

BY TIM FERGUSON

For some time, the city-planning vogue has been a school known as New Urbanism or Sustainable Communities. Neo-traditional by some people's lights, it is aimed at healthy socialization, incorporating diverse but properly scaled elements: front porches, walkable streets, transit corridors, sidewalk-close commerce – you get the picture.

The common objective is to retard sprawl, foster human contact and get the beastly automobile under control. If “it takes a village,” this is the village. New towns – Seaside FL, the Kentlands MD, the Laguna West development near Sacramento – are examples. Dozens of less ambitious projects have put the model into varying degrees of practice.

But if New Urbanism principles are to reach far across the American landscape, they have to be applied not just to the new, but also to well-worn districts and suburbs. And here the concepts encounter problems, as one moving part affects another and everything rubs up against someone's comfort zone.

A cautionary lesson may be found close to my home, in the case of *Target v Santa Monica*. This is not literally a legal matter, although it could have come to that if the Minneapolis-based Target, one of America's biggest discount department store chains, had chosen to play it that way. Target and its development partner spent three years and more than \$250,000 trying to get permission to build a primed-up flagship in the midst of

Santa Monica's revived downtown, only to be turned down this winter because – well, that's the story.

From the standpoint of New Urbanists, Santa Monica (pop. 89,000) has done just about everything right over the last two decades. A beach town that grew from early airplane industry incubator to affordable, breezy bedroom for Los Angeles by mid-century, it caught the California coastal updraft in real-estate prices in the 1970s. At that point, a city council under the thrall of residents Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda gained national attention by imposing strict residential rent controls and other market-dampening measures that were manna for Santa Monica's significant apartment-dwelling constituency.

Rent controls are not necessarily part of New Urbanism, but the care and feeding of a mixed population is. Most Santa Monica city councils since have tended to low-income needs through a variety of support programs, housing allocations and targeted services, even as the city became an ever more desirable address for the affluent – not to mention for the Milken Institute.

The city operates 167 (going on 200) clean, efficient buses that ferry passengers around

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town and throughout much of the west side of Los Angeles for a fare of 50 cents or less. And just this year, the city imposed an ambitious “living wage” ordinance designed to close the income gap.

But even as the price of Santa Monica’s homes went through the roof in the 1980s,

How does a prominent New Urbanist respond to the Santa Monica decision? I asked the Florida-based Andres Duany, who with wife and partner, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, is considered a pioneer architect-planner of this school. His reply:

We have no objections to Big Box retailers so long as they are embedded within or associated at the edge of Main Street retailers, always hiding their parking as did the department stores of old.

Of course, local stores are better as they plow back more of their profits into the community, but those rarely provide lower prices.

As far as traffic is concerned: something or other will fill the roadway capacity. If not the Big Box, then something else.

If the problem is snobism, then it is misplaced in the case of Target, as it is the one chain that provides well-designed goods.

the city had to contend with a dowdy, failing downtown business district – a problem shared with myriad other mature locales. The small shops had lost sales to outlying mega-stores. So Santa Monica took an early flier on the kind of civic infrastructure that since has become the rage across the nation. It closed three central city blocks to auto traffic and relandscaped them as a pedestrian strip. A dozen years later, the Third Street Promenade

is one of America’s glittering retail success stories.

The Promenade did more or less what New Urbanists want to do with the village square: bring a variety of people together by eliminating cars and other obstructions, and create an environment in which spontaneous interaction is easy. “Mixed use” is encouraged, usually in the form of apartments or office suites on top of storefronts. Santa Monica’s formidable numbers of homeless bring an edgy urban feel to the Promenade, yet are not sufficiently threatening to scare away the shoppers.

The big gains at the cash registers (and concurrently, bookings at a string of high-end hotels now lining the beachfront a few blocks away) served to bolster city revenues – and by more, perhaps, than those not familiar with California’s unusual fiscal profile would expect. The state’s municipalities primarily depend on sales and excise taxes, earning little from property levies. In the last decade, Santa Monica’s sales tax receipts have risen to \$26.5 million from \$16.3 million; taxable sales by Promenade stores went up sixfold. What’s more, hotel tax revenues jumped to \$19.7 million from \$6.3 million.

Commercial revitalization has helped to pay for Santa Monica’s welfare state pretensions. But the progressive vision has collided with two seemingly immutable facts of life. First, when receipts go up, so do commercial rents. And second, when people – even good liberals – can afford to keep and use automobiles, most of them will.

Rents for ground-floor space along the Promenade tripled from 1995 to 2000. No surprise, JC Penney and Woolworth’s pulled up stakes, along with dozens of smaller retailers and \$5 lunch spots. Sears still operates downtown, but it is separated from the Promenade by a 1970s-style indoor mall and is out



of strolling range.

In have come Restoration Hardware, Sephora, Banana Republic, Barnes & Noble, Pottery Barn, Discovery Store and PF Chang's. There are few spots left for sundries and basic housewares and little in the way of bargain apparel. Santa Monicans must drive five miles or so to the nearest big-box discounters.

This was the void that Target sought to fill with 175,000 square feet on the site of a former, family-run department store, now a parking lot. In deference to the city's ecological fetishes, the company promised a totally green building, including off-the-grid power from renewable sources, clean-fueled delivery trucks and zero emissions to storm drains. Target also pledged money to various community support groups for children, seniors and battered women – philanthropy, incidentally, much in keeping with the corporation's do-gooder reputation.

But opponents surfaced, groups ranging

from nearby condo dwellers fearing noisy deliveries, to antiglobalists objecting to products produced in low-wage countries, to unionists balking at Target's labor policies, to aesthetes dreading the addition of a giant "suburban" store to the ostensibly eclectic (if increasingly upscale) downtown retail mix. Target was to sit next to a Toys "R" Us that already offends local sensibilities. But the final design of the proposed structure bore little resemblance to the typical Target big box and left room only for architectural nit-picking.

The real deal-breaker was fear of the crowds that Target would draw. Perhaps 7,000 additional car trips a day meant that downtown streets, which have already filled as the Promenade's popularity grew and other developments sprouted in Santa Monica, would become appreciably more congested. Store officials and city staff gamely proposed mitigations. Target said it would give away bus tokens and open to a new mass transit ter-

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minal. But no one could wish away the additional vehicles.

Now, many a New Urbanist welcomes bustle – even combustion engine-aided bustle – in the city center, but Santa Monicans broadly parted company with them here. Whether comfortable homeowners or avant-garde artists, they told the city council they didn't want to wait in more traffic.

And wait they would have. Because, except for the committed or constrained – here, we are talking about the very old, very young or very poor – residents of Santa Monica, of California, of nearly anyplace in the United States outside of a handful of cities, default to the car for trips of more than a few blocks. This is particularly true when a purchase is contemplated; only bag ladies walk around with shopping bags in mainstream America.

Santa Monica's commercial revitalization is, in fact, evidence of this reality. Easy access to 10 municipal parking structures with very cheap rates is considered essential to the Promenade's success. Indeed, for realists, part of the attraction of the Target store was the company's willingness to build underground parking for hundreds of cars above and beyond what it needed for its own clientele.

Santa Monica and almost everywhere else in America, it seems, prefers New Urbanism Lite: at the beginning and end of each stroll is a car trip. A tribune for the movement, James Howard Kunstler, wrote in his book, *Home From Nowhere*: "Most urban areas and even many small towns (like my own) now suffer from density deficits. There are not enough people living, or business activities, at the core to maintain the synergies necessary for civic life."

But most Americans don't agree. They may be attracted to congestion as tourists in the great cities. They may even want pedestrian

congestion in their own village core. But they don't want it getting in the way of their everyday life, which is to say their driving life. Wait more than one cycle at a stoplight? Fuhgedaboutit. That is why in-fill development, which is what Target really represented, is great as a public policy nostrum and a political loser at the neighborhood level.

Target thought it had a fighting chance in Santa Monica. Thanks in part to its seeding of the grassroots, scores turned out to urge the city council to approve the store. Any number of speakers claimed to be part of one constituency or another that had put the city's left-progressive coalition in power, and some threatened retribution at the polls if they didn't get bargains in the bargain. Seniors were the most vocal.

But the council, evidently sensing the larger and somewhat latent public desire, turned down the development 5 to 2. The greenest members of the council gave a thumbs-down, despite all the company's gestures. Also among the five were the two moderates who generally represent what radicals in town would dub bourgeois interests.

Everyone has a voice in Santa Monica, democracy being an implied virtue of New Urbanism. And compared with most of California, an unusual number of city residents are transit dependent or auto-defiant. But Santa Monica would not secure an affordable retail base for them, if that meant antagonizing the local motorists. The first priority, it turns out, is traffic flow.

So the question remains for New Urbanist wannabes considering community retrofits: how do you foster an environment that accommodates cars, but reaches the critical mass to support anything more than a boutique Broadway? Santa Monica can't get there. In the meantime, it will be a prosperous but politically precarious place. **M**