

COMMENTARY

Needed: A Broadened Environmentalism

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A polycentric urban structure can generate the productive economy we need to sustain a healthy environment—if environmentalists help this new metropolitan form to emerge.

In his brilliant book, *Nature's Metropolis*, William Cronon wrote, "to do well by nature and people in the country, one has to do right by them in the city as well, for the two seem always to find each other in their own image."

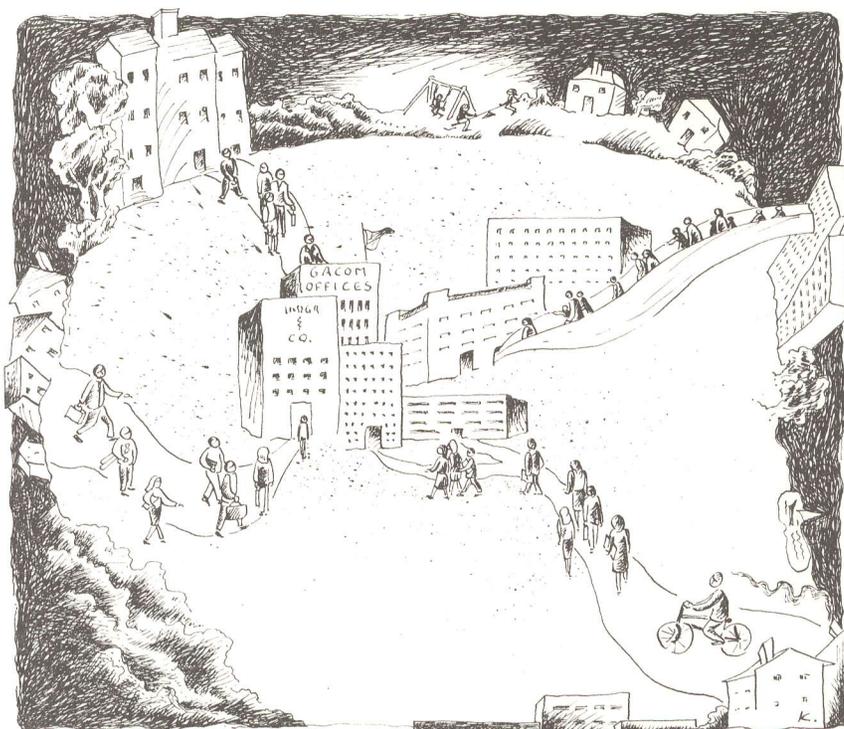
Doing right by people in the city as a requirement for doing well by nature is a concept environmentalists are going to have to pick up on—fast. That is, if they want to play a positive role in giving birth to a healthy 21st century.

A new urban structure is struggling to be born. The economically healthy, competitive regions of tomorrow will consist of linked centers of economic activity spread over large land areas. Whatever we call this phenomenon—edge cities, urban villages, multinucleated centers, polycentric regions—successful regions will have to be internally arranged in ways that will dramatically reduce the time and energy we currently devote to intrametropolitan travel.

Each major activity center in a region will have to be accessible to nearby housing, housing that meets the preferences and fits the earnings of members of all the economic classes that make up a productive society. Like the successful central business districts of the 19th and 20th centuries, the activity centers of the 21st century must be surrounded by relatively small neighborhoods that, in combination, provide diversely priced housing within an easy commute of workplaces.

Research by Peter Gordon, Harry W. Richardson, Myung-Jin Jun, and others has demonstrated that commutation distances in spread-out regions with intraregional jobs/housing balances can be less than in the single-center regions characteristic of the recent past.

The balanced development of polycentric regions can provide businesses with the



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labor force and communications they need to remain competitive. Activity centers that allow a full mix of densities to develop and that devote enough land to residential uses to keep land markets competitive will reap the rewards of new development and the return of filtering to the housing market. Future generations will be given a stake in the housing market, an opportunity that now is denied to people of so many economic classes.

The metropolitan structures that are trying to emerge are, in a word, resource-efficient and promise to provide the lifestyle and job opportunities needed for social cohesion.

The creation of the new urban structure will generate the productive muscle and political motivation to sustain a healthy natural environment. But its coming into being requires an acceptance of change and compromises about growth that will not be possible without the support of leaders of the environmental movement. A recent Gallup poll found that some 76 percent of Americans think of themselves as environmentalists.

If environmentalists, with all the influence they wield, refuse to play a positive pro-

growth role or, worse, if they fight for the imposition of obsolete urban forms on the suburban landscape, the appropriate transformation of metropolitan areas into economically viable regions for the 21st century is unlikely to take place. If the birth of the new urban structure is aborted by the failure of environmentalists to broaden their perspectives, both man and nature will lose a critical opportunity to thrive. ❖

References

Cronon, William. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991.

Gordon, Peter, Harry W. Richardson, and Myung-Jin Jun. "The Commuting Paradox: Evidence from the Top Twenty." *APA Journal*, Autumn 1991.



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