

Broken Promises: Sprawl and the American Experience

Can any idols of the nations bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Is it not you, O LORD our God? We set our hope on you, for it is you who do all this.

Jeremiah 14:22

If anything, there appears to be an inverse relationship between our growing obsession with the home as a totem object and the disintegration of families that has become the chief social phenomenon of our time. We worship this idealized container for family life, and yet it turns out that the family cannot be sustained without the larger container of community life.

James Howard Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere*

■ Do You Know the Way to San Jose?: The False Promise of Sprawl

One of my earliest childhood memories is of sitting at the breakfast table with my mom, listening to the AM radio after everyone else had left for school. One song I remember distinctly from that morning tradition

was Dionne Warwick's "Do You Know the Way to San Jose?" This song tells the story of a woman who is disillusioned with the big city of Los Angeles and wants to get back to San Jose, where everything is peaceful, beautiful, and spacious. I remember this song because it evoked such vivid images in my mind. It impressed upon me both that the big city was dirty and impersonal and that there existed idyllic enclaves with names like San Jose, where one could escape all of the city's problems and find fulfillment and meaning. It was an odd impression in some ways, because Seattle—the city in which I actually resided—was a fairly pleasant and nurturing place, from which I had never really harbored any fantasies of escape. So at the same time, the song evoked a suspicion of a city I had never visited and painted an idealized picture of escape from that place and others like it.

This impression lasted within me until I actually had the occasion to visit San Jose. I do not remember the exact date of my first encounter with that city, but I had seen San Jose on the map of northern California many times. It is located on Highway 880, somewhere between Berkeley and Santa Cruz. I know this because I attended college in Berkeley and spent a summer as a camp counselor in the mountains of Santa Cruz. However, it took a couple of times driving this particular stretch of road before I realized that I had encountered the San Jose of my childhood imagination.

What I observed on that highway was nothing like the image that had formed in my head from the song. In fact, nothing on that stretch of highway evoked a distinct impression of a city, a town, or any kind of defined human community. The view from the highway (where you could see past the concrete sound barrier) consisted of an unbroken sea of strip malls and housing developments. And on the unfortunate trips where I needed to actually exit the freeway for some reason or another, I was utterly disoriented by the lack of architectural cues that might direct me to the center of town or the commercial hub. It was so ugly and so lacking in any evidence of human community that I could not fathom what Los Angeles must have been like to make this place appear idyllic in contrast.

Now, it must be acknowledged that a lot of time had passed between when that song was written and my ill-fated voyages through this civic wasteland. Perhaps there was a time when San Jose was the perfect antidote to the problems of Los Angeles. But if it was, it had certainly taken a turn for the worse by the time I visited it. San Jose has since become for me a symbol of the kinds of poor decisions that are being made in this country regarding our human habitation. And it has served as a warning about where we are heading if we don't take a hard look at the assumptions and motivations behind these decisions.

■ False Gods and the American Experience

It is important to note that we have not been backed into sprawl and standardization as the dominant mode of development because of poverty, national crisis, or other limiting factors. Instead, we have boldly and confidently marched toward these unsatisfying arrangements with no one to blame but ourselves. We have done so, I believe, because we have been worshiping false gods in the name of American values.

These gods go by the names of individualism, independence, and freedom, but they take many forms in our daily experience. In this chapter, we will discover that these gods are beset by the same weakness of all false idols; namely, they consistently fail to deliver what they promise. We will suggest biblical values related to but not synonymous with these false gods that offer a more hopeful direction for our aspirations.

Individualism

Individualism can be defined as “the doctrine that the interests of the individual should take precedence over the interests of the state or social group.”¹ Individualism has been an important value in this country since its very inception. The first immigrants to this country came looking for freedom to worship God according to their individual conscience and not according to state directive. Individualism provides the basis for our founding documents, with the Declaration of Independence asserting each person’s right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This value was a foundational idea for this country, and it has not been diluted as it has been handed down from generation to generation.

Limitations on individualism are tolerated only in cases where the exercise of your individual rights impinges on my freedom to exercise mine. For example, a city ordinance that restricts noise levels after a certain hour at night is acceptable because your right to make noise is tempered by my right to have a peaceful night’s sleep. On the other hand, a city ordinance restricting the palette of color from which you can choose your house paint is unacceptable (to our dominant mode of thinking) because the color of your house in no way limits my freedom to choose the color of my house. The value placed on individualism in this country is not necessarily limited to the private citizen but seems to apply to commercial entities as well. If Wal-Mart wants to open a store in our city, or if a developer wants to erect a massive tract home development on the outskirts of the city, any attempt to block or restrict the plans is seen to be authoritarian and thus unacceptable.

Individualism, theologically considered, may not be altogether bad. But our militant devotion to this value can easily become for us a false god and a distraction from the will of God for our lives. God is not overly concerned with our individual rights and preferences, but rather wants us to submit these things to himself and to one another out of love. Of course, God does care for us deeply as individuals. One of the great mysteries of the Christian faith is that the more we submit our will to the will of God, the more we become uniquely ourselves.

This leads us to the other problem with individualism—at least in the form that we have come to understand it. Individualism simply does not deliver what it promises. If a visitor to the United States were to view the acres and acres of identical tract home developments that we build and occupy year after year, do you think he or she would ever guess that our country was founded on a deep reverence for individualism? Imagine that same person on a tour of American cities including such diverse locations as Atlanta, Houston, and Seattle, seeing the same chain retail stores taking over in each and every location until it becomes difficult to distinguish one place from the other? Would the person not assume that this is a state-run economy wherein the individual good is valued much less than the collective?

Granted, we could explain to our visitor the indisputable fact that virtually every purchase made at the chain retail store and every purchase of a home in the tract development resulted from individual choice. But we would also have to concede that in many cases the choices of the personal consumer had been overshadowed by the choices of the giant corporation. We would have to explain that if people did happen to want an individually designed home or to shop somewhere besides the large chain retailer, they would find their options severely limited. Large corporations and major developers have limited the options available to the individual consumer by driving out the competition.

This is not initially perceived as a limit on our individual freedom, because in the short term we have more choices and lower prices. But in the long run, our options can become considerably more limited. We are hard-wired to resist governmental intervention in these kinds of situations, but the fact of the matter is that sometimes we need the government to balance out the corporations' freedom in order to preserve the consumers' freedom.

When Jesus was in the midst of a very large crowd, he surprised his disciples by asking “Who touched my clothes?” and took the time to notice one particular woman who was desperate for an encounter with him.² Jesus encountered people one at a time, as individuals, and he took a different approach with each person to whom he ministered. He healed one person with mud and spittle and another with a simple command. And

he taught that God has every single one of the hairs on our heads numbered. Jesus honored and preserved the individual identity of people through his relationship with them and his compassion toward them.

When we compare Jesus' approach to ministry to our increasingly standardized housing and retail choices, he seems to have a lot more respect for the individual than our narrow version of consumer individualism seems to offer. And so developing a healthy respect for the individual in our building practices and in our consumer choices might actually better reflect the Christian values to which we subscribe. Consider the comments the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper made over one hundred years ago about standardized housing in America:

There is not a gable to be seen which in any way violates the absolute symmetry to which door and window, cornice and roof window, have been fitted. Precisely those straight streets and rectangular corners, those utterly level gables and standardized houses make the modern outgrowths of our cities fatally exhausting and boring. You have to number the streets and count them out so as not to get lost in so featureless a collection of houses.³

Contrast his impressions of individually built homes in Holland:

You can immediately tell that no shoddy, money-hungry developer threw up that line of houses but that every dwelling is the fulfillment of a personal dream, the precious product of quiet thrift, based on a personal plan and built slowly from the ground up. Those tufted, tiered, triangular, and shuttered gables were not symmetrically measured with a level but reflected every one of them the thinking of a human being, the whimsicality of a somewhat overconfident human heart.⁴

Perhaps Kuyper's sense of the dehumanizing tendencies implicit in standardized housing and his clear preference for individual expression provide a model for how we might develop a more comprehensive Christian critique of our current housing and retail practices.

Independence

Unlike individualism, which was a founding principle in this country, independence is a value that seems to have grown up more organically in our national experience. Whereas individualism is focused on limiting the institutional forces that might impinge on the individual's freedom, independence focuses on the individual's ability to survive and thrive on his or her own resources. Independence has been idealized in the image

of the American cowboy who rides into town alone, is silently heroic in the face of difficult circumstances, and then rides off into the sunset alone.

This country's love affair with the car has been fueled largely by our preoccupation with independence. The car allows us to do what we want, when we want, irrespective of distance or obstacle. It seems to be the perfect venue for the quintessential American experience and has over the years become the dominant feature of our daily lives. However, what we have failed to realize after almost a century of car culture is that the cumulative effect of our use of this machine has limited its ability to deliver on its promise.

Cars have allowed us to spread out our living patterns significantly. Historically, cities have had a natural limit set by how far people could comfortably walk from place to place. Then, with the development of streetcars, settlement spread in conjunction with the streetcar tracks. Slowly, with the onset of the automobile, the limits on sprawl were all but obliterated. As cars freed up drivers to live, work, shop, and play between farther and farther distances, these great distances became a fixed part of the landscape, making the car necessary for full participation in society. The shift has been subtle, but unmistakable, as we've moved from thinking of the car as a convenience to considering it a necessity.

This arrangement, at best, grants independence to one particular segment of our population while leaving many out. Youth who are too young to drive are completely dependent upon their parents to get them from place to place. There once was a time when a young person could walk to the corner store to get a treat, walk to the local park for baseball practice, and even walk to school. Now many kids need to be driven to each of these settings—putting additional pressure on parents, who must serve as their chauffeurs.

Historically, when a person turned eighteen in this country he or she would be seen to have gained full participation in our culture because of his or her right to vote. But in terms of true access to participation in our culture, voting has been trumped by access to a car and a driver's license. Almost every young person I know is far more excited about turning fifteen (or sixteen) and being able to drive to school, to practice, and to the mall than about turning eighteen and getting a chance to cast a vote in an election that is not perceived to have much bearing on day-to-day life.

When people get too old to drive, they suffer a fate similar to our children's. They must be driven to doctor's appointments, on shopping trips, or to visit their family. The practice of putting the elderly into retirement homes is a relatively recent phenomenon and is yet another outgrowth of our sprawling car culture:

Prior to 1950, there were few if any retirement communities in the United States; they did not exist because they were not needed. The elderly would almost always stay in their old neighborhoods after retiring. Once they lost their ability to drive, they could still maintain a viable lifestyle by walking, even if slowly.⁵

This generational segregation is deeply damaging to the fabric of our society:

The segregation of the old causes the same rift inside each individual life; as old people pass into old age communities their ties with their own past become unacknowledged, lost, and therefore broken. Their youth is no longer alive in their old age—the two become dissociated; their lives are cut in two.⁶

Our love for the car has clearly severed important ties to both the young and the elderly in our midst. And we have not gained much in return.

There are also those who are disabled and cannot drive a car, as well as those who cannot afford a car, who are left behind in our current auto culture. And more and more, even those who have cars and can drive are finding diminishing returns for their independence as we continue to build everything around the needs of the car. Traffic has gotten so bad that even those who can drive are finding restrictions on their mobility around every corner.

Again, it's ironic that our love for independence has led us to create dependent classes among our citizenry. It appears that by focusing our aspiration for independence on one particular group within our culture, we have not only left many other groups in highly dependent situations, but we have also reached a saturation point where everyone's independence is being curtailed. Anyone who has missed an important event because of a traffic jam will have felt this reality. In short, we have found independence to be unable to deliver its seductive promise. Our experience with the car over the past century has exposed independence as yet another false god of the American experience.

Again, we should not be surprised by this outcome, because independence is not held in high regard within the biblical witness. The popular proverb "God helps those who help themselves" is an American invention and is nowhere to be found from Genesis to Revelation. A more biblical value that may be at the heart of our striving for independence is interdependence. Interdependence strives to empower the individual toward some productive end but allows individuals to achieve their maximum potential only in community.

Such interdependence is affirmed very early in the biblical witness when God declares that, “it is not good for . . . man to be alone” and makes for the first human a helpmate and a partner.⁷ It is underscored in the teamwork of Moses and Aaron and in Jethro’s advice for Moses to appoint judges to adjudicate cases among the people.⁸ This notion of interdependence is probably best expressed in Paul’s image of the fellowship in the body of Christ:

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.⁹

The advantage that cities and traditional neighborhoods have over sprawling suburbs with respect to interdependence is that they allow people of a greater variety of ages to participate meaningfully in the culture. Young people, by being able to walk places and conduct transactions, are learning the rules and values of the adults in the community with whom they interact on their way. And elderly persons can be more visible and present (even if mostly sedentary) to pass on their wisdom and perspective to the younger generations.

Consider architect Christopher Alexander’s advice on recognizing interdependence in community life:

Persons at each stage of life have something irreplaceable to give and to take from the community, and it is just these transactions which help a person to solve the problems that beset each stage. . . . Patterns of mutual regulation occur between the very old and the very young; between adolescents and young adults, children and infants and these patterns must be made viable by prevailing social institutions and those parts of the environment

which help to maintain them—the schools, nurseries, homes, cafés, bedrooms, sports fields, workshops, studios, gardens, graveyards.¹⁰

If the church wants to be the “body of Christ” by including every member in its life, shouldn’t the church advocate a communal life that can fully include all members of the society as well?

Freedom

A third and final false god that we have been tempted to worship in this country has been the god of freedom. Freedom has been narrowly understood as escape from external enemies or constraints. Many of our ancestors came to this country for the purpose of escaping persecution or the stifling class system of the Old World. And then, in time, as the East became more crowded and confining, once again they escaped to the frontiers of the West. But even that vast frontier could not provide an escape valve indefinitely. In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner officially declared the American frontier closed. Around the same time, Henry Ford was tinkering with a mass production technique for the automobile.¹¹ The increasingly easy availability of automobiles during the first half of the twentieth century opened up one last frontier for this country and permanently changed the physical shape of our communities. The car has allowed us to escape by pushing our housing, shopping, and recreation to the very fringes of our population cores.

And thus was set in place a pattern of perpetual escape that we are still trying to make work today. As James Howard Kunstler puts it, “Americans, given the choice between civilizing their cities through public works, and using the car to escape the demands of civility, chose the car.”¹² The problem with escapism as a way to deal with problems, as we have observed, is that it cannot go on forever. This is painfully obvious to anyone who has bought a suburban house on the very edge of town only to find a year or so later another development going up where there once was green space. Not only does this kind of development prove personally disappointing, it also builds resentment among people toward their neighbors for destroying their dreams.

The other problem with freedom as escape is that, again, it is not a necessarily Christian value and it is not in our best interest. There are great escape scenes within the biblical witness. The Israelites were able to escape from their slavery in Egypt through the mighty acts of their God.¹³ Daniel and his friends were able to escape the lions’ den.¹⁴ Peter and Paul escaped imprisonment. And Paul used his authority with Philemon to urge him to allow Onesimus to escape his role as a slave.¹⁵

But freedom as we have understood it in this country is not exactly like the biblical accounts of escape. We tend to think of freedom as escape from anything or anyone that is annoying or inconvenient to us. Because of this potential confusion over the concept of escape in our culture, a better word to clarify the biblical understanding of freedom would be *liberation*. To be liberated means to be set free from oppression, and it can also mean to be set free to fulfill the role that God has set forth for a person. Liberation in the biblical witness also allows us to acknowledge the fact that often what we need liberation from is not an external enemy or an outside force but rather ourselves. We are “slaves of sin,” according to Paul, and no matter how far out of town we drive to our home, that enslavement will persist.¹⁶

If we are inconvenienced or annoyed by living, working, and playing in the company of our fellow human beings, perhaps we need liberation from our selfishness and our willfulness rather than a massive home on a two-acre lot (soon to be surrounded by other massive homes on two-acre lots). Living in closer proximity to our neighbors forces us to make compromises of our needs and wants—sometimes allowing us to learn the difference between the two. And as we navigate the delicate balance between our needs and those of our neighbors, we are presented with opportunities to take social risks and talk to our neighbors as we come up with mutually acceptable solutions. When we successfully negotiate these informal social contracts, what we gain—in addition to a satisfying solution—is a deeper and more honest relationship with those among whom we live. When distance and avoidance constitute our sole strategy for coping with our neighbors, this kind of character and relational formation never happens.

We once hosted a play group at our house for the children of some of our friends. One of the participants was a two-year-old boy who lives in a house on a five-acre lot. During the course of the activities, his mother asked us how we could stand to live so close to our neighbors. We tried to explain that having neighbors close by takes a little more work, but it also allows for the kind of human community that we have come to appreciate. This point was completely lost on our guest. Interestingly enough, this woman’s son was having a hard time sharing toys at play group on this particular day. Now this is typical behavior for a two-year-old, and we had all seen our own children exhibit similar behavior. However, by choosing to live in a setting where the adults would not have to share with their neighbors, this woman was limiting her ability to model healthy sharing for her son. In their particular environment, it would be easier to teach freedom as escapism rather than as true liberation.

■ Subsidizing Sprawl

In spending a great deal of time trying to convince people of the values of urban living and the peril of our suburban mentality, I have come to expect a certain resistance to this type of thinking. It is not that people will disagree with the content of what I am saying (although some people do just that). I may make some headway in encouraging people to choose individual identity over individualism, interdependence over independence, and liberation over escapism, and yet there is still some resistance. What they resist is not the values themselves but rather the antipopulist sentiment that seems to be implied in this perspective. Americans, as a whole, have a deep reverence for the free market and a deep skepticism for anything that seems to smack of elitism or authoritarianism. The free market—more so than our electoral system—has come to represent in our minds the will of the people. And it seems, at first glance, that people have freely chosen sprawl and all of its trappings with their hard-earned dollars. To suggest that we “should” do otherwise is perceived as an example of un-American social engineering.

For this reason it is important to understand the various forces behind our sprawl dilemma—specifically, those forces that do not represent free-market capitalism. The fact of the matter is that our government has played a much larger role in our current situation than individual consumers ever have.

Roads

A striking example of this is how the government poured public money into highway development and allowed an extensive and efficient street-car system to go bankrupt. The Federal Highway Act of 1938 provided the funding for an ambitious interstate highway system. By 1953, the government had put almost \$1 billion into 6,000 miles of interstate highway construction. President Eisenhower upped the stakes significantly when he signed into law the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1952, which set into motion a twenty-year plan to build 41,000 miles of highways and began the unchallengeable practice of including billions of dollars each year in our federal budget for building roads.¹⁷ In the year 1999 alone, the federal government contributed more than \$83 billion toward highway construction.¹⁸

At the same time, public transportation was given almost no support from government funds. As Kenneth T. Jackson notes:

Unlike the road, which was defined as a public good and thus worthy of public support, mass transit was defined as a private business unworthy of aid. . . . Thus, Americans taxed and harassed public transportation even while subsidizing the automobile like a pampered child.¹⁹

Even today we see city after city embroiled in endless debate over the wisdom of putting a fraction of what is spent on roads toward the development of an adequate public transportation system. While our government was sparing no expense to encourage sprawl-type development, automobile manufacturers were demonstrating that they too were eager to contribute to the cause. General Motors went so far as to buy up struggling streetcar companies and close them down. GM was convicted of criminal conspiracy for this activity in 1950 (and was fined a mere \$5,000), but the damage was already done.²⁰

After a half-century of neglect and targeted attack, the quality and availability of public transportation was deteriorating, thus making the car more attractive by contrast. At the same time, new roads were being built, which made the car more convenient. Not only did the highways make it cost-effective to live farther and farther out of town, but also many of them cut right through the middle of the city—literally cutting the life force out of vital neighborhoods.

Housing

The second government policy favoring suburbanization was the effort to provide better housing for average citizens. The primary policy designed to meet this objective was the National Housing Act, passed in 1934.²¹ This act provided guarantees on loans for qualified persons and required banks to make loans more affordable by lowering down-payment requirements and extending loan periods. This was a wildly successful government program, and it helped increase homeownership significantly during the years it was in effect. However, the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), created by the act, made policies that favored new homes in new neighborhoods over older homes in older neighborhoods. Not only did this fan the flame for suburban sprawl, but it also caused many people who had been living in the city to move out to the suburbs in order to get a loan. In addition to the direct effects of the FHA strategy, private banks began to adopt FHA policies in their general lending policies.

At the same time, the government was enacting legislation that would destroy many neighborhoods within historic cities. In 1949 Congress began to provide federal loans for cities to “redevelop” blighted urban

areas. According to *National Geographic*, this “‘urban renewal’ raze[d] not only slums, but also stable low-income ethnic and African American neighborhoods.”²² This government policy had three major problems. First, enforcement was left to the local level, and very little of the public housing that was constructed was built in the newer suburban areas. Second, there was a requirement that dilapidated buildings be torn down in order for localities to receive the funds for new public housing. What the government didn’t realize was that these dilapidated buildings, as chaotic as they looked from the outside, really helped to sustain the delicate texture of neighborhoods that were functioning adequately for the communities that lived there.

Last, the public housing structures that were built to replace the old buildings were so oppressive and destructive to community that they became far more dangerous and blighted places than anyone had imagined possible. The “projects,” as they came to be known, separated businesses from residential areas, concentrated all of the residents into a few high-rise buildings, and left too much open space between buildings. It became all but impossible for shop owners and residents to monitor common areas, leaving large territories of their neighborhoods vulnerable to gangs and undesirable activities. Those who had no other options were confined to living their lives in fear, and everyone else fled to the suburbs as quickly as they could.

In sum, for the past half-century, government policy has strongly favored suburban housing over housing in historic cities and neighborhoods. And government policy has turned many of our best urban spaces into civic wastelands. This has greatly reduced the quality and availability of good urban housing for those who might prefer such a setting and has created a situation where the suburban option has become the only reasonable choice for many people. We must own up to the fact that it has not been solely the free market that has driven us to our current sprawl development patterns.

Zoning

The process of zoning for different uses also changed many of the organic patterns of neighborhood development. Originally, zoning was a tool to keep incompatible uses away from each other. As a policy tool it was developed to stabilize real estate values by preventing, for example, a tannery from opening next door to a home. But over time, zoning as a standard practice took on a life of its own and no longer was used merely as a tool to regulate extreme situations. In effect, zoning laws took civic planning out of the public domain and put it into the hands of bureau-

crats and engineers who were more interested in neat and clean drawings and rules than in how things actually functioned in real life. The other use of zoning was for wealthy citizens to exclude undesirable residents from their neighborhoods. In 1926 the Supreme Court declared it legal for local governments to pass zoning laws that separated even compatible uses from each other.²³

Zoning laws restricting multifamily structures (such as apartment buildings) from being built in the same area as single-family homes became commonplace. There was no compelling reason for this application of zoning laws other than to keep less wealthy people out of wealthy neighborhoods. Other questionable zoning practices began to emerge at this time and were similarly going unchallenged. Soon it became commonplace to exclude all commercial activity from residential areas. Thus, the practice of extreme separation was put into place, making it illegal in some places to have a corner grocery or coffee shop in a residential neighborhood and sometimes making sure that only houses of a similar size existed in the same area.

■ Illegal Neighborhoods

One convenient example of the impotence of the free market in our housing divisions is my own neighborhood. I live in a traditional neighborhood that is about a ten-minute walk from downtown. Because of its charm and proximity to the amenities of the city, it is a very popular neighborhood. You rarely will see a “For Sale” sign in this neighborhood, because houses routinely sell the day they go on the market. Houses on my street have continued to grow in value, regardless of the fluctuations of the real estate market, and have outpaced the market year after year.

One would think that the market would respond to this popularity by building similar types of neighborhoods in other parts of the city. But developers don’t do this, because 60 percent of my neighborhood is non-compliant with the current zoning codes. We have a grocery store, a coffee shop, a bakery, and a hair stylist all within walking distance. Houses are “insufficiently” set back from the street. Most streets have alleys along the backs of the houses. And we have large mansions next door to small houses and even apartment buildings. My neighborhood serves as a constant reminder of the fact that the “invisible hand” of free-market capitalism is not solely responsible for our sprawling housing patterns of the last half-century. The reasons for our current situation are many and complex, and whether we like it or not, the way out will require more than just individual consumer choices.

Americans pride themselves on their ability to change and to adjust to new situations. And in this sprawl dilemma we see many people seeking out a more sustainable and satisfying solution. People are showing a willingness to give up some of their independence, individualism, and escapist tendencies to experience true community. But we need to change institutionally and structurally as we are changing individually if we truly wish to resist these false gods that have held us captive for so long.