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The Year of Density

By Cass Turnbull

The year of 2014 in Seattle was the year of density, specifically density without infrastructure, including green infrastructure. The development of Urban Villages and single-family units was breath-taking 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 prison 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.

We know that density done right is a good and necessary thing, but we have embraced an unfettered density which is stealing the soul of our City. There will be no neighborhood character and no livability for the city dwellers of the future. The craftsman bungalows are squeezed between three story skinny houses, if they're not torn down and replaced by McMansions. There fewer and fewer vacant lots to play in, fewer rope swings, forts, and tree houses, no funky old buildings, or hole-in-the wall cafes, or mom and pop grocery stores.



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Recently I've been driving through the light industry areas of town, in Fremont, Interbay, and the Duwamish. I've been looking at their stacks and piles cast offs and machinery sitting behind chain link fences, interspersed with fixed-up and painted old houses, still occupied, and dilapidated ones. I'm saying goodbye to wooden buildings with glass windows, to welding shops, to artist's lofts, hangers, to places that fix things and to one-story anythings. I'm saying goodbye to the real 'mixed use' land. It never occurred to me that 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, or to sooth the weary worker.

And I've been saying good bye to Seattle's water views. They used to be everywhere, to be seen by everyone traveling the roads along the lakes, the canal, and Elliot bay. And at the bridge approaches, and from Dexter, and Aurora, and then there is that view of the Olympics, the water sparkling, and ferry boats 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, or because it costs less money, or because it makes more money, than the alternative. They talk about balancing the needs of the city with green space. But it never gets balanced in favor of the trees. Is there anything sadder than the sign that says there has been a 'determination of ecological non-significance'?

So, I wonder is it time to move, or to pushback, or just to "cultivate one's own garden" as Voltaire so aptly put it.