

# Imagining a less-driven Florida

By Bruce Stephenson, Special to the Times  
In Print: Sunday, May 9, 2010

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A sprawling suburbia spilling over on to agricultural land — this scene is eastern Hillsborough County — is exactly the kind of car-dependent growth that the author argues must end.?

At the zenith of the housing bubble, Florida was an investor's paradise, the American Dream on steroids. Sandwiched within the profligate consumption of resources and adjustable mortgages was a profound belief that the Sunshine State embodied "the pursuit of happiness." • "Happiness," which the Founding Fathers equated to owning property, is having a tough go of it. In 2008, home values in Florida dropped by a third and forecasters rank metro Orlando, Fort Lauderdale, Miami and West Palm Beach among the nation's 10 worst real estate markets.

Outlying subdivisions have been especially hard hit and, with the toxic brew of crude oil spreading in the Gulf of Mexico, the cost of building a landscape to SUV dimensions is sadly apparent. Prudence and moderation, hardly an American strong suit, were exempt from the machinations that built these places. The lure of quick riches and property acquisition fueled a speculative madness that has left developers bankrupt, Realtors unemployed, construction workers on the dole, and homebuyers, many minorities and recent immigrants, atop foreclosure lists. The cycle of boom and bust is as endemic to Florida as sunshine; the state has recovered before but this time, Carl Hiaasen contends, "something radical must happen."

Fortunately, Florida is a laboratory for radical experimentation. After the urban crisis of the late 1960s, a new model of corporate statism opened to rave reviews in Central Florida. David Brinkley, in the first network news broadcast from Disney World, was astounded at what he saw, concluding it was "better than any other urban environment in America." He wondered if "real cities shouldn't cede their planning duties to Disney."

In retrospect, the NBC newscaster had a point. After riding the Magic Kingdom's sophisticated transportation system, hordes of tourists decamp into a more deadly version of Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, otherwise known as metropolitan Orlando. It's a shocking step; Central Florida's auto-oriented "Roads R Us" planning mentality has placed it atop the "Mean Streets" and "Angriest City" rankings.

The average city of over a million population loses 34 citizens in traffic accidents annually; but 58 humans die on Orlando roadways each year. For those looking for security in the guarded, gated subdivisions surrounding Disney World, the prospects are equally caustic. In this dystopian landscape there is a greater chance of death by traffic "accident" than being murdered in central Miami.

Orlando is hardly an exception in Florida. Tampa Bay, Miami, West Palm Beach and Jacksonville follow it atop the "Mean Streets" rankings. On the Angriest City list, St. Petersburg comes in second — a ranking best gleaned by reading *Heart of Darkness* before your next road trip, the safest way to manage the Colonel Kurtz metamorphosis that awaits on U.S. 19, the I-4 corridor and its ilk. Funneling one's life through an auto-oriented landscape has social consequences as

well. In a seminal study of civic society, Harvard's Robert Putnam found a 10-minute increase in daily driving translates into a 10 percent reduction in "social capital," the measure of civic involvement. It's not surprising Orlando ranks 46th and Miami 50th (of 50 cities) in community volunteering.

Disney World has become an urban prototype, but hardly the one imagined. Its privatized scheme (there is no public space) has been replicated in Florida's proliferation of gated subdivisions. At issue is not just building walls to keep others out; it is what is walled within. Once a free people isolate themselves from others to "incessantly ... glut their lives" with "petty and paltry pleasures," Alexis de Tocqueville argued, the bonds of democracy dissolve, marked by the individual who, even when close to fellow citizens, "does not see them; he touches them, but he does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone; and if his kindred still remain to him, he may be said at any rate to have lost his country."

In a republic, civic culture and private interests converge at a point of sustaining equilibrium and virtue. The sacrifice citizens make for the public good is the "social bond," Thomas Jefferson wrote, that binds this covenant. Sacrifice and desire intermingle in democratic communities—places where citizens are determinants of a shared destiny, not consumers of staged events. In the democratic experiment, social capital coexists with private capital to foster a synergy of place and create community — something not even the Disney corporation can imagineer.

*Imagining a New Florida*, a timely documentary produced by the Florida Humanities Council and WPBT2-Miami, delves into the evolving idea of community. (The one-hour program premieres Thursday at 8 p.m. on most Florida PBS stations.) From the White House on down one thing is apparent, the status quo will not suffice: "The days where we just built sprawl forever — those days are gone," President Barack Obama stated in Fort Myers shortly after taking office.

If the 60-year love affair with the auto-oriented, single-family home subdivision is not over, demographic realignment, ecological limits, peak oil and slumping real estate markets have dampened the ardor. Increasingly baby boomers and millennials, the two largest age cohorts, see their future in "walkable urbanism" rather than "drivable suburbanism." As the percentage of households without children continues to rise, the current "demographic inversion" will intensify, increasing the demand for apartments, condominiums and small-lot homes in neighborhoods where residents can walk to parks, shopping and transit. Add the escalating price of land, water and oil, and it is apparent why real estate values in metropolitan areas with housing and transit options (for example, Portland, Seattle) have fared far better than Florida cities.

Economist Richard Florida predicts capital will be increasingly attracted to "mega-regions" best suited for global competition: rich in cultural diversity with efficient transportation systems, a range of housing options, healthy ecosystems, and significant research centers. Success will be measured in building more energy-efficient and sustainable communities as the ability to underwrite the far-reaching development pattern of the past 30 years continues to dissipate.

With the federal investment in high-speed rail, the metropolitan Tampa Bay area and Orlando could become a prototype mega-region. Central Florida already has a template to refashion its development pattern, the "2050 Future Vision" that was compiled by the public-private initiative, myregion.org. Linked by high-speed rail, SunRail and future rail lines, in 2050 a third of the region's 7 million residents could live in downtowns, town centers and compact neighborhoods.

While there is less private space, driving would be optional, environmental lands preserved, public spaces more varied, and by building up rather than out taxpayers save billions in infrastructure costs. Tampa Bay has followed in kind: OneBay, a partner with myregion.org, also drafted a future vision for its seven-county region incorporating rail, natural land preservation and more intensive urbanism.

In a world growing "hot, flat, and crowded," as Thomas Friedman contends, smart growth, sustainability and new urbanism have moved from novelty to policy. The folly of constructing cities based solely on the auto is upon us, Friedman writes: "Fossil fuels once thought to be inexhaustible, inexpensive and benign have become exhaustible, expensive and toxic — toxic in terms of our climate, toxic in terms of geopolitics, toxic in terms of the regimes they are powering, and toxic in terms of biodiversity loss." The oil slick spreading across the gulf illustrates our debilitating paradox — a toxic contagion born of a lifestyle that cannot sustain life.

Whether it is General Motors or outlying subdivisions, investing in oil-dependent industries is not the future. Good physical planning is step one, but we also need to engender a true "hometown democracy" that is an affirmation of a New Florida and not another round of political infighting. The currently proposed Hometown Democracy Amendment, slated for the November ballot, is not what we need. It represents a citizen revolt, and it came about because the state Legislature failed to lead and envision a sustainable future for Florida. Known as Amendment 4, it would require a public vote on proposed changes to community master plans. Unfortunately there is no accounting for good urbanism in Amendment 4; it is a communal nay, as likely to terminate the reconfiguration of a suburban netherworld into a transit stop as halt a sprawling subdivision. Utilizing limited resources more efficiently will require sharing spaces, places and reinstating face-to-face relations. The future community — the one we need — cannot be an escape to a Magic Kingdom or arrive by government fiat. It must be vital and authentic, mixing profit with virtue to create what we can rightfully call happiness.

*Bruce Stephenson, director of the Masters of Planning in Civic Urbanism Program at Rollins College, is one of many Floridians — including planners and architects, historians and public policymakers, developers and residents of communities around the state — who appear in the documentary "Imagining a New Florida" premiering Thursday at 8 p.m. on most Florida PBS stations.*

"Imagining a New Florida" premieres Thursday night at 8 on WEDU-Ch 3. In addition to this statewide documentary the Florida Humanities Council sponsored four regional companion documentaries, including one by WUSF-Ch. 16 called "St. Petersburg: New Place in the Sun," which it will air Saturday night at 10.

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