

2014: The Year of Density

By Cass Turnbull

The year 2014 in Seattle has been the year of density, specifically density without infrastructure, including green infrastructure. The development of Urban Villages and single family in-fill was breathtaking in its speed, the immense size of the structures, and the perversity of some of the building configurations (apodments, two packs, three packs, four-packs, the faulty towers, the wedgies, and the massive D-blocks. Most of the new apartment and office buildings have only landscape remnants around the edges. You know, ornamental grasses along the front of the building and parking strips planted so densely that your passenger is trapped in the car. Those count now as the landscaping requirement. In the new BIG houses, the American backyard has been reduced to a small green square—the BBQ pad. Or sometimes it turns into the secret parking spot. The four-packs have traded their yards in for hidden, shared garage access courtyards. It must be fun to maneuver a full-sized SUV in one of those. The trees and the traditional Seattle landscapes are being sacrificed everywhere for everything: for mega-houses, for Accessory Dwelling Units, for office towers with waterfront views, for roads, for mass transit, for the economy, for...for... for...density.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for density. We all know that, done the right way, it is a good and necessary thing. But we have embraced an unfettered density that is stealing the soul of our city.

There will be no neighborhood character and no livability for the city dwellers of the future. We're selling off the little green triangles along the roads. The craftsman bungalows are squeezed between three story skinny houses, if they're not torn down altogether and replaced by a McMansions. A two-person household in a McMansion isn't density; it's a waste of space and resources. There are fewer and fewer vacant lots to play in, fewer rope swings, forts, and tree houses, no funky old buildings, hole-in-the-wall cafes, or mom-and-pop corner stores.



Recently, I've been driving through the light industry areas of town, in Fremont, Interbay, the north canal, and the Duwamish. I've been looking at their stacks and piles of cast offs and machinery sitting behind chain-link fences, interspersed with fixed-up and painted old houses, and dilapidated ones. I'm saying goodbye to wooden buildings with glass windows, to welding and machine shops, to artist's lofts, to hangers, to places that repair stuff and to

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one-story anythings. I'm saying good-bye to the real mixed-use land. I never thought it would someday become a new sort of industrial use land—slick and featureless, and without a spot of green anywhere to clean and cool the air, to stop the run-off, and to sooth the weary worker.

I've been saying good-bye to Seattle's water views, too. They used to be everywhere, to be seen by everyone who traveled the roads along the lakes, the canal, and Elliot Bay. And at the bridge approaches, from Dexter and Aurora, and then there is that view of the Olympics, the water sparkling, and ferry boats crossing Elliot Bay—the one seen from the viaduct. The city's views will ALL belong to the wealthy soon. The rest of us will be driving in a tunnel. Well, we'll be in cars, I'm not sure we'll be moving.

The destruction of Foster Island for the new 520 bridge is the perfect image of our time. The massive concrete road structure that is being built seems like a juggernaut eating its way through the wetland in stunning slow motion.

It is nothing short of spectacular. Every time I cross the bridge, I look at the advancing and uncaring machinery and try to gauge its progress. I try to see if the beaver lodge, the heron, and the golden swamp cypress are still there.

After the requisite impact studies and obligatory handwringing, it is a fact that the green spaces, the trees and native areas, are always taken—taken because it makes more sense, because it costs so much money, or because it makes so much more money than the alternative. They call it balancing competing needs, except it is never balanced in favor of the trees. Is there anything more heartbreaking than the sign proclaiming the 'determination of environmental non-significance'?

So, I wonder, is it time to move away, or to push back, or just to cultivate one's own garden, as Voltaire advised so long ago?