The Tao of Smart Growth
(The way that can be named is not the way)

by Raymond Young

“SMART GROWTH IS ABOUT... taking positive action... more livable communities... advance planning... healthy eco-systems... cooperative relationships between developers and local government... avoiding adversarial public hearings... [and appeals to those who want] to cut costs and taxes... safer and more natural communities for children... secure agricultural land base... social justice... public transit... housing options for all... to protect nature... preserve wildlife habitat... to reduce air and water pollution and to use resources more equitably and efficiently.”

– West Coast Environmental Law News (December 15, 2000)

Amazing—all that sizzle and no sprawl too! No wonder “smart growth” is North America’s fastest selling remedy for all that ails our urban areas. The vision is more than appealing—it’s just about perfect.

But wait. Isn’t this vision identical to the foundations of the planning profession: the establishment of clean, healthy, safe and natural places to live; the efficient, equitable provision of public services, housing, and social and economic opportunities; the preservation and protection of nature; and the maintenance of open, principled and participatory decision-making? It says a lot about the quality of the planning profession’s core vision that it has remained so consistent and so appealing over generations. But it’s not new. So why the current stampede?

Our concern about the smart growth movement should start with recognition that it is not based on a reasoned, widespread conversion to this worthy planning vision. The core of the planning vision has always been a good one, and at the level of abstraction at which it is expressed—even hyped—in the smart growth pitch, it is as irresistible as mom and apple pie on Mother’s Day. A stampede is basically “mindless” (to borrow a word from the smart growth lexicon). In this case, it is caused by a trendy commitment to a formalistic, almost ritualistic set of policies for achieving the planning vision.

While smart growth dressing itself well and promises all, it is in substance not about the vision at all. It is about marketing.

And what is being marketed is a pre-packaged prescription. From the perspective of smart growth, the planning vision is simply attractive, highly recognizable packaging that is guaranteed to elicit a positive response. Having appropriated the packaging, smart growth is also “branding” the vision. What brand could be better than “smart growth,” especially when the competition can be dismissed as “mindless sprawl.”

But what about the content? The answer involves perhaps the oldest marketing ploy of all: the suggestion of a potion that cures all ills, a formula that leads to the vision depicted on the package. The idea that a single remedy sounds good, looks good, and can do everything, has long been a dangerous one, capable of disarming critical faculties.

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the marketing efforts of the smart growth movement has been the commodification of the planning vision, coupled with the seduction of the planning profession itself. Once we accept a specific formula as the answer, and your thinking days were posted at 100 households per acre. Critics reacted with dismay, since those densities would all the population of the world to reside in Virginia, and the entire U.S. population in Los Angeles. Equally suspect was the “smart” analysis of automobile use at those densities. The calculator missed the point that, at 100 households per acre, the miles traveled per day in each square mile would be over thirty times greater than that in the present average urban area, and ten times greater than that in Los Angeles. The density calculator was quietly removed after its prescription proved unreasonable.

by-step instruction manuals that reduce planning to a checklist of “best practices” designed to implement a formula. Once we commodify the practice by relying on a series of checklists, we can’t truly call ourselves professionals at all. We are no more practising planning than the average consumer who follows ikea instructions is designing and building furniture.

Last June, one national organization posted a smart-growth density calculator on the Web (since removed). This tool, it was claimed, would automatically reveal the true environmental impacts of sprawl at different urban densities. All the assumptions and calculations were built-in and invisible. You pushed the button, got the answer, and your thinking days were over. “Smart” urban densities were posted at 100 households per acre. Critics reacted with dismay, since those densities would allow the entire population of the world to reside in Virginia, and the entire U.S. population in Los Angeles. Equally suspect was the “smart” analysis of automobile use at those densities. The calculator reported that, per household, “smart density” automobile travel would be reduced about 4.5 times, but of course the calculator missed the point that, at 100 households per acre, the miles traveled per day in each square mile would be over thirty times greater than that in the present average urban area, and ten times greater than that in Los Angeles. The density calculator was quietly removed after its prescription proved unreasonable.
In the quote at the beginning of this article, the author extols the virtue of "avoiding adversarial public hearings." The implication is that smart growth is so smart and its solutions so obviously correct that debate will be unnecessary. Why in the world would planners embrace a formula for planning that promotes such a goal? Public debate reflects healthy competition between legitimate ideas and interests devoid of difference and "managed" to minimize competing ideas and interests. The implication is that smart growth is so thousand times more valuable than an endless series of "cooperative hearings." Why in the world would planners panic, not praise, in our profession.

For discussion of the "smart" density calculator posted recently on the Web, see:

"Avoiding adversarial public hearings." [Toole, Randall. "Sierra Club Exposes Smart Growth Gordon, Peter and Henri Richardson. "Critiquing Sprawl's..."

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Summary

All professions are prone to fads and fashionable trends. Planning is no exception. "Smart growth" is attractive because it asks no questions, provides all the answers, and invites no critical thought. It's entirely packaged: all we have to do is unwrap it and wonder at its truth. Planners have a duty to break smart growth rhetoric down to its components—to think about them, test them, and make judgements about what works and what doesn't. To do less is to turn professional practice into a series of checklists, and planners into technicians.