

May You Live In Interesting Times

THAT OLD CURSE IS PARTICULARLY TIMELY for planning commissioners and planning staffs. On top of climate change, they must chart a path forward in a world increasingly shaped by demographic, economic, and technological changes. These changes can bring opportunity to cities and suburbs alike if they are willing to let go of the old principles that have guided their work for decades.

Take, for example, two very different places: long-suffering downtown Hammond, Indiana, and affluent, suburban Newton, Massachusetts.

With my colleague Jeff Speck, AICP, I am working on a revitalization plan for downtown Hammond, which was the 1940s setting for the classic film, *A Christmas Story*, but today is almost a ghost town. In Newton, I am collaborating on a plan to revitalize an outdated strip center in the midst of leafy suburban neighborhoods.

These very different places share a common opportunity to reemerge as robust, walkable, mixed use urban centers representing the heart of an increasingly diverse country.

We stand today not at the peak but rather on the cusp of a new era, one that touches almost every community across North America. Millennials and empty nesters are increasingly attracted to urban living—in cities and suburbs alike. Over the next 20 years, their unprecedented numbers will make it difficult to meet the growing demand for housing and amenities.

Meanwhile, knowledge industry jobs will steadily follow well-educated workers to the walkable downtowns and suburban centers that they prefer. Finally, in less than a decade, connected autonomous vehicles (which use various technologies to communicate with drivers) will begin to tip the balance even further toward urban and suburban lifestyles.

Flexibility is key if we are to benefit from these trends. That means adopting a more flexible approach to planning—abandoning fixed outcomes like total square footage and number of parking

spaces in favor of performance-based goals that define outcomes in terms of issues, such as quality of life and economic development objectives.

But fair warning: This kind of flexibility touches the third rail of North American planning: density, traffic, and parking.

Parking

Let's start with parking. Traditional ratios are increasingly meaningless. In some scenarios, more development can mean less parking.

Self-parking cars—likely to be the norm within a decade—will require cities to radically rethink parking requirements. With the arrival of shared autonomous vehicles (often referred to as SAVs), which need far less space, garages could be largely empty.

In Hammond, planning for this future could mean abandoning a potential \$5 million public parking structure and focusing on surface parking in order to support the city's first new mixed use development. Over the next



The Northland Newton Development project outside of Boston (above) will redevelop an existing strip mall (below) into a higher density, mixed use urban village with commercial and retail space and more than 800 new housing units surrounding a community green.

two decades, as housing, jobs, and retail uses return downtown, planners, anticipating declining parking demand, recommend that the city hold off on expensive garage investments in favor of sharing existing lots.

Newton is also thinking ahead. City officials understand that parking needs will change over the next two decades. Parking built to serve the first phase of the Needham Street project might eventually have to support some million square feet of additional development.

Traffic

Planners in both cities are starting to look at technology and shared trips to manage the traffic impacts associated with significant development. Both redevelopment initiatives envision narrowing streets to create wider sidewalks, adding protected bike lanes, and finding green solutions to stormwater management.

Density

That brings us to density. The first hurdle is to explain to skeptical stakeholders, who have watched their downtowns decline for decades, that demographics are delivering a new era of opportunity.

Planners in Hammond and Newton have taken the lead in educating stakeholders about the potential livability and economic benefits that well-planned and designed spaces can bring—even with higher density.

On the last day of the downtown community charrette, Hammond's public works chief asked Jeff Speck an intriguing question concerning roadway capacity: What would have to be sacrificed to accommodate several million square feet of new downtown development? In the past, that figure would have been enormous. But no more.

"What can we do to make our downtown more walkable?" the official asked.

The future looks bright indeed. ■

—David Dixon, FAIA

Dixon is the vice president of Planning and Urban Design at Stantec. He is based in Boston.



HISTORY A TIME TO REMEMBER

Markers commemorating Hurricane Katrina are everywhere in New Orleans. But the newest is far different from the typical concrete ones.

Thirteen years after the deadly catastrophe, the Flooded House Museum opened this year in Gentilly, where a failed levee adjoining the London Avenue Canal allowed floodwaters to ravage the neighborhood and the rest of the Lower Ninth Ward. A persistent neighborhood activist named Sandra Rosenthal had the inspired idea of saving the last house standing next to the canal and transforming it into the museum. With the help of a corps of volunteers, including two talented young artists, she created a simulation of the flooded interior of the one-story brick dwelling. Its watermarked walls and flood-ravaged furniture are visible night and day through the moldy windowpanes.

"It's the view that the neighbors had when they returned after the flood," she says.

Find out more about the project on Levees.org, the website Rosenthal started in 2007 to inform the public about the cause of the levee failures, which she and many in New Orleans attribute to neglect by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.



Damage depicted by Flooded House Museum in New Orleans serves as a cautionary reminder for those living in areas protected by levees.

—Ruth Knack, FAICP