



Building Our Future

American cities have been in declining health for half a century, but evidence abounds—from New York and Portland to Fort Collins and Asheville—that the malaise afflicting them may be about over. And Douglas Kelbaugh, dean of the College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan, has a remedy that just might ensure a full recovery.

First, Kelbaugh says, we must invest in cities instead of suburbs. Next, we need to stop subsidizing the automobile. Taxes and regulations should reflect the true cost of operating an automobile, which most of us would find horrifying if we knew what it actually was.

Other powders in Kelbaugh's apothecary include public transit, master planning, promotion of accessory apartments, funding, and the dispersal of governmental power to the regional and neighborhood levels.

Kelbaugh, like so many other urban planners, is unhappy with America's love affair with the automobile. Walter Kulash, a traffic engineer from Orlando, Florida, is unhappy with the people who do traffic planning. Using a highly sophisticated traffic model that predicts travel demand, traffic engineers then design roads to meet that demand. The problem with this approach, Kulash says, is that new roads breed new suburbs

and malls and induce more traffic. About 90 percent of the new road capacity is filled within the first five years after a road is opened.

Kulash believes that if we stop building new roads, the trend toward ever-larger big-box retailers will reverse. We will get more, smaller retailers along main streets, in downtowns, and in neighborhood centers. Instead of moving to the next new suburb, people will stay where they are, investing in and revitalizing their old neighborhoods.

Mark DeKay, an architect at the University of Tennessee, and Micheal O'Brien, a landscaper from Boulder, Colorado, have a vision of what our cities could be like—a vision they call green city. The green city, as the name implies, is built along ecological principles. The ideas it encompasses—neighborhood centers within a five-minute walk, interconnected parks, innovative zoning and tax codes, low-energy buildings shaped and positioned according to the path of the sun and wind, greenways protecting pristine streams, urban vegetable gardens, constructed wetlands for processing wastes, composting toilets, and on and on—have been tried, successfully, in many places. Nowhere, however, have they all been tried together in a single package.

The green city is a wonderful image of the future, but it's a daunting challenge for the developed nations of the world. The flip side of that image is the morass into which most of the cities in

the developing nations are sinking. Nearly half of the world's population now lives in cities, and those cities in the developing world are struggling, not for sustainability, but for minimal standards of health and a decent quality of life. Africa is a dismal example.

As A.C. Moshia, a senior lecturer at the University of Botswana, describes the problems confronting Africa's cities are orders of magnitude greater than what the cities in developed nations experience. Part of the problem is the massive influx of people—40 percent are under 21 years of age—into Africa's cities. Worse yet, these young migrants are poorly educated and bring few skills with them.

The economies of Africa's cities are on a downhill slide. Housing and jobs are scarce, and the environment is getting sicker. Basic services, like clean water, sewage systems, and garbage collection, are often lacking. In many cases, the cities have simply ceased to function altogether. But despite these ills, Moshia believes the biggest stumbling block is people's attitudes. Once attitudes change, he says, Africa's cities can finally begin to work. Their residents can then begin building a future that even developed nations will be proud of.

The Editors