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New Ruralism: Agriculture at the Metropolitan Edge

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As the New Urbanism has gained prominence, other initiatives have surfaced recently claiming to embody its correlate—the New Ruralism. Predictably perhaps, these have sought to use New Urbanism’s new profile in the popular imagination as a flint to strike new enthusiasms and a touchstone to derive their own ready-made sense of authority.

However, as a workshop at the University of California made clear earlier this year, there is much to question in these claims—in particular, the extent to which these initiatives really complement the core values of New Urbanism.

Some visions of New Ruralism do indeed reinforce New Urbanism’s goal of concentrating new development around transit-served town centers and encouraging reinvestment in older urban cores. But others seem more concerned with trading on New Urbanism’s nostalgic association with “traditional” small-town values to promote a supersized suburbanism with potentially devastating environmental consequences.

Convergence of Interests

The workshop in April was sponsored by SAGE (Sustainable Agriculture Education) and IURD (the Institute of Urban and Regional Development) at UC Berkeley’s College of Environmental Design (CED). Funded by a grant from the Columbia Foundation, it was part of a larger effort to bring together practitioners and researchers engaged in urban-rural interface issues. Its goal was to begin to draft a framework of principles, policies and practices to preserve rural environments and ensure that rural lands (especially those near cities) remain viable locations for farming.

At issue is “the preservation and

enhancement of urban-edge rural areas as places that are indispensable to the economic, environmental and cultural vitality of cities and metropolitan regions,” according to Sibella Kraus, President of SAGE and New Ruralism Project Director for IURD.

In a “A Call for New Ruralism” in the Spring 2006 issue of *Frame-works*, the CED alumni journal, she described how rural areas, especially those near cities, are at tremendous risk from “suburbanization, environmental degradation, and an industrialized and globalized farm economy.” Yet, at the same time, urban residents are “increasingly overfed and undernourished...disconnected from rural and natural surroundings that further recede with increasing low-density auto-dependent urbanization.”

“In many ways industrialized agriculture and urban sprawl are similar blights, both operating with little regard to the natural conditions of the landscape and oblivious to the ecological and cultural uniqueness of place.”

To counter such forces, the New Ruralism framework proposes a cooperative effort between the New Urbanism, Sustainable Agriculture, and Farmland Preservation movements. Its eventual goal is to establish permanent agriculture preserves as sources of fresh food for urban regions, and as places to nurture connections with the land, preserve rural life, and contain and sustain cities.

In opening the workshop, CED Dean Harrison Fraker hailed the effort as the beginning of a “conversation” on a number of themes previously seen as unrelated—healthy food, smart growth, and farmland preservation. The roster of attendees mirrored these concerns. It included Ann Evans, former Mayor of Davis, California (now co-chair of the Roots of Change Council); Michael Dimock,

President of the Ag Innovations Network; Ed Thompson, Director of the California Office of the American Farmland Trust; Shelly Poticha, President/CEO of Reconnecting America and the Center for Transit-Oriented Development; and Prof. Richard Jackson of the UC Berkeley School of Public Health. Representatives of the Greenbelt Alliance, the Trust for Public Land, the Bay Area Open Space Council, and other related organizations also attended—as did planners, designers, researchers, and city officials involved in farmland preservation issues.

A New Ruralism framework such as envisioned by those in attendance might have far-reaching implications for areas such as California’s Central Valley. Productive farmlands there are being plowed under for development at an alarming rate. At the same time, IURD and others are studying how the state can best accommodate its next 15 million residents. Furthermore, Fraker pointed out, 50 percent of the world’s built environment will be produced in the next fifty years. On a global scale, choices about whether to preserve or develop rural lands will be critical to the health of the planet.

Competing Visions

There could hardly be more difference between this view of what New Ruralism means than that promoted by other groups in the last several years. At the other end of the New Ruralism spectrum lies the dream of extending the fully serviced private residential enclave over an ever more dispersed “exurban” geography.

The idea of “country living” on hobby farms or ranchettes has been around for years, popularized by the retreats of movie stars, presidents, and corporate bigwigs. But it is now being promoted for the common



man by publications such as *Progressive Farmer*, which have little to do with raising crops, and everything to do with selling rural real estate and outfitting people with the products, services and attitudes to occupy it. With features about escaping the dangers of the urban environment, such publications tap into a deep and abiding American phobia of both the physical milieu and potentially corrupting qualities of cities. Yet, instead of a wholesome life on a working family farm, the new paradigm entails complete mobility by private car, full access to modern communications, and

Above: New development encroaches on productive agricultural lands at the city's edge. Central Valley, California. Photo courtesy of SAGE.

an unfettered free-range consumerism.

The link between this vision and the name "New Ruralism" received a boost last year from a publicity campaign by the St. Joe Company. This New York Stock Exchange-traded real estate development company is presently selling off of vast (and previously unproductive) landholdings in northern Florida as retirement properties for aging baby boomers. And in June 2005 it published a promotional "white paper" outlining the activities people might engage in there and the supposed philosophical connection between these and rural values. In particular, the paper stressed how the company's portfolio of RiverCamps, WhiteFence Farms, and Florida Ranches (complete with "Cracker-modern" architecture)

would foster rediscovery of "an intimate connection with the land."

Yet, despite opening the discussion with Henry David Thoreau's well-known words from *Walden* about going to the woods to "live deliberately" and "front only the essential facts of life," there is nothing humble about this New Ruralist vision. According to the white paper: "Larger home sites, often separated by nature preserves or agricultural land, offer a buffer from your neighbors. These are places where the front porch is a place to scan the vastness of your domain."

As Roberta Fennessy wrote last year in *Urban*, Columbia University's Urban Planning Magazine, there is also little that is rural about such a vision. It is really about bringing all the private comforts of the city to



the country and leaving the public responsibilities behind. In this rural landscape, every bedroom has its own bath, county roads are never manure covered, farmers don't have bad teeth, and intimate contact with nature is complemented by full access to premium entertainment services.

Apart from fencing off and domesticating wild habitat, and requiring continuous applications of chemicals to control the weeds and bugs, building and servicing this new rural utopia will require a vast new infrastructure. Not the least of this will be miles of new and improved roads needed to transport all the new ruralists to the usual outposts of American culture at the local Interstate highway interchange.

Public vs. Private Value

It is perhaps fitting testament to the versatility of the New Urbanism that its arguments can be spun in such opposite directions. However, the core difference between this New Ruralist vision and that presented at the UC workshop involves competing views of public vs. private environmental values. Specifically, the St. Joe vision is suspicious of engagement with any kind of public realm. Meanwhile, it is precisely the public value of rural lands that the UC workshop set out to explore.

As stressed by many presenters at the April event, the continued existence of productive agricultural land at the metropolitan edge ensures the continued existence of urban and rural life as interrelated poles of experience.

To this way of thinking, farmers are not only producers of food, but conservators of a valuable heritage. Instead of suburban fantasies of rural life, the vision of the metropolitan edge emerging from the workshop was of small- to medium-scale sustainable agriculture, overlapping with areas for wildlife and habitat management.

Protecting farmlands, however, requires protecting farmers, and as Ann Evans told the workshop, this means rediscovering the basis for a viable local farm economy. This is not as far-fetched as it may seem, she said; indeed, it represents a "new mainstream." The key is to develop

Above: Rural heritage often combines agricultural, landscape, and habitat values. Photo courtesy of SAGE.

new market incentives that promote a direct-to-grower mentality that will encourage a new generation of urban-edge farmers to develop high standards of stewardship, pride of place, and meaningful opportunities for workers.

According to Michael Dimock, this model has great promise. In the past, it has been difficult to convince farmers to make common cause with environmentalists, health advocates, and good-government groups. But, as a roundtable effort in Ventura County near Los Angeles indicates, they have much to gain financially from such allegiances.

Concern for farmland preservation dovetailed with the second important theme at the workshop—how U.S. food policy deliberately distances people from any understanding of what they eat. As a result, instead of being fresh, healthy and flavorful, the nation's food supply has become as tasteless as new development is placeless.

According to Richard Jackson, such lack of dietary awareness has also created a public health crisis. Specifically, the rise in obesity and Type Two diabetes can be directly related to the average 63 pounds of high-fructose corn syrup a typical American consumes each year, largely in soft drinks and processed foods.

Nevertheless, Ed Thompson pointed out, the great majority of federal farm subsidies go directly to the commodities that underlie the “fast food” culture that makes Americans fat. Meanwhile, support for growers of “slow foods” such as fresh fruits and vegetables is negligible.

Shelly Poticha pointed out that similar fallacies govern people's choices to move ever further from transit-served, walkable communities. They think they will save money and live a better life by doing so, but actually become victims of a commuter “rat race.”

Carrots and Sticks

Much of the policy discussion at the workshop focused on ways to harden the rural edge against sprawl encroachment and so allow it reflect development pressure back to existing bypassed areas. The fact is, farmers today often count on selling their lands to developers as a form of retirement insurance, Dimock said.

A variety of carrots and sticks were discussed as ways to preserve farming at the urban edge. Among the carrots, the most important involve raising the value of farm output. This can mean switching to higher-value organic crops and making direct partnerships with urban consumers through farmer's markets or purchase agreements with restaurants.

With the rise of new communication technologies, dual-income farm families are increasingly common. Another way of creating value is to brand fresh farm output through a system of protected “appellations.” A more revolutionary approach might mean paying farmers for public services they already provide, such as carbon sequestration, ground-water recharge, and habitat management.

The sticks discussed were really a range of public-policy interventions. According to Thompson, one of the most successful New Ruralist initiatives is in Montgomery County, Maryland. There, a hard-and-fast line has been drawn between rural and urban areas, and property owners on the urban side can increase the density of developments by buying conservation easements from farmers on the rural side.

In California, farmland preservation easements have not been as successful, said Prof. Elizabeth Deakin of UC Berkeley's Department of City and Regional Planning. Two problems have surfaced: the easements

create an unproductive patchwork, not an edge; and they have not been instituted proactively to protect the most valuable and productive lands. Eventually, some biological analysis will have to be incorporated into the program if it is to be successful, Dimock suggested.

Another way to add value to agricultural lands has been to allow clustered residential development. Student researchers presented a number of such projects at the workshop. Some, following the New England Qroe Farms concept, even allow residents to purchase a stake in the farm operations.

Such projects have, however, been criticized for producing a “kindler, gentler” sprawl. They also may result in “farm parks” that largely ignore issues of social equity.

Telling the Story

Since the meeting took place in a university setting, one of its major outcomes was a tentative agenda for future research. This involves several tiers, focusing on physical, financial and legal structures. For example, one research goal is to better understand the legal and financial issues of clustered housing models.

However, as planner Steve Hammond of WRT Solomon E.T.C. pointed out, it is equally important simply to tell the story of the lifestyle, recreation and habitat benefits of a new relationship between city and country.

Above all, “New Ruralism is not just the absence of urbanism,” he said.

For more information on the New Ruralism initiative and framework visit www.sagecenter.org