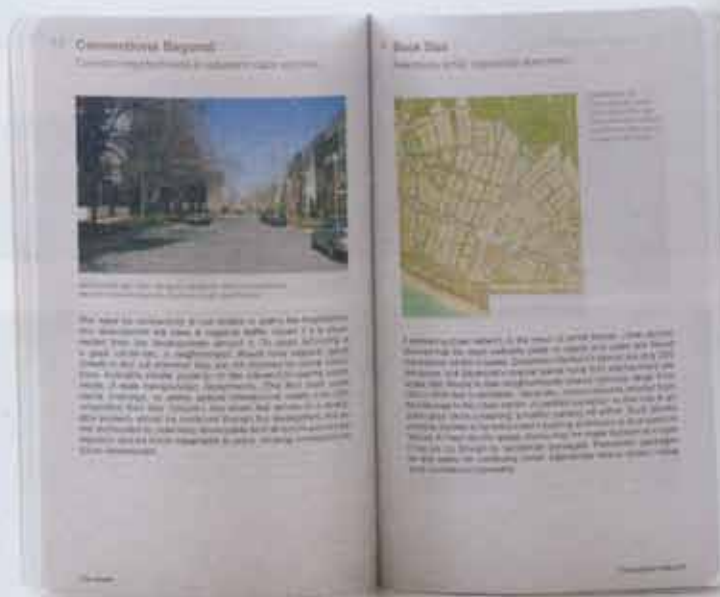
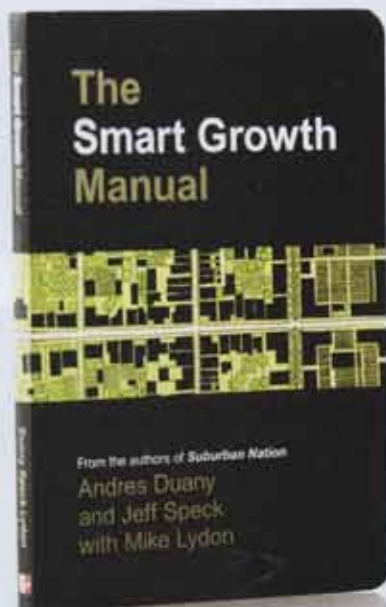


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How Smart Is Smart Growth?

THE SMART GROWTH MANUAL IS A CITIZEN'S POCKET GUIDE TO ANTI-SPRAWL PLANNING PRACTICES AND A PRIMER ON NEW URBANIST THOUGHT.



TEXT BY ROBERT BRUEGMANN



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THE LATEST BOOK by Andrés Duany, the galvanizing force of the New Urbanist movement, and Jeff Speck, the city planner and designer who was Duany's collaborator on a previous book, *Suburban Nation*, attempts to codify thinking about Smart Growth. It appears to be intended both as a primer for card-carrying New Urbanists and as a set of arguments designed to convince those who remain skeptical or hostile to that movement.

In some aspects, *The Smart Growth Manual* (McGraw-Hill Professional, \$24.95) succeeds admirably. Perhaps the most important thing it does is to suggest the evolution in thinking that allowed a small vanguard of the 1980s—interested primarily in a cluster of ideas about houses, sidewalks, streets, and neighborhoods—to grow into a widely popular movement that attempts to deal with the entire built environment and to bring its practices into line with ideas about Smart Growth. (However, the authors never really define this term, except as the opposite of “dumb growth,” which they seem to equate with automobile-dependent sprawl.) Concise, clearly written, and well

illustrated, this book provides a good introduction to New Urbanist thought.

One admirable feature of *The Smart Growth Manual* is its consistent attention to the basic building blocks of our urban areas, from the window mullion to the layout of entire towns. There are interesting, often quite

convincing, arguments about streets and sidewalks, bicycle pathways, the recycling of construction waste, operable windows, and the placement of benches, to name just a few. These pages help explain why New Urbanist ideas have become so important in contemporary American urban planning: When planners moved away from architecture and physical design in the postwar years and embraced instead the world of the social sciences and statistical tables, they found they still needed some kind of systematic recommendations about the built environment. It is easy to see why the carefully honed formulas seen in this book would be attractive.

Yet virtually all of the founders of the New Urbanism were architects, not planners, and when it

comes to large-scale urban planning issues, the authors often appear to be on shaky ground. Quite a few of their assertions about environmental matters and transit, for example, are dubious at best. To cite just one example: Duany and Speck write that the high-speed rail line between San Francisco and Los Angeles will move passengers between the two cities "in 2.5 hours for a price of \$55 and a with a CO₂ reduction of 324 pounds per passenger." A quick online search shows that this claim comes directly from the promotional material of the California High-Speed Rail Authority. There is no good account of where the money to build the system will come from, when it will be finished, or how the agency arrived at the unlikely figures for projected fares and CO₂ reduction (which, on the agency's website, is per train run and not per passenger).

The book also provides good evidence as to why New Urbanist ideas have excited such violent antipathy among many architects, particularly in schools of architecture. The images are particularly revealing. It is difficult, for example, to distinguish in aerial views why the supposedly "smart" development at the Kentlands, in Gaithersburg, Md., is different in any substantial way from the landscapes that are identified as suburban sprawl. What the "good" examples all appear to have in common is their similarity to tasteful, upper-middle-class, gentrified districts. Most architects probably don't reject this kind of design, but they do fear that the New Urbanists are not, as they claim, interested in offering a choice but in gaining control of the regulatory apparatus in order to block all kinds of buildings they don't like.

Unfortunately, despite the authors' disclaimers, *The Smart Growth Manual* gives ample grounds for this fear. Duany and Speck cite, apparently approvingly, outright bans on everything from cul-de-sacs to "snout houses"—those with the garage in front, which would seem to be, from a functional viewpoint, an entirely logical place for the garage in today's suburbs. They concentrate, moreover, on only a few elements of the urban fabric. Despite talk of complete and diverse neighborhoods, the messier parts of vital cities—from the neighborhood bar to the 7-Eleven in the suburban strip mall—seem to be missing.

In general, the book reflects a curiously static view of history and urban change. It suggests that there was a millennial tradition of neighborhoods that came to an end with post-World War II sprawl. But this view seems to ignore the historical literature that shows a vast array of different historic urban patterns and evidence in books that the trends toward bigger scale, decreasing densities at the center, burgeoning suburban expansion, and increasing segregation of land uses and income groups have been with us for at least the past several hundred years everywhere in the affluent world.

The authors also demonstrate little interest in new technologies that could revolutionize urban form as new technologies have done many times in the past. Nor is there any apparent interest in the fact that, just at the moment that New Urbanists are trying to erase the legacy of the postwar era—with its suburban subdivisions, highways, and urban renewal projects—

preservationists, historians, and architects such as Rem Koolhaas are looking at all of these with renewed interest and respect.

However, in the end, all of these omissions and curiosities probably faithfully mirror the world view of many New Urbanists. For that reason, *The Smart Growth Manual* is likely to stand as an important landmark in the history of that movement. Both proponents and critics will find much to engage them in its pages. □

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