



The Monadnock Building  
53 West Jackson Suite 650  
Chicago IL 60604  
**312 408 1661** fax 312 408 1496

# San Jose Mercury News Opinion/Editorial

Friday, October 17, 2008

Doug Farr, AIA

For nearly half a century, people have looked to Silicon Valley for cutting-edge technology. Many people (Al Gore included) are now looking to Silicon Valley and the technology sector to invent and finance our way past climate change. The prevailing wisdom is that smarter, more efficient technology will allow us to do all the things we do now, but with reduced or no environmental impact. In my opinion, Al Gore and the others have this half right—and half wrong. We sorely need inventions such as better light bulbs, fuel-efficient vehicles, and green buildings. There is no way we can make our climate change targets without them. However, there are two crucial elements that have been glaringly missing from the sustainability conversion.

First: how we use land. How we settle the land and organize our lives on it is the foundation of sustainability and determines our overall environmental impact. Who leads the most sustainable lifestyle in North America? Manhattanites! It seems counter intuitive that Manhattan would be the most environmental place in the U.S., but think about it. They occupy the smallest dwellings, own the fewest cars, drive the fewest miles, walk and ride transit the most, and pay top dollar to do so. Far-flung suburbs by comparison are the embodiment of the problem. Huge houses, one car per person, drive everywhere. You know the picture.

Second: mobility. The climate change conversation about transportation has focused on vehicle efficiency and the deeply-in-denial hunt for greener fuels. The recent passage of California Senate Bill 375 may be a mobility game changer. For the first time in the US, local municipal plans will be prepared with the goal of reducing carbon and greenhouse gas production by reducing how much we drive. Much is known about how to integrate land use and mobility in patterns that reduce or eliminate our need to drive, yet to the general public they have not been easy to conceptualize like a light bulb, Prius or green building. Here's where some invention is needed.

The thing we need to invent: the neighborhood. While not a recent invention, the planning concept called the "neighborhood" may be the easy-to-get concept that can hold its own with the light bulb in the public discourse. The neighborhood is what California uber-planner Peter Calthorpe calls a pedestrian-shed; a pattern of land settlement that allows a person or family to meet their daily needs on foot or bike. They take ten minutes to walk across and typically consist of a gridded street network, a mix of uses and enough population density to support the mix of jobs, shops and services. Density is a naughty word across much of the country, but when people make the link that some density is necessary to be able to have anything to walk to, they can accept it. The truism about a bad house in a good neighborhood is better than a good house in bad neighborhood makes real sense. But as sustainable as neighborhoods and urbanism are there is still a lot of room to improve both environmentally and economically.

The invention: sustainable urbanism. The integration of high performance buildings and high performance infrastructure in a walkable, transit-served neighborhood is the definition of a new international movement called Sustainable Urbanism. Sustainable Urbanism represents the combination of two irresistible forces—the huge demographic bubble of empty nesters and twenty-somethings who want an urban lifestyle with the increasing societal expectation of a green lifestyle. The challenge: change our values, perceptions and ideas about what makes a city sustainable and invent ourselves into a new way of life.