

City Ethic

Urban Conservation and the New Environmentalism

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*“No important change in ethics was ever accomplished
without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis,
loyalties, affections, and convictions.”*

-- Aldo Leopold

Abstract

Why has a movement that has been so spectacularly successful in achieving improvements in air and water quality, been so unsuccessful in reigning in sprawl? It may be because the environmental movement itself sends conflicting messages: idealizing nature while (at best) neglecting cities. What may be needed is a transformation of the movement's values and approach to issues of land use. Through a "city ethic" the environmental movement could help lead popular American culture to resolve its contradiction of opposing both sprawl and increased density, which could lead in turn to a marketplace that embraces cities and shuns sprawl and to public policies that do the same.

Taking Stock

If we count the birth of the modern environmental movement as the first Earth Day in April, 1970, then the movement turns 30 this month; old enough to prompt some reflection on the doorstep of middle age. While the environmental movement raised the consciousness, framed the debate and provided policy directions that have made dramatic improvements in air and water quality, the trend on land use has been away from improvement.

There is a litany of facts to describe the sad trends, but here are just two that capture the situation well:

- Between 1970 and 1990, the population of the Milwaukee metropolitan area increased by 3% while the amount of land it consumed for development went up 38%. That pattern is repeated in every major metropolitan area in America whether they are rapidly growing or shrinking. In Los Angeles, the figures show a population expansion of 45% and land area growth of 300%. Cleveland lost 11% of its population, but picked up 33% in land consumed for development.
- It has gotten worse recently. A 1999 U.S. Department of Agriculture report found that sprawl has accelerated greatly in the last decade. The USDA reported that between 1992 and 1997 Americans consumed land at the rate of 3.2 million acres per year compared to 1.4 million acres per year between 1982 and 1992. At this rate, America will consume a land mass the size of Wisconsin in about ten years.

And the problems of land use are not just problems for land. Land use is the key factor behind the remaining water and air quality issues we face. Pollution from point sources of air and water pollution has been dramatically reduced. The remaining problems are, to a greater extent than ever before, issues of nonpoint sources. Auto and truck travel are a leading source of air pollution despite the fact that engines are much more efficient and clean-running. The reason is that auto travel has increased far beyond

what simple population increases would predict. Vehicle miles traveled increased 140% between 1950 and 1990 while population rose 40% during the same period. Runoff from construction site erosion, from sprawling suburban lawns and from parking lots and roads is a leading cause of water pollution.

The (Environmentally) Good City

Cities are the antidote to the problems of sprawl. These benefits are described in Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist’s book, “*The Wealth of Cities*,” where he writes:

“Cities are, on balance, good for the environment. New Yorkers pollute far less, on average, than their suburban neighbors. More gasoline is needed to support the auto-dependent lifestyle; more electricity must be generated to heat and cool the large, stand-alone homes; more resources must be used to provide roads, pipes, and utility lines to the scattered sites; more energy must be consumed to supply water and return sewage from homes farther and farther away from municipal plants; more trucks must use more gas to move products farther and farther; more chemicals are applied to control the weeds on larger and larger lawns and more water to keep those lawns green; and, most important, more land must be cleared and leveled to accommodate the same amount of living.”

The chart below compares the land and air impacts of development at densities of one lot per five acres (a typical rural subdivision in Wisconsin), one lot per one acre (Frank Lloyd Wright’s “broadacre city”), eight lots per acre (the Madison neighborhood Aldo Leopold lived in), and 50 units per acre (a dense urban development). The chart projects the impacts if all 400,000 new housing units projected to be built in Wisconsin over the next 20 years were built at that density. It demonstrates that development at the density of Aldo Leopold’s city neighborhood would have half the air quality impact and only 2.5% of the land consumption of the five acre lot scenario.

Density	Land Used	VMT	Fuel Used	CO1	NOX	CO2	VOCs	Land Impact	Air Impact
5	2,000	12,000,000	413,793	422,068	29,379	6,620,689	56,275	100%	100%
1	400	11,000,000	379,310	386,896	26,931	6,068,965	51,586	20%	92%
0.125	50	6,000,000	206,896	211,034	14,689	3,310,344	28,137	2.5%	50%
0.02	8	3,200,000	110,344	112,551	7,834	1,765,517	15,006	.4%	27%

All figures except density are x 1000. Density is expressed in acres per unit, land used is expressed in acres, VMT is vehicle miles traveled per year, fuel is expressed in gallons per year and carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide, carbon dioxide and volatile organic compounds are expressed in pounds emitted per year. Fuel consumption assumes 29 miles per gallon, the equivalent of a Ford Taurus. This chart was extrapolated from projections of VMT based on housing density in research done by John Holtzclaw and from pollution figures cited by the NRDC. The chart is still being refined and should not be reproduced without noting its preliminary nature.

Cities as Cancer: The Culture of Sprawl

Despite the environmental benefits of cities, they have been long maligned as unhealthy and unnatural. We live in a popular culture that denigrates cities and idealizes nature and rural life. This culture has deep roots in American history. From Thomas Jefferson's agrarian ideal to Henry David Thoreau's idealization of living apart to Frank Lloyd Wright's hostility toward anything urban, the vilification of cities and the elevation of all things rural on both moral and environmental grounds has been a long tradition.

Frank Lloyd Wright was especially vociferous in arguing that cities were morally repulsive cesspools of pathology. In 1932 he wrote a book he called "*The Vanishing City*." In it he wrote:

"Like some tumor grown malignant, the city, like some cancerous growth, is become a menace to the future of humanity."

Wright predicted – and heartily endorsed – almost every major change in the American landscape which would take place over the next six decades. He understood how cars, which he loved with unbridled passion, would change our sense of space. He predicted – and applauded – the decline of cities, the advent of rural subdivisions and super highways and even the coming of 'Stop 'n Go.' (Wright actually designed a convenience store-gas station in Minnesota.) His mistake was to believe that all of this would be wonderful, healthful, aesthetically pleasing, and morally and culturally uplifting. Wright's idea of Utopia was "Broadacre City," where every family would have at least one-acre.

Again from "*The Vanishing City*":

"I see him (the resident of Broadacre City) tanned, muscular, and supple from his invigorating life, replete with sun and air, with work in wholesome surroundings, with exercise and play accessible to both his purse and his house."

Unfortunately, Frank Lloyd Wright's vision of the future was all too clear and his prescriptions were followed all too carefully. The most ubiquitous form of modern American congestion is the suburban freeway. This congestion exists because we faithfully applied Wright's prescription for what to do about congestion in the city. We built Wright's dream of broad highways and broad acre cities and his dream became our nightmare.

Emptying the cities even became the official policy of the U.S. Government during the Depression. One New Deal program was the Division of Suburban Resettlement. The Division promoted the development of several suburban communities. While few were actually developed, one, Greendale, was built in suburban Milwaukee. A description of Greendale while it was being built reads:

“The program, the skeleton of ideas and facts, on which Greendale is being planned is something like this: Automotive transportation makes it possible for men to live a considerable distance from their work; pure air, rural surroundings, and contact with the ground are physically and psychically good; life is better in a small town where social cooperation is possible.”

The idea of cities as pathological and unnatural was picked up and echoed just as the modern environmental movement was being founded. A popular book of the time (though it was written in 1948, the same year that “*A Sand County Almanac*” was completed) was “*Walden 2*” by sociologist B.F. Skinner. Its sales in the early 1970’s were so strong that it was reissued in 1976 with a new preface by Skinner in which he wrote:

“It is often said that the world is suffering from the ills of bigness, and we now have some clinical examples in our large cities. Many cities are probably past the point of good government because too many things are wrong... Should we not rather ask whether we need cities? It has been suggested that, with modern systems of communication, the America of the future may be simply a network of small towns... A few skeletons of cities may survive, like the bones of dinosaurs in museums, as the remains of a passing phase in the evolution of a way of life.”

The threads of the idea of moral superiority in rural America are not very hard to find today. Pick up any popular publication. For example, there is this from an October, 1999 *Wisconsin State Journal* editorial entitled, “Dairy Expo puts city life in perspective”:

“Madisonians tend to think too many big-city thoughts... And then you (dairy farmers) come to town with your.. bright-eyed, apple-cheeked children... You remind us of our roots... where those children and their parents put in 14-hour days, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year... You are our history and our heritage, the wellspring of the Wisconsin work ethic.”

Or there is this in a November 1999 article on small town life in Dane County published in *Isthmus*, an alternative Madison weekly newspaper:

“I am comforted to think that this – a daughter returning to care for her terminally ill father – is a small town value. In an increasingly impersonal culture, it’s reassuring to think there are still places where generations take care of one another.”

For the author, the publisher of a well-respected literary journal based in Cambridge, daughters taking care of ill fathers is a “small town value.” Apparently he believes that in major metropolitan areas sick parents are left to die in alleys.

The theme of pathology in the city is also alive and well. A November 1999 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel article introduced readers to the theory of “urban psychosis”, which is the notion that domestic and city neighborhood violence explains violent acts among young offenders. There have been no related theories about “rural psychosis” to explain the greater tendency toward drug use among rural teens.

A Time-Life book celebrating the just-completed 20th Century asserts in its opening paragraph:

“The swelling cities (of the early 20th Century) swallowed individuals, erasing their faces and their freedom of action.”

No evidence is offered to bolster that assertion, which the author apparently assumes to be unassailable. It seems that a case could be made that cities expand individual “freedom of action” by freeing people from stultifying small towns where everyone knows everyone else’s business and passes judgement on it. Certainly, there is ample evidence to suggest that social progress comes from cities while small towns tend to defend the status quo.

These anecdotes are underscored by polling data that show a continuing preference for the country as a place to live. A poll done by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel in early 2000 found that 44% of Wisconsinites wanted to make their home in rural areas while only 6% wanted to live in a large city.

The Role of the Environmental Movement

The theme of cities as unnatural and unhealthy found its way into the early modern environmental movement. A 1967 article in the Sierra Club Bulletin attacks cities with a vengeance:

“Spend a week in the downtown heart of a metropolis, with all its noise, stench, and congestion. No “natural” selection equipped us humans for such insults to the senses... Someday, if we are not careful, through city-selected degeneration, the 40 billion members of half-deaf, half-blind Homo post-sapiens will lead a life resembling that of termites.”

This article was reprinted in the Summer 1997 issue of *Wild Earth*, apparently without regret or retraction by its author.

While today’s environmental movement seems to have come around to the idea that cities are good for the environment, that conviction has been rather half-hearted, taking a back seat to the traditional passion for the natural world. For example, in 1995, David Brower, a long-time leader of the Sierra Club wrote a book entitled *“Let the Mountains Talk, Let the Rivers Run.”* In it, Brower spends several chapters recounting

his wilderness experiences (he is an elite mountaineer; in fact, seven mountains have first been ascended by Sierra Club presidents) and singing the praises of the natural world. His chapter on cities acknowledges their environmental benefits, but the entire chapter runs just three pages and his only specific recommendation is that they should be hemmed in with urban growth boundaries. With care taken to tightly limit development outside of them, urban growth boundaries are a good idea, but Brower expresses no appreciation for the complexities and nuances of urban policy while he goes into great detail about issues involving dams and forest roads.

A review of the websites of nine leading national and state environmental organizations reveals that only a few organizations have developed an interest in urban policy. The Sierra Club and Citizens for a Better Environment have especially impressive sections of their sites devoted to urban issues. These sites display a philosophical understanding of the link between healthy cities and a healthy natural environment and they have specific policy and individual action recommendations to make cities better. 1000 Friends of Wisconsin notes the importance of cities in its site and it includes legislative agenda items related to healthy cities, but it is not as detailed and extensive as the Sierra Club or CBE sites. The remaining six sites visited make no mention of the relationship between healthy cities and a healthy environment. Even the excellent Sierra Club and CBE sites have initial pages dominated by traditional environmental concerns such as “saving the giant Sequoias” and pesticide use.

The problem is that too much popular environmental thought contains an internal contradiction. By implicitly idealizing rural life and the wilderness experience we have provided the philosophical basis for the sprawling developments we oppose. Every time we wax rhapsodic about some mountain stream, every time we publish another calendar of stunning photos of birds in flight, we reinforce the idea of that idyllic natural world... *and why wouldn't people want to live there?*

Still Fighting the Last War

To a large extent, the public -- and the policy makers who represent them -- are still fighting the last land use policy war. Frank Lloyd Wright was not altogether unjustified in his concern about the urban environment, which had been, up to the time he wrote “*The Vanishing City*” in 1932, increasingly congested and polluted.

Today the problem is not congestion, but sprawl. The smoke stack industries which polluted city air and the raw sewage that flowed directly into urban rivers has been largely cleaned up or the industries have left. The issues of sanitation which were real in the world Wright grew up in have been all but eliminated today. In fact, today the major sources of air and water pollution are nonpoint sources, like runoff from farm fields and pastures, and pollutants that come from the driving demanded by the spread out suburban lifestyle.

Yet, the idea of “density” endures as one of the most unpopular notions in development. A 1999 survey sponsored by the National Association of Homebuilders

found that 77% of Americans would oppose building higher density single-family homes in their neighborhood. Forty percent of them would strongly oppose it.

Jane Jacobs recognized this in 1961 when she wrote in *“The Death and Life of Great American Cities”*:

“To say that cities need high dwelling densities and high net ground coverages, as I am saying they do, is conventionally regarded as lower than taking sides with the man-eating shark.”

The theme of moral decay in the city and the “evils” of density still exists in Wisconsin law. In 1955, the Legislature passed an urban redevelopment and blighted area law and in its “findings and declaration of necessity” (s. 66.43, Wis. Stats.) it found:

*“It is hereby found and declared that there have existed and continue to exist in the state, substandard, insanitary, deteriorated, slum and blighted areas which constitute **a serious and growing menace**, injurious and inimical to the public health, safety, **morals** and welfare of the residents of the state; that the existence of such areas contributes substantially and increasingly to the **spread of disease and crime** (necessitating excessive and disproportionate expenditures of public funds for the preservation of the public health and safety, for crime prevention, correction, prosecution, punishment, and the treatment of **juvenile delinquency** and the maintenance of adequate police, fire and accident protection..)” (Emphasis added.)*

Those findings were reaffirmed in 1975 with passage of an “urban renewal” law and a new set of findings affixed part of the blame to density in s. 66.405, Wis. Stats.

*“It is declared that in the cities of the state substandard and insanitary areas exist which have resulted from inadequate planning, **excessive land coverage**...” (Emphasis added)*

Wisconsin municipal law is riddled with references to “avoid(ing) undue concentrations of population”, “prevent(ing) the overcrowding of land” and to the moral and physical decay that results from greater density. This is an astounding concept for Wisconsin, given that no neighborhood in our state comes close to the densities of Manhattan or Chicago, where it could be argued that severe public health problems really did exist due to congestion at one time. In fact, this language has its basis in a model law that was written in 1915 and based on conditions in New York at the turn of the century. Urban renewal law seems to have its basis in archaic notions that may never have been fully applicable anywhere in Wisconsin. In addition, it attacks the very densities that make a city a city. It seems to start with the notion that the natural world is our true home and that “renewing” urban areas means to make them less essentially urban.

Public policy follows public opinion, which often lags changes in reality by a generation or so because people's value systems are formed when and where they grew up. Fifty years ago, the problem was convincing a public that had mostly grown up on farms that there was value in preserving what seemed like an endless countryside. Today, we are a majority suburban nation and the problem is instilling reverence for the cities we have left behind.

The opponents of density are largely fighting an enemy that has long since been defeated. The problem in America today is not unhealthy city congestion and concentrations of people, but sprawl. In a significant irony, the last remaining problem of "congestion" that we face today is congestion on our freeways, caused not by too much density but by a lack of it. Sprawling developments where everyone must drive have led to a 240% increase in driving nationally since 1960. We can't pave over farmland and city neighborhoods fast enough to meet that kind of growth. God knows, we've tried.

City Ethic: Urban Conservation and the New Environmentalism

Fifty years ago, Wisconsinite Aldo Leopold wrote about the need to revolutionize the way humans viewed land. He called for a "land ethic" in which we no longer view ourselves as "conqueror" but as a "plain member and citizen" of the land. He argued that conservation to that point had gotten nowhere because we had not overcome our fundamental human arrogance.

It is not clear that conservation has progressed so much farther today. While Leopold's ideas may no longer be in much dispute, we don't necessarily act very differently than when our paradigm was that of conqueror. There is no more dramatic illustration of our dominant role than the bulldozer, obliterating the countryside to build yet another large lot subdivision.

A pervasive current example of society's general failure to grasp the land ethic is advertising for sport utility vehicles. In the typical ad, a huge, lumbering, polluting beast ascends a mountain, rocks falling in its wake. Or it splashes through a pristine stream (probably eroding its banks and dripping oil into the water, but that is not closely depicted). The irony is striking. SUV's are being sold on the strength of the buyer's love of nature. Yet, if the vehicle were actually ever used in the manner they depict, it would be horribly destructive to the natural setting that the buyer apparently loves. As it is, SUV's are almost always used on suburban roads and urban six lanes, where they burn up gas and pollute at a rate far exceeding the sedans that would serve the purpose just as well. People buy SUV's, at least in part, because of the romantic connection to wilderness created by the image-makers, yet the vehicles represent a very environmentally harmful choice. Apparently, auto-makers have market research that shows them that people who love the wilderness want to get there in the most environmentally destructive way possible.

The modern environmental movement started from an anti-urban, “back to the land” paradigm, which contained an internal contradiction. On the one hand cities were bad; sources of pollution both environmental and spiritual. On the other hand, sprawl – which is only a logical reaction against the densities of the polluted city – was also an enemy. The answer was to move away from cities, but when we moved to the country in large numbers we were no longer “on the land.” We had created the no man’s land of suburbia. Not urban. Not rural. An environment without the city’s culture, excitement and convenience and without the country’s tranquility. And an environment that is not more independent or sustainable but absolutely dependent on cars and on an increasingly environmentally and politically risky oil supply.

By getting back to rural places some Americans felt that they were reconnecting with their own true primitive home. Some, like Frank Lloyd Wright, even predicted -- with some relish -- the demise of the city altogether. People would live “tanned and muscular” on the land. It never occurred to Wright and others that when people moved out to the land in large numbers they would destroy the very place to which they had moved.

Maybe what is needed in order to make more progress is a complementary idea to Leopold’s land ethic. A “city ethic” would change our view of where we belong from the savanna and the forest to the urban neighborhood. A city ethic transforms the very idea of home. If we can view cities as our true and natural home, we would advance a long way toward achieving the land ethic. Respect for land means treading as lightly as possible on it. And what is more fundamental to treading lightly than taking up less space? Cities, at a pleasant and vibrant density, are not only fine human habitats but also good for nature.

Advancing Leopold’s land ethic today means beginning to see wild areas as fine places to visit, but not to inhabit. It means ripping out the invidious circuitry of a culture that enshrines wilderness, denigrates cities and delivers only the pseudo-wilderness nowheresvilles of endless, placeless suburbs. By recommitting ourselves to the city as a place and to civic life as a way of living, we can tread more lightly on the planet and leave room for all of the other beings who deserve their place on the earth as well. The truth is that “back to earth” was bad for the earth. Back to the city is perhaps the next phase of environmental thought.

Our choice of a place to make our homes is arguably the most environmentally and socially significant decision we will make. To recycle fastidiously inside a massively over-built house that mars the countryside and is part of a drive-everywhere subdivision is to miss the point of being an environmentalist. A person’s environmental baggage does not get lighter because there’s a bag of recyclables in the back of the SUV.

How many suburbanites do you know who say they have moved out of the city because they love the country? We will know we have made progress when suburbanites say that because they love the country they are moving back to the city.

By its very definition, wilderness is where we *don't* live in large numbers. The fewer of us there, the greater the wilderness. As population increases, we will simply need to put more people on more land. Good cities, well planned and developed, can accommodate more people more happily and with less environmental impacts than sprawled development. Henry David Thoreau wrote that, "In wildness is the preservation of the world." The city ethic would assert that in cities is the preservation of wildness.

Cities are natural human habitats. The idea that cities are unnatural is unnatural in itself. We don't condemn or question the health of any other animal that builds homes or congregates together. Ants build elaborate tunnels, but we don't talk about the pathology of the ant hill; we don't revere the simple, lone ant, free of the hill and making his own way down the sidewalk. Bees have hives, birds have nests. There are homes and cities in nature. Cities are a natural way for thousands or millions of human beings to live together.

Put me in a loin cloth and give me a spear and put me in the wilderness and I will probably be dead inside of a week. And if I clawed and scrapped and survived for a year, I wouldn't enjoy the experience. Life in the wild is short, nasty and brutish. I need civilization for my very survival and I need cities to be fulfilled and happy.

The environmental movement needs to treat cities with the same reverence as natural areas. The movement should *not* abandon its dedication to the preservation of wilderness, but it should add to it – with equal dedication – an affection for cities.

New Environmentalism: What the City Ethic Could Mean

By adopting a city ethic, we might transform the environmental movement. Here are some of the ways a city ethic could fundamentally change our thinking.

Changing the Language: Urban Doesn't Sprawl

A central problem in dealing with sprawl is confusing language. We have failed to make a distinction between suburban and urban growth. Too often, both are lumped together as "urban sprawl." Yet, actually what has been happening is that cities (places of real compact, urban form) have been losing population while suburbs (loose, more environmentally destructive development patterns) were booming. It has been a case of blaming the victim.

In fact, urban sprawl is an especially unfortunate phrase because it is an oxymoron. Urban does not sprawl. Urban is compact. *Suburbs* and *exurbs* sprawl. By mixing up urban with sprawl we have become confused about what the problem really is.

Every year in America since 1960 we have become more and more metropolitan and less and less urban. The proportion of Americans living in places defined as "metropolitan" has increased from two-thirds in 1960 to 80% today. Yet, the form of the new development is anything but urban. It is made up almost exclusively of low density

suburban sprawl and “edge cities,” concentrations of unplanned, often unincorporated retail and commercial centers.

One implication of the city ethic is that we might lose the phrase “urban sprawl.” If sprawl needs an adjective, it is “suburban” or “exurban.”

Seeing Cities as Home

The environmental movement starts with the idea that the natural world is our true home and that any human development diminishes it. The second implication of the city ethic could be the idea that we start with the built environment as a natural home for human beings. This implies that the places we build demand just as much reverence and should be taken just as seriously as the natural environment. It has implications both for older neighborhoods and for new developments. The city ethic suggests that it is an equally pro-environmental statement to help restore a city neighborhood as it is to plant a prairie. The city ethic also suggests that new development is not always bad. It is one thing to sacrifice good farmland or natural areas for large lot, socially exclusive, auto-dependent subdivisions and strip malls. It is another thing altogether to honor land by building a good neighborhood on it, respecting it by using only as much of it as we need.

Looking Beyond Our Own Backyards

Another implication of the city ethic is the idea that the very best thing anyone can do for the environment (perhaps short of choosing to have fewer children) is to make a home in the city. And by “making a home,” we mean participating fully in civic life; making the city a good place to live for everyone. There are people who regard themselves as “environmentalists” who confuse personal surroundings with a good overall environment. This is the kind of thinking which someone employs when they move their family to a large lot rural development in search of cleaner air for themselves while they drive into town, thereby contributing to more pollution for everyone else. A city ethic would recognize that environmentalism is essentially a social movement and it demands a respect for the implications of personal choices on the environment which we all share. A choice which improves my personal surroundings at the expense of the larger environment is an anti-environmental choice.

Practicing Urban Conservation

Sometimes, the environmental response to respecting cities is to make them less urban by importing nature into them. A final implication of the city ethic – the most radical of all, perhaps – is that cities do not need nature’s redemption because they are not unnatural. We are still, to a large extent, responding to the conditions of Eastern U.S. cities at the turn of the last century. Manhattan needed more green space and Central Park was a great idea. But the problem in Wisconsin one hundred years later is not that we lack enough urban green space, but that we lack enough true *urban*. This is not to say that urban parks are bad or that they should never be expanded or improved. It is to say that the city ethic would understand the value in a good urban neighborhood with its shops

and restaurants, porches and sidewalks. The environmental movement would stop trying to rescue the city with more “green space” and would start trying to understand what makes urban places work. We would practice *urban* conservation with the same vigor with which we pursue the conservation of nature. Under the city ethic “*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*” deserves a place on environmentalists’ bookshelves right next to “*A Sand County Almanac*.”

Conclusion

More than fifty years ago, Aldo Leopold wrote:

“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

Cities are “right” because they preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community by consuming less land per household and by producing fewer pollutants per resident than scattered development in the countryside.

But Leopold also wrote:

“No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions.”

He was writing about the need to move away from the idea of nature being subservient to human exploitation and toward seeing ourselves as plain members of a larger biotic community. Aldo Leopold did not deal much with today’s most significant land use issue – sprawl – because the forces that would make it an issue were just coming together when he died in 1948 and we did not begin to recognize sprawl’s ill effects until perhaps two decades later. We still need to complete the change in intellectual emphasis he called for half a century ago, but we need to make another change in our “loyalties, affections and convictions” that he could not have anticipated. We need to develop an intellectual emphasis on cities, a new-found loyalty to urban places, a deep affection for city life, and the conviction that cities, very simply, are good. Before we will be effective in the battle against sprawl, we need to find a city ethic.

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