

May 2007

Beyond the Hype: Real Trends in Urban Development

Dear Colleague,

Baby Boomers are not migrating to the city or "back to nature" for retirement, despite numerous reports predicting otherwise. The concept of "place-making" will dominate urban planning in the years ahead. And "Universal Design," the approach to design intended to be as accommodating and inclusive to as many people as possible, is overrated.

These are a few of the insights Snow Properties gleaned on May 11 in Los Angeles during one of the more fascinating real estate forums we've attended in some time. Presented by UCLA in collaboration with the Landscape Architecture and Public Policy Programs, "The Renaissance of Urban Development: Redefining Community," featured thought leaders from urban development and planning, community design, architecture, transportation, public health, the environment, and other areas. Following are some of the key messages we took away*.

From 2003-2030 we can expect a 230 percent increase in the population of people aged 65 and older. The "gray tsunami" of the Boomers is well documented. However, keynote speaker Joel Kotkin challenged much of the hype surrounding Boomers and retirement. He shared trends showing that of all suburbanites over age 50 who move, most (80%) move to another suburban home. That is almost eight times the number that bought in the inner city. More than half of city-dwellers who moved headed out to suburbia. According to Kotkin, most Boomers want to retire in place. Seniors in general want to move to or remain in the suburbs; they do not want to be displaced from their neighborhoods.

Other speakers noted that many of the senior master-planned communities (made famous by developers such as Del Webb) are on the outer edges of towns. Many seniors find them somewhat isolating. These "edge communities" also present mobility issues for the elderly, which was the topic of one entire breakout session. Older drivers as a percentage of all drivers, public transit vs. private vehicle, and auto and pedestrian safety are offshoots of how and where seniors choose to live.

A significant conclusion drawn is to create spaces that allow for "aging in place." Provide seniors the housing product mix that suits their lifestyle needs now by creating new uses in their existing neighborhoods. How is this accomplished? By transforming an older neighborhood site such as a small retail center or elementary school, or through infill. Drilling down more, one transportation expert suggested providing seniors with gas vouchers so they can give their car to their grandchildren who can then drive them around. In other words, support existing networks. And by supporting existing networks, the fight over density is significantly neutralized. Today's NIMBYS just might be transformed into tomorrow's "AIMBYs" - already in my back yard. Remember you heard it hear first.

While no one suggested that urban sprawl is behind us, it's fair to say that cities, communities and planners are getting smarter faster. "Place-making" is more in vogue as changing demographics, energy costs, work/commute considerations, and dual-income households demand better solutions. Suburban town centers with walkable, mixed-use areas that bring a sense of community are increasingly desirable. Place-making is more front and center than the neo-traditional planning movement, which seeks to connect pieces of an existing metro area into a reconfigured community.

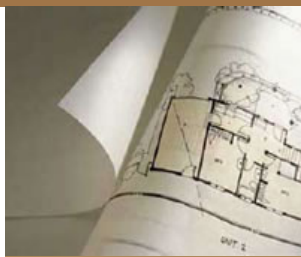
The day-long UCLA Urban Development forum was packed with riveting information on many more topics. We hope to share more of them with you in future issues.

*This commentary is based on our notes from the conference and is shared for general interest purposes. It is not intended as an official or authoritative representation of factual information presented at the conference.

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Did You Know?

Place-making is a term that began to be used in the 1970s by architects and planners to describe the process of creating squares, plazas, parks, streets, and waterfronts that will attract people because they are pleasurable or interesting. Landscape often plays an important role in the design process

Universal design, which is related to "inclusive design" and "design for all," is an approach to the design of products, services and environments to be usable by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability or circumstance. It links directly to the concept of an inclusive society and its importance has been recognized by governments, business and industry

"We have mixed use, mixed tenure, architecture, community architecture, urban design, neighborhood strategy. But what seems to have happened is that we have simply lost the art of placemaking; or, put another way, we have lost the simple art of placemaking. We are good at putting up buildings but we are bad at making places."

Bernard Hunt, English architect

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