



# OCCASIONAL PAPER 4

## **OPEN SPACES, GOOD PLACES: THE FUTURE OF DEVELOPMENT FOR THE ST. LOUIS REGION**

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Dr. Archibald's paper was presented at the Missouri Department of Conservation's Common Ground Forum, March 8, 2001.

It is an honor and a pleasure to be here with you this morning.

I am especially pleased to see the number and variety of organizations represented here. I commend you for your work. I plead ignorance of many of the issues that bring you here, but I assume that we are all united by a common concern for the quality of the spaces that we inhabit.

I am here as a community advocate first and foremost but I am convinced that good places for people and environmental advocacy are one and the same.

At the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, St. Louis was a leader in the parks and playground movement. These "open space" efforts were made to ameliorate the worst effects of an industrial city on its humans - overcrowding, smoke pollution, and lack of opportunities for outdoor recreation in natural settings. The elimination or even curtailment of problems of dense population and pollution were not the object, but rather mitigation of those effects through opportunities for escape. Nineteenth-century zoning was not a solution, for that zoning simply attempted to separate noxious industrial facilities from residential development. Those who could afford it insulated themselves in private places. Meanwhile the poor lived in tenements and could occasionally escape to a magnificent assemblage of City Parks.

So what is the purpose of open space and parks now in the twenty-first century?

Our region has great expanses of privatized open space. This open space is a consequence of our unbridled pursuit of the suburban dream. Our post WWII vision of the ideal home is largely one of space. The larger the lot, the more desirable the property; an acre, two or three acres, ten if we can afford it; what historian Kenneth Jackson refers to as the "crabgrass frontier." We know that in our region in fifty years the land area that we occupy has increased by several hundred percent while population has increased by less than one hundred percent. When we measure by this standard, we have plenty of open space but it is neither accessible nor is it respectful of a natural environment. In fact, the opposite is true. Suburbanization given its penchant for privacy and personal ownership severely restricts its abundant open space. Suburbanization destroys natural environment, both initially and in its subsequent reliance on private automobiles, prodigious consumption of fossil fuels, and unceasing highway development. Land is destroyed and the air is fouled — even if the air is cleaner than in turn of the century St. Louis and our people are wealthier and healthier.

### **So what is the purpose of open space and parks...in the twenty-first century?**

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The flip side of suburban development is urban abandonment. The City of St. Louis has lost nearly two thirds of its population in fifty years. For me this is an environmental debacle.

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**Democracy depends, as it always has, upon voluntary self-sacrifice for the common good.**

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Waste is not just a matter of how we consume new resources; it is also a question of how we use or don't use those resources in which we have already invested time, dollars, and resources. Maybe suburbanization would be more acceptable to me if I didn't dwell on its detritus. Sometimes I drive around the City of St. Louis and think of the abandoned and underutilized infrastructure and resources. Houses, factories, stores, schools, churches, parks, streets, sidewalks, sewers, water lines, utilities, power lines, and more. In Montana I supervised the state historic preservation office for ten years. I remember working with developers to reuse historic properties. Often I could not convince developers that reuse of a structure was an economically viable alternative to demolition. In most cases when a careful financial feasibility was done, reuse did prove more economical. But in one sense the developers were not wrong. There was and is a bias in favor of the new and against the old. You can see it at work in downtown St. Louis in the classification of office space. No old address is as good as a new address.

So without intention we have two types of open spaces. We have far flung residential areas with enormous infrastructure costs, high-priced, desirable suburban real estate; and we have abandoned space that nobody wants at any price and a deteriorating infrastructure serving far fewer residents than it was designed to support yet still to be paid for. Both are forms of waste. In this sense we already have more open space than we can deal with and we pay an extravagant price for it.

While the environmental costs are high, the costs in community destruction are also enormous. It is not accurate to blame all ills that afflict contemporary communities on this process of dispersal and abandonment because many other factors have contributed: television, air conditioning, two wage earner families, and more. Underlying all of this is the American penchant to emphasize individual rights over common good, and often short term gratification over long term benefit. As Americans became wealthier in the post WWII period, they were able to exercise expanded individual choice. This is not a new feature of our characters, but rather an elaboration of a long-standing tendency. It took just over a hundred years for thirteen ocean-hugging colonies to gobble the width of an entire continent. By 1891 the frontier was declared officially gone. What we see in the far-flung and wasteful spread of the St. Louis Region is our own iteration of extreme individualism expressed in urban geography. The common good rarely supersedes individual rights in public policy decision and nowhere is this more apparent than in land use decisions.

In America, individualism has always been at odds with community, never more so than now. Yet democracy depends, as it always has, upon voluntary self-sacrifice for the common good. Decline of community, well documented in recent studies, is an indicator of the health of our democracy. One good reason for that decline is the simple fact that we do not live or recreate together. In short, we have too much suburbanized open space and too much abandoned open space.

Several years ago I accepted an invitation to talk about community with a group of graduate students at Washington University's School of Architecture. I was thoroughly familiar with the topic; I didn't have to prepare much. I began by defining community as a place and stressed the interaction between people and place. When I finished speaking I invited discussion. One bright young

man challenged me. "Your definition of community," he said, "does not describe my community, and it does not describe how I think of community. My community is not a place," he insisted. "My community is those people with whom I choose to associate. I have a community based on cell phones, computer communications and fax machines, sustained by regular visits back and forth with its members in automobiles and airplanes. It does not matter where I live," he continued, "because the people who live near me are not my community and not my neighbors." A community that is no-place, I thought.

I was terrified at the implications of what this future architect said, for we are not as likely to sacrifice self-interest for strangers as we are for friends, neighbors, or even acquaintances. I also knew that for most of us he was right. I know that we will increasingly live in virtual worlds and ethereal neighborhoods made possible by electronics and by transportation. But I fear for democracy and human happiness if we do not also relearn how to build and live in neighborhoods of place. Places frame the possibilities of our lives and our relationships with others. For as long as we have three-dimensional bodies, we will have to live someplace, and as long as we live someplace our lives will be inextricably linked to the others with whom we share that place whether we acknowledge it or not.

I must admit my own bias to all of you. I was born on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan; it's heavily forested, sparsely populated, Lake Superior margin land. A chunk of my adult life was spent in Montana, where there are thousands of square miles of wilderness. Then I lived in a St. Louis suburb and now in the City of St. Louis. I know now that I am not a suburban person. I disliked the impersonality, the monotony, the homogeneity, even the neatness of it. I did not like not being able to walk anywhere, and I did not like the neighborhood hubbub about real estate values. And I did not like the constant in and out of automobiles. I did not like the commute. Yet I know that those who live in such places, and they are now most of us, have made a Faustian bargain for perceptions of security, and an acre or two or more of the American dream. As for me, I want to mingle with and enjoy my fellow humans or else I want solitude. I want the vibrant life of a city or I want complete escape.

At its core the question of how we use and allocate space on the land is a question of values, of what we value. It's about the values we embrace in our own lives. Most importantly, it is the question of whether or not we deem the quality of the legacy we leave to our children, and our neighbors' children to be worth considering.

Our lack of concern about space, open or otherwise, is also a product of our vagabond lifestyle. Places are just real estate when we move, as I have, multiple times in a lifetime. We don't stay long enough to invest ourselves in the land, our experiences, joys, sorrows, memories, and to bury our loved ones in it. If no place is really ours, then no place really matters. While I realize you may

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think it far afield from your interests this morning, I want to pursue this question of ethics and values further because it is one factor that obstructs the development of a new land ethic. It is, as Scott Russell Sanders puts it, a matter of the stories we tell. Stories determine who we are, define what we value, and express aspirations.

Sanders writes:

"The Aborigines of Australia believe that they help renew the world by recalling stories and singing songs from the beginning of time. Their dreaming tracks are paths they walk and tales they tell, paths of footsteps and narrative drawn on the land. They participate in the ongoing work of nature by reaffirming creation. In aboriginal belief an unsung land is a dead land: since, if the songs are forgotten, the land itself will die. To allow that to happen was the worst of all possible crimes. "As we walk our own ground, on foot or in mind," he writes, "we need to be able to recite the stories about hills and trees and animals, stories that root us in this place and that keep it alive. The sounds we make, the patterns we draw, the plots we trace may be as native to the land as deer trails or bird songs. The more fully we belong to our place, the more likely that our place will survive without damage. We cannot create myth from scratch, but we can recover or fashion stories that will help us to see where we are, how others have lived here, how we ourselves should live here."

Advocates for open space, green space, wetlands, parklands, trailways have a powerful reciprocal interest in population density. Otherwise you will set aside a parcel here and a parcel there, but you will allow the wholesale process of privatization, environmental degradation, and massive land consumption to continue unabated while communities will be simultaneously further undermined.

I have often thought that here in St. Louis we are not very good at seeing the whole problem, or perhaps the enormity of it overwhelms us. When I was president of Citizens for Modern Transit, the local advocacy group, I found that many of my colleagues saw "transit" as identical with a public transportation system. But I saw transit as more than efficient public transportation. It is also a land use issue, an environmental concern, an opportunity for denser housing and thus better community, a potential antidote to urban sprawl and the decline of the city and its close suburbs. Yet some mass transit supporters had difficulty seeing the environmentalists' causes, for instance, in relationship with their own. To me it was like a bowl of spaghetti shared at a large gathering: as you took your own portion out of the bowl, you couldn't really know for sure which spaghetti strands you would be affecting. It was all one dish. It's all one common cause.

But you know making the city into the landfill for the whole region's problems is directly connected to this issue of land use and abuse. Because of cheap land and subsidized development, escaping problems is easier in the short term than facing them and solving them.

So while I concur with all of you that open space of all kinds is crucial for recreational, environmental, and spiritual reasons, I fear that it will just amount to spitting in the wind if we do not act to face the whole set of inter-related problems that confront us. And I have been around here long enough to know that the problems we face are not intractable: zoning and taxation policies can change; transportation funding formulas are not immutable; the city can reenter the county; park funding can increase; and we can adopt growth boundaries if we think they will help. I have been here long enough, as have many of you, to know that we have lots of good plans. What we lack is the will to implement them.

Seeking and claiming that will, supplying that determination, may be the most powerful regional strategy that we can enact.

**LIVABLE communities don't just HAPPEN.  
They are CREATED by the PEOPLE who LIVE in them.**