

For Change:**Environmental Responsibility,
Sustainability and Urban Economics
Trends**

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By Claude Gruen

The invention of urban places was the greatest force for change that affected humankind. The pace of change was accelerated by the first settlement of nomadic hunters and gatherers into a village in Mesopotamia. Ever since, what has occurred in urban places has increased the rate and complexity of change. The change born of cities themselves mandates that urban places constantly morph into the new agglomerations and neighborhoods that enable organizations and households to harvest the beneficial results of on-going technical, socio/cultural and economic transitions. Like other organisms, urban places have to change or die, although some cities become museums--think Venice. What happens when the preservation of what *was* forecloses what *can be* is illustrated by once vibrant "downtown" cores, pickled into obsolescence by the subsidization of land uses for department stores and other businesses that are no longer able to remain competitive.

In contemporary discussions of what type of change or urban development, it is often written that development must be environmentally sensitive or sustainable. Environmental responsibility and sustainability are actually two complementary but usefully distinguishable criteria. Environmental responsibility is defined as development and activities that use resources efficiently, maximizing the use of renewable resources and minimizing the external generation of outputs that despoil the natural resources we all share. The energy and material efficiency called for in this definition are met when contemporary buildings are designed and constructed using the type of structural components and building techniques that conform to the specifications of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) laid out by the U.S. Green Building Council. Such structures also minimize the pollutants generated by

their occupation and operation. The external effects of such buildings on the global environmental are as benign as possible, given contemporary technology.

LEED-conforming buildings may cost slightly more to build than less environmentally responsible structures, but their payback is much faster because on-going operations and maintenance costs are lower. Often, encouraging the use of environmentally responsible construction can be done more effectively by focusing on the payback issue than by mandating LEED as a part of the public design review process.

Buildings and other structures that meet the test of environmental responsibility do not necessarily conform to the requirements of sustainability, at least not as such requirements relate to the long term viability of urban places. The definition of sustainability as it relates to urban places and the neighborhood and commercial agglomerations within them is that the parts and whole of the city, town or village must generate enough income to pay for their ongoing maintenance and updating. If the urban place is to be viable over time, the external economies and psychic benefits provided by urban places must support and motivate payments for the maintenance of functional structures and the replacement of obsolete ones. For individual buildings, this means they must be designed to add functional value to adjoining structures, not just use materials efficiently and minimize pollutants.

Similarly, large lot zoning that effectively discounts the price of land to home buyers inefficiently allocates urban land, even if the homes on the oversized lots are built in conformity with the standards set by the U.S. Green Building Council. Euclidean land use regulations that cripple the viability of urban places by stifling the diversity of uses or artificially driving up the price of residential land so as to price out workforce housing cannot be mitigated by environmentally-friendly building design.

Arguments over historic preservation represent a frequent hot potato of

sustainability and are only incidentally related to environmental responsibility. The January 8, 2006 *New York Times* devoted about 2 1/2 pages to Herbert Muschamp's strident criticism of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission's failure to grant landmark status to Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art. Muschamp's objection to the commission's decision is based not on its functional or architectural merit. Instead, he argued that the building should be preserved because it had once housed many events of great importance and significance to the emerging gay community in New York. As I read his polemic, I wondered whether these historic events could not have been aesthetically memorialized in one or more of the rooms in the new Museum of Arts and Design planned for the site. The importance of being able to re-use urban land so as to keep places responsive to the times seems great enough to warrant the use of creative options for remembering the past without stifling the replacement of underutilized or obsolete structures.

As we build urban structures and places, environmental responsibility may well turn out to be a necessary condition for the survival of the planet. But although such building is compatible with creating and evolving sustainable urban places, it should not be mistaken as the same thing.



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