

Agriculture is the New Golf:

Rethinking Suburban Communities

by Alison Arieff, *Good* magazine, Issue 19, 28 April 2010

There is new movement to plan suburban communities around farms instead of golf courses. Can it catch on?

It has often been observed that suburbia is a place where the developer displaces animals and rips out trees, and then names the streets after them.

Whether you see that as destruction or reinvention, the tendency is nothing new. All of America was built on this sort of land transformation, some of it smart, much of it not. But the devastation wrought from decades of intervention by heavy equipment has manifested itself in a range of ills from economic collapse to loss of biodiversity. So today we're faced with a strange scenario: Our relentless pursuit of the American Dream now has us scrambling for a return to Eden.

"We're at a watershed in terms of reaching the limits of sustainability both environmentally[and in] time and expense," says June Williamson, coauthor with Ellen Dunham-Jones of *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs*. "There are many dynamics pushing and encouraging a rethinking of our development patterns. The opportunity is there to reshape those settings in a way that will reflect changing demographics, recognize climate change, and acknowledge the need for new suburban development patterns."

Look at Google Maps images of any platted but unbuilt or unfinished subdivision—all remaining evidence of what stood before erased, replaced with flattened house lots with nothing on them, paved streets including curvy cul-de-sacs, and even street signs, but no signs of life—and you'll understand the impulse to do things differently. According to the American Farmland Trust, more than 6 million acres of agricultural land in the United States were lost to development between 1992 and 1997 alone. Consider that many of those acres were lost to developments that never saw the light of day. Is it too late to restore that acreage? And is it possible that agriculture could be suburbia's best hope?

Well, sort of. It's not as if Orange County, California, despite its dire decline in home values, is going to revert back to acres of orange groves. But around the country, there's a growing interest in looking at the ways agriculture might help retrofit ailing suburbs and cities, and offer an alternative way of thinking about new developments. Growing Power, run by the urban farming expert, MacArthur Foundation "genius," and GOOD 100 honoree Will Allen, has already demonstrated the potential of urban (and suburban) farming with six greenhouses on nearly two acres of land in Milwaukee as well as a 40-acre rural farm 45 minutes away in the suburb of Merton. And in Detroit, the entrepreneur John Hantz is moving forward with an ambitious but controversial plan to build the world's largest urban farm—and with it, create green jobs, help the environment, and supply food to the region.

In cities, agriculture might be able to take the place of vacant lots. And in suburbia? Well, in 2008, Andres Duany, the New Urbanist, proclaimed that "agriculture is the new golf". "Only 17 percent of people living in golf-course communities play golf more than once a year." Why not grow food, as advocated in several of Randall Arendt's books: *Rural by Design* (1994), *Growing Greener* (1999), and *Envisioning Better Communities* (2010). Featured in them are case studies of Farmview in Bucks County PA and Farmcolony in Greene County VA. At Farmview (dating from 1987), 130 acres of prime farmland were saved in the midst of a full-density subdivision where houselots were reduced in size to preserve that land - which added value to every lot. And at Farmcolony (13 years older), about 150 acres were similarly preserved through the same technique, known as "conservation subdivision design". Built at a one-acre overall density (but with half-acre lots) on public water and sewer, Farmview is decidedly suburban, while Farmcolony is built at the rural five-acre density with lots ranging from one to two

acres, served by well and septic.

While we may have a way to go before we achieve a reality of agricultural urbanism or suburbanism, this idea seems increasingly reasonable: that we design around agriculture just as golf communities were designed around courses. (Though even the most fervent fan of farming might concede the disparity in cachet between bogeying and back-hoeing.)

The opportunity to design a development from scratch is rare in this period of housing-market implosion, and it's not quite that simple. Residents may clamor for a house overlooking a pristine green; the realities of farming (smell, flying dust, muck, etc.) demand greater separation between land and house.

That was just one of the challenges facing the planners from the architecture and land-planning firm Hart Howerton when it was approached by California's Solano County, a region that already had the agriculture but couldn't figure out how to create a community within it. In recent years, the region, once blooming with cherry orchards, has been overrun with gas stations and fast-food restaurants. The county hoped Hart Howerton could help it solve a long-standing conflict between the open space desired by neighbors and development rights desired by landowners. Many of those landowners were farmers whose livelihoods had vanished and who had no option but to sell to the highest bidder, resulting in what the architect Brendan Kelly describes as "crap development. You know, the sort of 'take a nice orchard and turn it into Stonebridge/Meritage/Quail Run' crap. If nothing was done lands would remain fallow."

In Solano, Kelly and his colleague Amie MacPhee created a plan for a clustered rural community that marries innovation with deeply rooted farming patterns. The big idea here is that they've retrofitted not buildings but the typical pattern of development: The existing agricultural land is clustered into a 1,400-acre plot, while the rest of the community is preserved open lands, habitat preservation, and a village of 400 homes at the center. A land conservancy, partially funded by a percentage of home sales, would provide a mechanism with which to manage and monitor the land. As MacPhee explains, "Agriculture is an amenity. You can't just wish for it, you have to support it."

MacPhee and Kelly believe that the local community embraced their plan in large part because, as MacPhee explains, "We got to design this without a developer over our shoulder, and that helped us break out of any conventional practice." Developers—and the banks that fund them—are decidedly risk-averse, and their hesitancy to commit to anything unknown is one of the major obstacles deterring all but the status quo in suburban design. MacPhee and Kelly are convinced that their project for Solano will "pencil out" for developers: "If agriculture is the new golf," says Kelly, "then this plan is a fabulous 72-hole resort."

In Colorado, a planner and farmer named Matthew "Quint" Redmond has found that to be true. He is working on a similar suburban re-envisioning, with his own version of house-meets-farm that he's calling "agriburbia." Marketing his efforts with the tag line "Growing sustainable communities by the bushel!," Redmond recalls being laughed out of the room for a similar idea back in 2003, though developers now seem to be taking him more seriously. New developments, such as the 3,000-acre Sterling Ranch in Colorado, typically mix housing, commercial development, and significant acreage dedicated to professionally farmed land that will provide produce to the neighborhood as well as the larger region.

Redmond's vision of agriculture-based development is notable not just for the farming itself but for its mention of a secure food supply in the marketing materials. As concerns around food health and safety continue to make their way into national discussions, a community that produces a trusted food source is a community in possession of a meaningful market differentiator.

"The issue of where your food comes from is disturbing to everyone," says the activist and architect Fritz Haeg, whose Edible Estates project has urged homeowners to take back their lawns and replace

them with edible landscaping. “When my aunt in Omaha is aware of these issues, I know it’s taken off.”

Even in its infancy, it appears that this model might help new development, which is at a relative standstill these days. But how viable is it for the communities that are already here, whether built, partially completed, or abandoned? “If you’re thinking about remaking suburbia, you have to recognize the patterns we have today,” says Egon Terplan, the regional planning director of the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association. “You can’t treat suburbia in a monolithic way.”

Alex Steffen, the executive editor of *Worldchanging*, agrees. “We have to get smarter about suburban taxonomy: Inner-ring suburbs—with relatively dense single-family neighborhoods and semi-auto-dependent cores, within easy transit reach of a central city—are in a completely different position than outer-ring suburbia, with its big houses on large lots, cul-de-sacs, and arterials planning, and long drives to get anywhere. In the inner ring, it’s not that hard to imagine adding lots of infill development and new transportation infrastructure to make livable, fairly walkable, much more sustainable communities.”

But “visions of subdivisions turned nicely into habitat and farms,” Steffen believes, “are delusional.” The outer rings of suburbs, especially those recently built “with funny loans at the far edges of sunbelt cities, are probably just destined to become the ruins of the unsustainable.”

The opinions are as different as the kinds of suburbs, and it’s an understanding of difference that will inspire creative solutions to how to retrofit suburbia. Says Williamson, who also teaches architecture at the City College of New York/CUNY: “Local conditions will drive retrofitting.”

That focus on local solutions inspired the creation of Galina Tachieva’s forthcoming book of techniques, *The Sprawl Repair Manual*. The book will offer pragmatic solutions by scale and type, from the big picture (which would include addressing transportation, employment, and green space) to the individual block (how a street lined with McMansions can gain population density with little intervention if townhouses and senior housing are added). It’s painstakingly detailed because it will take just that level of hand-holding to bring about real change.

But will lenders, builders, and developers see the big picture? “I think developers well understand that things need to change—that when the economy comes back it will be different,” says Tachieva. “The majority of leaders, politicians, and planners know that things will be different. It’s not possible to do the same from a financial point of view.”

“I’m optimistic,” says Williamson. “But it won’t happen tomorrow. It took us fifty or sixty years to get where we are today, and it will take us that long to fix it.”