

Downtown Development – Our Past Restored

By Lisa H. Lewis

Traditional American thought usually assumes that bigger is better. While growth is healthy and important, it can sometimes get out of hand. Sprawl is the term planners have given to growth gone wild. Problems such as traffic congestion, inadequate public utilities and poorly connected areas can result from unplanned growth. Today developers and city planners are experimenting with a managed growth approach to revive urban areas and minimize unwanted urban sprawl. Efforts in city revitalization are being made by many Baton Rouge organizations, both independently and jointly. A comprehensive plan for to revitalize downtown has been undertaken by a group called Plan Baton Rouge.

The goal of this effort is to make our downtown a place we can proudly utilize, for our own recreation and for that of our visitors. This plan, developed by the firm Duany Plater-Zyberk is in the initial implementation stages. This architectural firm leads our nation in the development process called “New Urbanism.” According to Princeton Bardwell, President of the Baton Rouge Growth Coalition, this is the overriding issue with which Baton Rouge planners and developers are grappling: the philosophy of New Urbanism and how it should be applied in our city.

New Urbanism promotes a return to mixed-use town areas, community styled neighborhoods where people can live, work, play and develop a sense of belonging. It calls for communities designed so that people’s daily needs can be met within walking distance from their homes, especially for the elderly and the young. It often incorporates a large transit network for more infrequent needs. New Urbanists advocate providing spaces that welcome people, spaces people will truly utilize to work, congregate and recreate, in an effort to restore a sense of community. Planners are currently debating how this philosophy should be implemented in Baton Rouge.

The idea of preservation usually connotes re-use and revitalization of buildings of the past. Many developers, planners and preservationists propose that in the 2000s, this definition should be enlarged to include not just the built environment but rather the total environment, the whole ecological system. The term “conservation” might be utilized instead to suggest the widespread nature of preservation, the ecological whole.

“Smart growth,” not just growth for its own sake, has taken its place as an important issue, both locally and nationally. Various organizations are at work in our city to decide specifics, including Plan Baton Rouge, NAHB, Urban Land Institute, and the Baton Rouge Growth Coalition. The involvement of the local community is essential to the success of the plan. The implementation of preservation is a local phenomenon, best influenced by those whose daily lives are involved with using the finished product. The success of the plan, however, will ultimately depend upon its acceptance by homebuyers and business owners.

Many American cities have employed New Urbanist theory with great success. Local architect Kevin Harris explained that “the Plan” outlines just how this could benefit Baton Rouge.

The true beauty of this plan lies in the fact that it calls not for one major developer to come in and rescue Baton Rouge, but rather for a thousand small investors in a cooperative effort. This allows us to save ourselves. In addition, it is a smaller, friendlier approach, more typical of the Baton Rouge style.

Some architects, contractors and individuals have already undertaken major remodeling efforts in downtown Baton Rouge. Many old homes have been purchased and are being redone. The present cost of a Beaugard Town area home is approximately \$40 to \$50 per square foot prior to remodeling and \$100 and up per square foot afterwards. As downtown continues to develop, values likely will increase.

Princeton Bardwell observed that Baton Rouge possesses a geographic obstacle to its development in that our downtown area lies at the edge of our city. Since Baton Rouge has grown away from our downtown area, developers are presented with a challenge. Mr. Bardwell, however, is confident of a positive outcome. He commented,

I believe this challenge can be overcome with the tremendous talent we have available. We can redesign and create uses to draw people back downtown and breathe new life into that area. Already many individuals and groups are making progress towards these goals. The prospects for downtown rejuvenation are very favorable. Baton Rouge's redevelopment plan is popularly supported, and a crucial cohesiveness is building that energizes the project. This cohesiveness also adds economic stability and security to investors and attracts people to the downtown market. The well-defined nature of the urban development plan aids as well by providing knowledge that instills security and facilitates the reinvestment necessary to keep the area alive.

Many developers' philosophies are changing in conformance to the New Urbanism recommendations. Some feel that expert planning must take first priority, re-use efforts must be made, and wetlands and green areas preserved rather than drained or developed. In Baton Rouge, there are a few key pieces that must fit into place to make the plan work. Parking and mass transportation around the downtown area are crucial. The new State of Louisiana parking garage is currently under construction and will become a big part of the solution. Additionally, the Plan calls for a trolley loop around the downtown area, one that follows the route of an original trolley line. Kevin Harris explained why he feels this is critical.

Trolley stops are fixed entities that cannot be relocated on the whim of city officials like bus stops could be. They promote a great deal of stability and confidence in specific locations. I believe that stops have been planned carefully for downtown Baton Rouge so that a person is never more than a block and half from a stop anywhere in the area. The concentration of pedestrian traffic will help small businesses along transit routes to flourish.

If Baton Rouge follows the New Urbanism philosophy, a local trend away from single-family, detached homes as the primary desired residence should result. According to Preservation in Print's November 1997 article, "The New Urbanism,"

Since World War II, America's ideal has been individual ownership of a freestanding, single-family residence situated on its own suburban lot. We've worked relentlessly to achieve this ideal with little concern for the consequences to cities or to the natural environment. Now it is time for the pendulum to swing back the other way. The New Urbanism is the most significant evidence that Americans do appreciate the urban experience.

Some downward shift in square footage should result as well. Space is at a premium in concentrated, urban locations. Townhomes will likely be in demand. The new American architectural trend towards incorporating function, quality detailing and comfortable space into a reduced square footage blends well with the townhome concept. This trend, inspired by Susan Susanka's recent book, The Not So Big House, has taken off in California with a challenge to architects to build a richly appointed, functional home while shrinking the square footage requirements by 25%. The idea that "less can sometimes work as more" has spread to many areas of the United States and may be seen in Baton Rouge within the next few years. This idea presents a new option which may be the preference of some buyers.

Some shifting of government regulations might be necessary, as well as government subsidized programs to encourage re-use and discourage excess development. The Plan Baton Rouge web page recommends that we should: "Revert from zoning-based planning to code-based planning. America's zoning laws, intended to control the baneful effects of industry, have mutated into a system that corrodes civic life, outlaws the human scale, defeats tradition and authenticity, and confounds our yearning for an everyday environment worthy of our affection." That is what preservationists and architects strive to create – a living space worthy of our affection.

In 1980, the National Trust for Historic Preservation created the National Main Street Center to encourage revitalization of small-town downtown areas. One of its thrusts is the restructuring of laws, programs and policies to support downtown rejuvenation. ("Striking Back at Sprawl" Historic Preservation, Sept./Oct. 1995) Boston's Roslindale (twelve minutes south, connected by a commuter rail line) has been a recent successful "Main Street" program. Its city initiative, called Boston Main Streets, attempted to rejuvenate small town business in existing commercial areas. It involved huge amounts of cooperation and grass roots involvement. As stated in the April/May 2000 issue of Historic Preservation's article entitled, "Boston Tryout," "perhaps it will spur improvements in other cities..." Baton Rouge may be one of them.

Critics of New Urbanism have few, if any, objections to the theory behind the movement. As quoted in the November 1998 issue of Architecture, Planner Alex Krieger addresses the New Urbanists:

You – and we all – are for investing in central cities. You – and we all – are for limiting placeless sprawl. You – and we all – are for minimizing racial and economic segregation. You – and we all – are for avoiding environmental deterioration. Does anyone not want to avoid the erosion of society's built heritage?

In practice, however, more criticisms arise. Mr. Krieger continues, pointing out that New Urbanists themselves have created more subdivisions (though they have not been called such) often relatively homogeneous and without enough density to support mixed use. In addition, he points out that perpetuating the nostalgic or pseudo-nostalgic notion of old-fashioned good times may promote flight from real places just at a time when those real places might be on the verge of rejuvenation.

New Urbanist developments have also been criticized for developing into extremely high-priced areas. This may be only the result of short supply and high demand. As more such areas are completed and supplies catch up, demand may level off and prices should decrease, according to architect Kevin Harris. The issue of economic justice arises as well, since some long-time downtown residents are likely to be outpriced by the "success" of downtown redevelopment. Hopefully fair solutions can be ironed out if the plan progresses.

Some planners feel that Baton Rouge's downtown revitalization avoids the major potential pitfalls. Local architect Kevin Harris pointed out:

The Duany Plater-Zyberk plan seems to be a great way to encourage Baton Rouge development. How New Urbanism is applied is very important to its outcome. I feel that our situation downtown is unquestionably a wonderful area to apply its principles and rebuild a rewarding product.

A new design alone will not re-form our downtown area into a vibrant community. Only the interaction of people in meaningful space can accomplish that. Developers, planners and city officials must work together as they consider the reuse of our older areas to give them functions that meet the needs of complex, 21st century people. Plan Baton Rouge contains many new, interesting ideas. Implementation of this plan, however, will require market acceptance by homebuyers and business owners. If sustained investment does in fact take place, we may see a tremendous revitalization of our historic downtown area. Ultimately, however, the market will play the role of arbitrator. Suburban living is likely to remain the preferred choice of many homebuyers. Acceptance of the return to an urban lifestyle by a significant percentage of consumers will be necessary to sustain the success of this project.

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