Is new urbanist sprawl better than “normal” sprawl developments? Usually. Is restorative development better than new urbanist sprawl? Always.

Changes are afoot: Already, the new urbanism movement is broadening its scope in order to address these issues, and this is good. The increasingly-documented destruction of traditional “real” urban centers (and natural resources) by new urbanist centers has created significant pressure to encompass more holistic, systemic values and agendas, as evidenced in this quote from a sales flyer for New Urban News: “You may know new urbanism as smart growth, traditional neighborhood development, transit-oriented development, and/or livable communities.” Perceptions and definitions that hazy make the necessary systemic changes near-impossible.

There are many things that are right about new urbanism. As with sustainable development, new urbanism needs to adopt a trimodal perspective that allows them to clearly differentiate “restorative new urbanism” from “new urbanist sprawl”.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

Let’s review a few of the characteristics of restorative development that makes it the logical next step for all four of the above dialogues, whether it’s to replace them or to evolve them.

Restorative development is nonpartisan & non-divisive: Restorative development’s “opposite” is new development. New development is a legitimate economic activity during the pioneering phase of building a city or civilization, but there obviously comes a time when we have to de-emphasize that mode. While sprawl builders understandably take umbrage at being called “dumb”, they don’t have any problem with being called “developers” (as opposed to “redevelopers”).

Restorative development is “structurally sound” as a development strategy: It’s not just a collection of policy patches to an antiquated system. As long as restorative development is not structurally built into an area’s strategy, planning, and budgeting, it will manifest haphazardly, and revitalization will have trouble maintaining any momentum. It’s important to realize that a plethora of new buildings can be built within the agenda of restorative development, because the goal is to restore the value of the land, and to revitalize neighborhoods. Plenty of new structures are created on remediated brownfields, and on redeveloped waterfronts. One of the major new trends is airspace development, which allows cities to revitalize old neighborhoods whose connectivity was severed decades ago to badly-located highways (such as Winn Development’s plans in Boston).

Restoration—unlike smart growth and sustainable development—is a fundamental mode of development, not just a dialogue. It has a solid base in theory, and it has a taxonomy (the trimodal perspective, the 12 sectors, etc.) on which one can build policies, plans, budgets, and reporting systems. Restorative development is more palatable to developers than sustainable development or smart growth because it’s not built on legislation that’s heavily based on telling us what we can’t do (like smart growth): Restorative development produces fast, dramatic results. When properly supported by integrated revitalization program, it decreases sprawl by offering far more attractive options to developers and politicians alike.

Revitalization Institute is leading this shift worldwide. Revitalization Institute’s Integrated Revitalization Initiative organizes research, education, and tool development related to integrated approaches to restorative development. Its new Partner Network

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of companies, NGOs, and post-secondary institutions are the ones who actually apply this research to actual project and services to developers, communities, regions, and countries. A custom integrated revitalization strategy created by one of those Partners can help communities get a grip on their entire inventory of restorable assets, in all twelve sectors of restorable assets. Of course, a clear vision must precede a strategy, so dialogue-facilitation and visioning services are also offered by those Partners.

Integrated revitalization is rapidly taking hold outside of the U.S., and is rapidly supplanting smart growth in the communities, counties, regions in the U.S. that are ready to move from dialogue to systemic change. The best example in the U.S. is probably John Knott's Noisette Project in North Charleston, SC. Even though its design preceded the development of Revitalization Institute's tools (such as its Integrated Revitalization Guide), the visionary Noisette Project incorporates (and inspired) many of their elements.

We have finally realized that we can't continue to base economic growth on discovering new continents and extracting virgin resources: We live on a finite planet with a growing population. Likewise, we are realizing that conserving what's left of our natural environment—while crucially important—is no longer sufficient. Only restoring the existing depletion of natural resources can lead us to a healthier and wealthier future, along with renewing the value, beauty, and function of our best planning, architectural, and engineering accomplishments. As Teddy Roosevelt said, "The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation INCREASED in value." (emphasis added).

Ending each year with more natural resources—creating a healthier, wealthier, and more beautiful world with each project—is a very different paradigm from "merely" sustaining the world, making industry smarter / greener, or making neighborhoods more livable. Strangely enough, even though restoration and revitalization are loftier goals, their rapid return on investment make them far more practical and achievable. Many thanks to the sustainable development and smart growth dialogues for getting us here, but let's not get so attached to the dialogue that we can't grow beyond them.

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