

Comment on J. Terrence Farris’s “The Barriers to Using Urban Infill Development to Achieve Smart Growth”

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Abstract

Farris’s article shows that urban development has changed since the Housing Act of 1949 was enacted more than half a century ago. The problem is that greenfield locations have a competitive advantage over vacant or underused sites in existing urban areas. Only a small percentage of development is constructed on existing urban land. But even as the NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) factor plays a major role in driving development out of existing urban locations, greenfields have now sprouted their own NIMBYs. Suburbs that were land-rich a generation ago are land-poor today, and instead of stealing development from the central city, they must now—like the central city itself—fight to protect their turf from greenfield suburbs farther out on the fringe. Despite his well targeted arguments, Farris misses a larger point about the changing metropolis and what it means for the greenfield-infill relationship.

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It is remarkable, reading Professor Terry Farris’s article, how little the basic conundrum of urban development has changed since the Housing Act of 1949 was enacted more than half a century ago.

The problem, simply put, is that greenfield locations have a competitive advantage over vacant or underused sites in existing urban areas. Greenfield locations are cheap; they are big; permit processing is easy, relatively speaking; and the financial markets are oriented around them. So-called infill sites—even in distressed neighborhoods—are expensive, small, and complicated to deal with.

So the goal of virtually all urban development policy in this nation over the past 50 years has remained pretty much the same: to level the playing field by making available land in existing urban areas cheaper, more attractive to financiers, and easier to process in political terms. It is astonishing to note, for example, that despite all the hype, our national brownfields policy consists basically of identifying urban sites with development potential and then using government funds to subsidize their cleanup and assembly—essentially the same goals and tools of the now-hated Urban Renewal Program.

Despite all this effort over the past half-century, the results are pretty discouraging, as Farris’s own charts suggest. Only a small percentage of housing and other types of real estate development is constructed on

existing urban land. In all likelihood, something close to 95 percent of all new development in this nation occurs on greenfield sites, and that number has not changed much in the past few years. Specific infill projects receive lots of publicity, but the effort required to plug a few hundred units in or near some existing downtown hardly seems worth it to any developer or financier whose main goal is to make money. Advocates of downtown housing must satisfy themselves with successes that seem huge in percentage terms but are miniscule when viewed as real numbers: a doubling of the downtown housing stock from 5,000 to 10,000 units, for example, in a metropolitan area where a like number of suburban houses are on the market and available for viewing on any given Sunday afternoon.

And so Farris's litany sounds disturbingly familiar to anybody who has read urban policy literature or, in fact, walked around any urban neighborhood in the past several decades. This is a tough problem, he says, that requires money and real political will to solve, rather than the kind of mythmaking that advocates of urban life so often engage in. His on-target discussion of the mythology of urban infrastructure is a good example. Since older cities are declining in population and many neighborhoods have a high rate of abandonment, the mythmaking goes, then there must be an excess of perfectly good urban infrastructure lying around available for anybody who cares to use it.

There are two problems with this myth: The first is the assumption that most older urban neighborhoods are emptying, which is true in some places but decidedly not true in immigrant metropolises such as New York, Miami, and Los Angeles, where decrepit older neighborhoods are more crowded than ever. The second problem is the assumption that the excess infrastructure is ready to use. Nobody questions that old houses require expensive refurbishment that often makes the entire enterprise economically futile. But when the talk turns to schools, sewers, and surface streets, somehow that same fine-grained understanding of the economics of an aging built environment gets tossed out the window.

Farris's conclusion—even more depressing than his evidence—is that there is basically nothing we can do about it. Instead of focusing on promoting the myth that urban areas can accommodate vast amounts of new growth, we should instead fight a rearguard action in the suburbs, containing new development geographically and making it high density and attractive.

In reaching this conclusion, Farris has waded into the most persistent philosophical debate in American urban development policy. Is it possible to reverse the flow of suburbanization and focus our efforts on building better cities? Or is suburbanization inevitable, meaning that designing a better suburb is about all we can hope for? The first view has historically been the province of mythmakers, while the second has

traditionally been seen as the more pragmatic solution. This problem has engaged our most visionary designers from John Nolen and Clarence Stein a century ago to Andres Duany and Peter Calthorpe today. It is no wonder that Farris lands in the build-a-better-suburb camp. He makes a very compelling argument for it, based on the data and on his own hard-earned real-world experience in trying to make urban development work.

Yet all the forecasts for future growth, which Farris appropriately cites in his article, make a more compelling argument that we as a nation must find some way to prove him wrong. Our population—up by more than half just since John Kennedy occupied the White House—is likely to double in the next century. Our nation will continue to be wealthy, meaning that even if lifestyles change from the sprawling patterns of today, the demand for new built space of some kind will only accelerate. And the mass of our existing built stock, most of which has been constructed since World War II, is likely to age badly and will need to be replaced in bulk. Are we really going to create all of this new built space on land that has never been urbanized? Are we going to create metropolitan areas that stretch not 50, not 80, but 200 miles from end to end?

Maybe. But I think Farris ignores two important yet undeniable trends suggesting that the cause of urban development may not be quite as hopeless as he thinks.

The first (which Farris does not mention at all in his article) is that even though greenfield sites are still bigger and cheaper than infill sites, it is harder than ever to develop on them. Even as the NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) factor plays a major role in driving development out of existing urban locations, greenfields have now sprouted their own NIMBYs. Farmland preservation advocates, environmentalists, low-density neighbors, and others often stand opposed to the development of nonurban land on the metropolitan fringe, thus driving up the cost and hassle of greenfield projects. Especially in the Sunbelt, the federal Endangered Species Act is coming into play simply because of the breathtaking reach of contemporary metropolitan expansion. For almost the first time ever, development in Sunbelt metropolitan areas is reaching beyond traditional agricultural regions into land that has never been farmed and that therefore is still in its natural state—often with the original plant and animal species in place. It is worth noting that the Endangered Species Act is often attacked but has almost never been amended, so it is likely to be around for a while. And the cost of environmental opposition and environmental mitigation on greenfield sites will continue to mount.

The second trend is a dramatic change—and, indeed, expansion—in what we think of as an older urban area. We have been urbanizing the countryside aggressively for more than a century and creating politically

discrete suburbs for more than half a century. The result is a new metropolitan constellation that consists not just of an old central city and new suburbs, but a wide range of older communities—urban and suburban—all of which struggle with a competitive disadvantage in more or less the same way. Suburbs that were land-rich a generation ago are land-poor today, and instead of stealing development from the central city, they must now, like the central city itself, fight to protect their turf from greenfield suburbs farther out on the fringe. Partly for this reason, the sheer number of infill sites in the nation has become truly vast. Estimates suggest that there are 600,000 brownfield sites, so the number of developable infill sites is surely somewhere in the millions.

It is also worth noting that, in many metropolitan areas, even as older suburbs lose their price advantage to greenfield locations because they are running out of land, they are gaining a major proximity advantage because of increased traffic congestion. Greenfield sites are much farther away from the locus of metropolitan activity than they used to be—sometimes so far away that it is a significant competitive disadvantage. It is true that employment has decentralized, thus placing the metropolitan fringe within striking distance of a great number of jobs, but it is also true that getting around is much harder than ever before, meaning that the proximity of existing urban areas (even older suburbs) is becoming more important.

In short, despite his well-targeted arguments about infrastructure and barriers to infill development, Farris misses a larger point about the changing nature of our metropolitan areas and what it means for the greenfield-infill relationship. Analyzing central cities in isolation might go down well at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, but it is not a reflection of life in the real world. The assumption that infill locations are at a hopeless competitive disadvantage compared with the metropolitan fringe is becoming less and less true; the fringe is getting more expensive, and the older urban areas are getting more and more attractive, especially in terms of proximity.

It is not very reasonable, then, to simply dismiss urban development entirely and focus instead on creating better suburbs. As an alternative, maybe our nation's smart growth advocates and urban developers should simply set a national goal for the amount of new real estate development that should occur in existing urban areas—say, for example, somewhere between 10 and 20 percent nationwide. Such a figure is not so high that it is impossible, but it is high enough to be a challenge. Such a goal could stimulate a coordinated national effort to promote more infill development, yet it would also require a realistic assessment of how to reach that goal. Not only would we as a nation have to assess our urban land resources, but we would also have to realistically assess the state of what Rolf Pendall calls the “infrastructure endowment” of older communities, as well as the other assets and obstacles associated with infill urban growth (Pendall 2000).

Yes, most new real estate development in the United States in the foreseeable future will occur on the metropolitan fringe. Yes, the obstacles to reversing that trend are extremely high. But a modest and measurable goal is achievable, especially if smart growth advocates and others heed Farris's well-articulated advice to stop mythologizing about the potential for urban development and take a realistic look at how to get the job done.

Author

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Reference

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