

A “Humane Micropolis:” Northampton Has Evolved on its Own Terms

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“Design Northampton Week” which begins this Sunday evening at the Senior Center on Conz Street inspires one to think about what this amazing small city really is and how it came to be that way. Accolades for Northampton are familiar and well-deserved—“Paradise of America,” “Number One Best Small Arts Town in America,” and so on. But what makes Northampton “Northampton”—our cherished home and well-kept secret from those unfortunate enough to live elsewhere?

When I and my family moved here from Chicago in the early 1970s, I was invited to speak to a Rotary lunch on the subject of Northampton. As a newly-hired Assistant Professor of Urban Geography at UMass Amherst, I compared the city to one of the best-known “ideal community” models in the literature of planning: Ebenezer Howard’s “Garden City.” Appalled by conditions in the slum districts of English industrial cities (a view shared by other reformers like Jacob Riis in New York City), Howard in 1898 first proposed that philanthropic investors cooperate in building satellite towns to provide decent housing, factory jobs, gardens, parks, and healthy living conditions to the laboring classes. Such “garden cities” would be totally planned, self-contained new towns of about 32,000 people, separated from each other and larger cities by “greenbelts” of rural land. (Two garden cities were in fact built near London under Howard’s inspiration: Letchworth and Welwyn.)

In my Rotary talk, I mistakenly described Northampton as the apotheosis of the “garden city” ideal. Indeed, Northampton satisfies several of Howard’s criteria with its stable population of about 30,000, its industrial and commercial base, its educational and cultural institutions, and its abundance of parks and nearby countryside.

But I missed the crucial difference: Northampton is in fact much better than a garden city precisely because *it is not a planned community*. Unlike garden cities and other “ideal communities,” it was not designed as a set piece with its land use and architecture governed by a unified plan and authority. In fact, Northampton was never designed at all and that is one reason for its enduring vitality. (Letchworth was a noble

and well-meaning experiment in its day, but today it is basically a museum of early 20th Century suburbia, as though preserved in amber.)

In 2006, I and 26 colleagues from around the country proposed a new way of looking at urban habitability in our book: *The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21st Century City* (University of Massachusetts Press and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy). In contrast to the Garden City, The Humane Metropolis perspective regards urban places essentially as living organisms whose success over time depends, like ecological organisms, on their ability to *adapt*. Urban adaptation cannot be imposed from above through pre-conceived plans. Instead, it depends upon the resourcefulness of local citizens and their leaders in responding to challenges and opportunities posed by such factors as physical site characteristics, regional location, water resources, economics, technology, culture, and the web of public laws and policies.

Today, 80 percent of Americans live in metropolitan areas, and the world has just crossed the 50 percent urban threshold. After a half-century of trying to “manage” postwar urban sprawl, it is apparent that we are in fact a metropolitan nation and we must adapt to that reality by making our urban “homes” as habitable and “humane” as possible. We define a “humane metropolis” as an urban community (neighborhood, city, region) which seeks, primarily through grassroots advocacy, to become more *green, safe and healthy, efficient, equitable, and neighborly*. In cities across the country, these efforts take various forms such as urban ecology restoration and education, urban farming, stream daylighting, green buildings and roofs, and green stormwater management. Critical to these efforts are local “community catalysts”— like Will Allen of Growing Power in Milwaukee, Lewis McAdams of Friends of the Los Angeles River, Steve Coleman of Washington Parks and People, Bette Midler of New York Restoration Project, and Daniel Ross of Nuestras Raices in Holyoke. (Neal Peirce devoted a column to the Humane Metropolis in this and many other newspapers on April 1, 2007).

From this perspective, Northampton may be described as truly a “Humane Micropolis”— a humane metropolis writ small. It is blessed of course with a congenial physical setting, a diverse housing stock, a broad-based economy, cultural vitality, and a strong sense of community. And Northampton has long been energized and enriched intellectually through past residents like Joseph Parsons, Sr., Jonathon Edwards, Sojourner Truth, Samuel Hill, Sophia Smith, E. H. R. Lymon, William Fenno Pratt, Calvin

and Grace Coolidge, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Newhall Look, and their counterparts today such as . . . (fill in your favorites).

We are an educational town, an arts town, and a business town, but we are also a tolerant and welcoming community to people of various life pursuits, life styles, and life experience. The vitality of Northampton is not confined to its downtown but is discovered in its back streets and hidden neighborhoods like the Montview Town Farm near the Connecticut River levee, the African American Heritage Trail in Florence, the renovated mills along Riverside Drive in Bay State, or Water Street in Leeds. Regardless of neighborhood economic status, our side streets are graced with impromptu patches of wildflowers, sunflowers, tomatoes, blackberries, and ferns, overshadowed by iconic oaks, maples, sycamore, white pine, and spruce trees. Our expanding system of rail trails encourages off-street exploration by bike or foot, while promoting fitness and casual neighborly chit-chat.

And this is a caring community, as attested by the faith-based and nonprofit services such as the Survival Center, the Grove Street Inn, the Manna meal program, and the winter cot program. When the Meadowbrook apartment complex was faced with gentrification, a coalition of housing advocates, the Mayor's office, and tenants orchestrated a sale of the property to a new owner willing to continue affordable rents for many of its units. Village Hill, site of the former Northampton State Hospital, is now the scene of an ambitious redevelopment effort in which half of its 207 authorized dwelling units will be reserved for individuals and families eligible for "affordable housing."

To suggest that Northampton has evolved organically without a preconceived plan, is not to claim that planning is irrelevant here. We have had planning and zoning since at least the 1940s. And we have plenty of planning disputes today such as the proposed hotel near Pulaski Park, the landfill expansion, Village Hill, North Avenue Woods, and a possible new Rt. 91 interchange. But the planning and zoning process essentially is reactive to specific proposals and procedural in setting "rules of the game" for land use changes.

Massachusetts is unusual among states in not requiring zoning to be "in accordance with comprehensive plan" and that has perhaps been to our benefit. Planning here deals with needed infrastructure, including "green infrastructure" like conservation areas, bikeways, improved walkability, and tree planting. But fortunately,

the funky pre-zoning neighborhoods in Florence, Bay State, and near downtown have been little affected by zoning which typically ratifies the status quo rather than create nonconforming use problems. Post-zoning subdivisions like the Ryan Road area are more akin to standard suburbs across the country than to the older parts of Northampton.

Northampton has mercifully been spared top-down, macro plans in vogue from the Garden City era to Urban Renewal in the 1960s. Unlike architect and developer-driven concepts of urban design, the Humane Metropolis has few aesthetic preconceptions. Ecology is “messy” and so are older communities like ours. But who wants to live in an “ideal community” planned by outside experts when we can live in the “Paradise of America” (aka “The Humane Micropolis”), a work always in process of adaptation by its fortunate inhabitants.

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