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COMMUNITY,
ENVIRONMENT,
AND POPULATION

The Failure of Planning: Permitting Sprawl in San Diego Suburbs, 1970 to 1999, by **Richard Hogan**. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2003. 200 pp. \$69.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-8142-0923-8. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 0-8142-5104-8.

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San Diego is a postmodern urban nightmare: a once-gentle landscape of coastal hills and river valleys sloping to the Pacific that today resembles nothing so much as a lumpy stucco of residential boxes and ubiquitous freeways slathered across bulldozed barren earth. Ecology and design are at odds. Suburbs sprawl uniformly for 30 miles to the north and east of the old downtown, yet precipitous and flammable canyons fracture the linear design, blocking connections between enclave housing developments. Local roads run to freeways, the only option for most commuters. As Richard Hogan observes:

[L]ife in San Diego is crazy. Its people live in the best climate in the world, with beaches, mountains, desert—whatever the nature lover might want. What is crazy, however, is that they live in their cars. They drive their cars to a health club to get exercise after work, or they mount their bikes on their cars and drive for an hour so that they can take a half-hour bike ride. . . . No wonder road rage is rampant in southern California. (p. 118)

Hogan spent a portion of his childhood in San Diego and returned in 1992 for a sabbatical year from Purdue University. He studied the urban planning process in a sample of local communities, using interview and observational methods among developers, planning officials, and housing and environmental activists. Hogan came to know and understand these people, to fathom the logic of their collective action. His study is extra-

ordinarily valuable because it reveals a process in which grotesque results emerge from the rational behavior of actors bound together in a particular kind of market.

San Diego suburbs have boomed, with occasional recessionary interludes, since the 1960s. Whole communities are built and named by developers constrained only by the pace of freeway connections. Market demand has little effect on housing supply. Big developers build far ahead of demand as fast as they can engross the land and drive up speculative property values. Indeed, the burgeoning supply brings pressure to bear on public infrastructure providers for “needed” freeways and shopping centers. The result is quintessential sprawl.

Hogan’s first and most bracing point is that this pattern is neither unplanned nor uncontrolled. “[T]he freeway-and-shopping-center pattern of suburbanization was planned. . . . The critical questions are: Planned how? Planned by whom? Planned toward what end?” (p. 43) Hogan answers these questions in a set of case studies focused on housing and habitat in five suburban communities.

The inhuman design of suburban space is the patterned and predictable result of corporate development for profit, public officials doing their regulatory job, and growth-control advocates attempting to mitigate unpleasant side effects of the process. Big developers can buy up extensive lands to hold or put into mass housing production as financial considerations dictate. Local officials must “work with” these developers who do, in fact, offer concessions (say to affordable housing or natural preservation) as the price of doing business. Owing to their constant presence and high stakes in localities, developers become local government’s most steadfast constituents. Progressive activists mobilize now and then to demand environmental protection, local amenities (parks, recreation facilities), or low-cost housing, while powerful interest groups like the Sierra Club press for scrupulous regulation of development. Corporate developers and flexible local governments are best equipped to mollify opposition groups. They can afford the necessary concessions and they understand the bureaucratic labyrinths of environmental legislation.

Thus we are led to Hogan's second paradoxical result:

The irony of popular participation is that it increases the cost and complexity of the planning process and thereby increases public-sector dependence on developers—the only parties who are willing and able to pay the cost of pursuing big-picture solutions (p. 27) . . . the ideology of the no-growth movement is feeding the growth machine. (p. xxiii)

Hogan's book and his sabbatical end with a return to West Lafayette, Indiana where "the quality of day-to-day work and home life is far better" (p. 118). For those who do not live in a similar "life-centered community," he holds out little hope short of a "frontal assault" on the market economy. Proposed alternatives such as the "smart growth" movement or European-style social democratic schemes succumb in the end to market domination. Hogan concludes "the only viable alternative is a truly revolutionary change" (p. 137), although the route to that end is not indicated—unless it is U.S. Route 52 leading to West Lafayette. He does not examine the kind of nonmarket logic that might counteract the San Diego pattern nor explore the methods employed in more successful planning and environmental efforts. There are, of course, other models of livable community, even in California.

Yet anyone who has spent a few days in San Diego gridlock must empathize with Hogan's yearlong ordeal. Across the country we are building settlements without community—corporate designed, mass produced, profit maximizing, uniformly boxy, bare, townless, unaffordable, SUV settlements that are life-centered only in the sense of requiring a lifetime of commuting. Hogan's frustration shows, but maybe that is because he is in touch with the mood of many Americans.

Newcomers to Old Towns: Suburbanization of the Heartland, by **Sonya Salamon**. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 245 pp. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-226-73412-9.

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Salamon's handsomely crafted and well-written monograph, *Newcomers to Old Towns*, provides a differentiated narrative of the multiple ways in which the American heartland is being "suburbanized." The book, which heavily relies on interviews rather than long-term participatory fieldwork, is based on research conducted by the author and several of her students in six Midwestern small towns during the 1990s. Comprehensive door-to-door household surveys and in-depth interviews with a representative sample of residents were supplemented with observations, census data, newspaper material, and expert interviews. I find Salamon's team research approach to profiling small town communities sophisticated and convincing, even though I would have enjoyed more "thick descriptions" and original voices throughout the chapters. The six case studies are enriched through newspaper articles, an appealing black and white photo essay, and many well-placed maps and tables.

Salamon's core argument is that rapid population growth in rural areas has created a "postagrarian social fabric" that has destabilized the strong social networks and autonomous character of small towns, turning them into archipelagos in the commuter zone of regional urban centers. This process has led to four different types of small town communities today: "agrarian," "affluent residential," "mixed economy," and "shabby residential."

A number of small and remote communities, such as the book's Smallville, have for now managed to preserve their traditional "agrarian" character despite the continuing erosion of local jobs. In contrast, settlements like Prairieview, because of excellent schools, attractive landscape, and proximity to a regional center, have attracted scores of suburban newcomers who are turning the area into "affluent residential" bedroom communities. Unlike old timers, suburban new-