LAST HARVEST

HOW A CORNFIELD BECAME NEW DALEVILLE:
Real Estate Development in America from George Washington
to the Builders of the Twenty-first Century,
and Why We Live in Houses Anyway

WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI

SCRIBNER
New York London Toronto Sydney

SCRIBNER
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

First Scribner trade paperback edition May 2008

SCRIBNER and design are trademarks of The Gale Group, Inc. used under license by Simon & Schuster, Inc., the publisher of this work.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-800-456-6798 or business@simonandschuster.com

DESIGNED BY ERICH HOBBING

Text set in Stempel Garamond

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2006052136

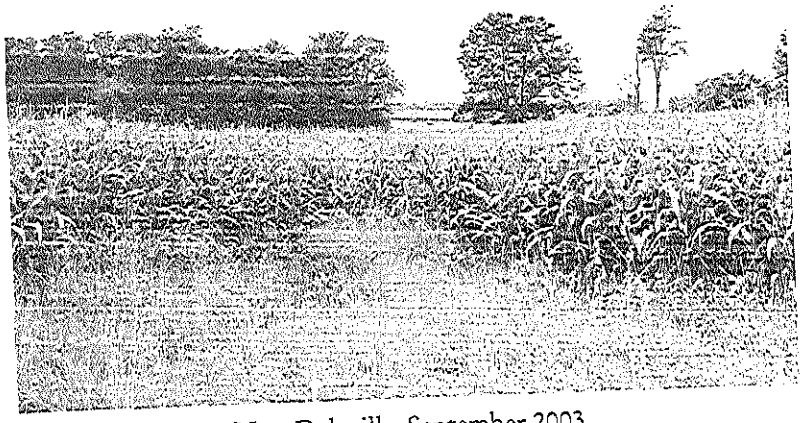
ISBN-13: 978-0-7432-3596-9
ISBN-10: 0-7432-3596-7
ISBN-13: 978-0-7432-3597-6 (pbk)
ISBN-10: 0-7432-3597-5 (pbk)

Photograph, page 1: courtesy of Arcadia Land Company
Illustration, page 90: courtesy of Robert R. Heuser
Photographs, pages 9, 185, 275, and 283: courtesy of the author

To Shirley

CONTENTS

PART ONE



New Daleville, September 2003

Prologue

Twenty years ago, my wife and I started to walk for exercise, every morning before breakfast. We lived in the country, and our route was a winding road between meadows and apple orchards. Since moving to Philadelphia, we walk on city streets. The experience is different, yet not so different.

Chestnut Hill, where we live, is as bucolic as its name. There is a hill, and there are horse chestnut trees, though the American chestnuts that gave the place its name are long gone. Our walks take us down arboreal tunnels of massive oaks and sycamores, which grow in wide planting strips between sturdy granite curbs and slate sidewalks. The strips, which are the responsibility of individual homeowners, exhibit a pleasant disharmony. Most people, following an unwritten rule, plant grass, but there are also nonconformist patches of ground cover, defiantly individualistic flower beds, no-nonsense brick pavers, mean-spirited bands of crushed stone, and in at least one case, an earnest row of zucchini.

The boundaries of the house lots are likewise variously defined. Many are generously open; some have hedges or planting beds. There are ivy-covered wooden fences of every sort, as well as black wrought-iron railings, white pickets, and the occasional stone wall. A few houses have solid wooden fences, unsociable barriers that resemble stockades out of *The Last of the Mohicans.*

Houses change with the seasons. Pots of flowers appear on

stoops, and wreaths adorn front doors. The decorations on our neighbor's lawn are always a treat: ghosts for Halloween, angels at Christmastime, pink flamingos for the children's birthdays. Last Valentine's Day, every window contained an illuminated heart. Some houses fly flags. Not as many Stars and Stripes as immediately after 9/11, but several of those odd flower-power banners that people seem to like. Dave, an ex-Marine, hoists the red standard of the Corps. We sometimes meet him in the morning, watering the rosebushes in front of his house. Most Chestnut Hill houses are close to the sidewalk. So close you can look inside.

Garbage day is a sort of public confessional. You can see who's bought a new computer, and who's given up on the exercise machine. The other morning I came across a discarded tabletop hockey game. For a second, I thought of lugging it home. When the contents of basements and attics appear on the sidewalk, it means a move is imminent. Families come and go with regularity; finally, we're all of us just passing through. A young household moves in, and swing sets sprout in the backyard. If the children are older, it's a basketball hoop. A new owner usually means energetic gardening, at least for a season or two. Gardens are the main things that change. Occasionally, someone adds a terrace to a house, or encloses a porch. New owners undertake long-delayed maintenance: putting on a new roof, or repointing walls. The only significant construction on my street in several years has been the repair to a neighbor's house that was hit by a falling tree. When the work was finished, the house looked exactly as it did before the accident. After all, why improve on a good thing?

There is no typical Chestnut Hill house. There are mansions as big as small hotels, and little Hansel-and-Gretel cottages. Our walks take us by a representative sample of the architectural styles that came and went during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: charming Queen Annes with picturesque bay windows and ornamental curlicues; rather serious, half-timbered Tudors; elegant Georgian Revivals that make me think of

Jazz Age financiers in wing collars and spats; and straightforward center-hall Colonials, as friendly and uncomplicated as the big golden Labs that play in their front yards. One street has a row of flinty stone cottages that appear to have been transported directly from the Cotswolds. Schist, quarried from a nearby ravine, is the common building material, but we also see brick, stucco, and clapboard. If we walked farther than our usual three miles, we would pass Italianate, Jacobean, and Romanesque Revival residences. Not all the houses are old. Beginning in the nineteen fifties, some of the large estates were subdivided. The grandest of these properties was Whitemarsh Hall, a celebrated Gilded Age mansion, designed by Horace Trumbauer in 1917 for Edward T. Stotesbury. All that's left of the 145-room Georgian pile is a pair of huge entrance gates, whose massive columns loom over the plain-Jane bungalows that dot the grounds of what was once a formal French garden.

What drew Stotesbury, a stockbroker and banker who was reputedly the richest man in Philadelphia and owned second homes in Bar Harbor, Maine, and Palm Beach, Florida, here? During most of the nineteenth century, Chestnut Hill had been a sleepy rural hamlet. Summer visitors included Edgar Allan Poe and John Greenleaf Whittier, who came to experience the rugged landscape of nearby Wissahickon Creek, and wealthy Philadelphians, who, attracted by the salubrious climate, built country estates. In 1854, thanks to a consolidation of city and county, Chestnut Hill became part of Philadelphia, but remained largely rural. In the eighteen eighties, Henry Howard Houston, a wealthy local businessman, bought up 3,000 acres of this countryside, and after convincing the Pennsylvania Railroad, of which he was—not by chance—a director, to build a commuter line from downtown to Chestnut Hill, he set about subdividing the land and developing a new community. He called it Wissahickon Heights. To give his development social cachet and attract Philadelphia's elite, he founded the Philadelphia Horse Show, which became the premier social event of the city. To draw summer visitors, he built a large

hotel—complete with an artificial lake. He added a country club, where residents could drink and play cricket (a popular game in Anglophile Philadelphia, which had several cricket clubs) and built a picturesque Gothic church, where they could worship their Episcopal God.[1]

Garden suburbs such as Wissahickon Heights were part of an important episode in American urban history, when upper-middle-class families moved from the centers of cities to their suburban fringes. The Harvard historian John Stilgoe has called these outlying communities "borderlands." He reminds us that this displacement was the mark of cultural as well as physical transformation. "The enduring power of borderland landscape between the early nineteenth century and the beginning of World War II," he writes, "suggests that many women and men understood more by *commuting* and *country* than train schedules and pastures, and hints also that the cities of the Republic failed to provide an urban fabric as joyous, as restorative as that found by borderers a few miles beyond."[2]

Borderers were not back-to-the-landers. They expected attractive, urbane residences, cultivated landscapes—and cultivated neighbors—which required organization. A few of the nineteenth-century borderland communities grew spontaneously, but most, like Wissahickon Heights, were planned. The first, by most accounts, was Llewellyn Park in New Jersey, developed in 1853 by Llewellyn Haskell, a Manhattan businessman, and designed by the celebrated architect Alexander Jackson Davis. The largest was Riverside, Illinois, laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1868 for the Chicago developer E. E. Childs. Similar communities appeared on the outskirts of every major American city.

So many Philadelphians found Houston's development "joyous and restorative" that, by the time Stotesbury moved here, Chestnut Hill was the city's most prestigious address. Houston's son-in-law, George Woodward, greatly expanded the business during the

early nineteen hundreds.* A physician with an entrepreneurial streak, he was also a progressive philanthropist, interested in architecture and social housing. He subdivided land and sold lots to wealthy Philadelphians, but he also built a variety of rental houses—middle-class family homes as well as large residences, a range that continues to give the neighborhood a diverse charm. Woodward hired young architects whom he'd send to England to broaden their repertoire—and to discover Cotswold cottages. In 1921 he commissioned Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., son of the famous landscape architect, to lay out a public park. Woodward's descendants continue to manage rental properties in Chestnut Hill to this day.

My own house—built on the foundation of an old icehouse—was designed for Woodward's development in a Colonial Revival style by H. Louis Duhring in 1908. Stepped gables give it a Dutch appearance, and the interiors are rustic, with pegged, rough-hewn beams and fieldstone fireplaces. The public rooms, following the British Free Style, are exceptionally open. It's a testimony to Duhring's talent that the house has served as a family home for almost a hundred years with only minor modifications. The bedrooms were remodeled in the nineteen thirties, extra bathrooms added in the fifties, a porch turned into a sunroom in the sixties, and the kitchen renovated in the nineties. I converted two bedrooms into a study when we moved here six years ago. No doubt, during the twenty-first century it will undergo more alterations. If energy costs continue to rise, there will come a time—I hope it's not on my shift—when someone will have to figure out how to add proper insulation to the walls. But the original roof slates have lasted, and the roofer assures me that, with a little care, they're good for some time yet. The stone walls need periodic repointing, and the woodwork must be properly maintained. All of us own-

*Woodward changed the name of the development to St. Martin's, which survives as the name of a train stop.

ers over the years have performed these essential tasks, driven by the house's simple but sturdy details, its practical plan, and its intrinsic good character.

Not far from my home is an unusual group of houses that Duhring built for Woodward in 1931. By that time, many people owned cars, and Roanoke Court, as it's called, is entered through a walled motor court flanked by individual garages that resemble two rows of stables. Beyond that, eight attached houses surround a common garden. It's a magical, secluded space. The large houses are designed in a simplified version of the English vernacular style that Duhring favored, with steep slate roofs and rough stone walls. He built a number of such novel housing groups in Chestnut Hill, including several courts, a crescent of semidetached residences, and a cluster of unusual quadruple houses. Woodward encouraged such experimentation. In addition to the Cotswold row, he commissioned a lane of British country-style cottages and a cluster of charming Norman houses, complete with a town gate, known locally as French Village. The last was built after the First World War to honor Woodward's deceased son, a pilot in the Lafayette Escadrille.

Visitors to Chestnut Hill use terms such as *old-fashioned* and *traditional* to describe the treed streets and interesting-looking houses. They can be forgiven for assuming that the neighborhood is the result of years of fortuitous evolution—a suburban version of Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard. Nothing could be further from the truth. Evolution there has been, but pastoral Chestnut Hill is no happy accident. It was a residential real estate development, and it was *designed* to look the way it does.

1

The Developer

"The construction side is almost risk-free, since building begins only after the house has been sold to a buyer. All the risk is in the development side, but so is all the money. A small home builder makes 5 to 7 percent profit, while a developer can make a lot more than that—or he can go bankrupt."

Every spring I invite Joe Duckworth, a residential developer, to talk to my class, a mixture of architects, planners, and Wharton School MBAs. He generally begins by reminding the students that home building is an unusual business. "The customers are not only buying a product," he says. "They're looking for the right location for commuting to work, good schools, recreational amenities, and nice surroundings. They're shopping for a neighborhood."

He shows images of suburban communities, asking the students to describe what they see. "Lawns," they answer. "Colonial shutters." "Brick chimneys." Emboldened, someone in the back calls out, "Boring, cookie-cutter houses." "Interesting answer," says Duckworth. "You're right, the houses are similar. When people buy a house, they want to be able to sell it. Since they can't afford to lose money, they're highly risk-averse. They want what everyone else has."

Paul, an architecture student, raises his hand. "The houses that you're showing all look pretty traditional. What's the market for modern design?" Duckworth answers that in the seventies a home builder he worked for created a so-called California contemporary model, with clerestories, cedar siding, high spaces, and an open plan. "It wasn't great architecture, but it was different. Today, those houses are selling at a ten to twenty percent discount compared to other nineteen-seventies-era houses. People just don't like them, and no Philadelphia builder has tried it since."

Duckworth talks about his business. "In the past, residential development was straightforward," he says. "You had an engineer prepare a subdivision plan, you got it approved, and built the houses. Development and building were done by the same company. In the last five years, thirty-eight states have enacted some kind of land development regulations. Today, especially in an anti-growth area such as Pennsylvania, getting land permitted is an art that requires a different skill set than building houses, so land development and house building are increasingly done by different people. Development involves acquiring land, getting permits, and putting in roads and infrastructure; house building is mainly about construction. The construction side is almost risk-free, since building begins only after the house has been sold to a buyer. All the risk is in the development side, but so is all the money. A small home builder makes five to seven percent profit, while a developer can make a lot more than that—or he can go bankrupt."

Kelly, one of the Wharton students, asks how developers weather economic downturns. "It's mostly a question of resources," Duckworth says. "In a downturn, about a quarter of developers go bankrupt. They've bought land which they can't sell. So the rest of us have the opportunity to buy this land at a low price. When the economy turns up, we have permitted land ready to go, while other developers are just starting the long permitting process."

Duckworth discusses the role of regulation in development.

"You have to understand that the way that our suburbs are planned is not because of developers, it's mainly because of zoning," he tells the class. "Who do you think controls zoning?" he asks. "Zoning boards," calls out a smart aleck. "Yes, but zoning boards are run by who? The local residents. What these people want is to maintain, or even increase, property values. At the same time, they want—and their neighbors want—to limit development as much as possible. In Chester County, where I live, the size of an average lot increased from half an acre in the sixties to one acre in the eighties, and by the end of the nineties it was an acre and a half. The bias of local zoning is always towards bigger lots." Duckworth ends by talking about his own projects. "I'm working on village-type developments with smaller lots and more open space. It's taking a long time to get approvals, though, because we're swimming against the current."

Duckworth and I have been friends for more than a decade, and we usually have lunch after the class. He's in his early fifties, with longish hair and a beard that he's recently been growing and shaving off with disconcerting regularity. Today he's bearded. I tell him that I'm sure the students appreciated his comments since many of them want to be real estate developers. I ask him what attracted him to the field. "I studied mechanical engineering at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh," he says, "and after graduating I got a job with Sun Oil in Philadelphia. After a few months I realized that my future was not in engineering, and I decided to get an MBA and go into business. Like most of my Wharton classmates, I wanted to be an entrepreneur and run my own company. In most fields, that meant spending years working your way up the corporate ladder and then, if you were lucky, having one shot at being CEO. I didn't want that. I was already married with kids, and I was in a hurry. I looked around at business sectors where someone like me, with a college education and an MBA,

had an advantage. I came across commercial home building, which I didn't know anything about. It was a field that seemed to have many family-run businesses. I thought that I could bring modern business practices to bear and make my way."

Eventually, he landed a job with Toll Brothers, the largest home builder in the Philadelphia area. His responsibility as assistant to the president was finding and buying land and getting approvals. He learned the business but after nine years left the company. "I realized that I was never going to be a brother," he jokes. He moved to Realen Homes, one of Toll Brothers' smaller competitors. "Realen was a reputable company that owned apartment buildings that generated good cash flow, but the home-building side of the business was not doing well. It had lost money on a deal that went sour, the employees were demoralized, and there were no projects in the pipeline." Duckworth was brought in as president and CEO to revive the operation. Using his Toll contacts, and Realen's credibility as a company, he immediately optioned more than three thousand lots. "Over the next decade I built up company sales from twenty million dollars a year to a hundred million, making Realen the second-largest home builder in the Philadelphia area, after Toll," he tells me.

I know that Duckworth has recently left Realen to start his own real estate company, and I ask him about the projects he mentioned in class. "We're in the middle of trying to get several of these village-type developments off the ground, which requires townships to change their zoning to allow smaller lots. It's an uphill battle," he says. "There is one project that looks promising, though. It just came to me through another developer, Dick Dilsheimer. I've known Dick a long time. He and his brother are old-fashioned merchant builders, that is, they buy land, subdivide it, build reasonably priced houses, and market them to buyers. For the last year they've been trying to get permission to build a small subdivision in southern Chester County. It's nothing special: eighty-six houses on ninety acres of rural land. Dick's problem is

that the township doesn't like his project. They keep telling him that they want something different, with smaller lots and more open space."

Duckworth calls Dilsheimer's proposed development "as of right," that is, it follows local zoning exactly and does not require a variance, or special approval. Nevertheless, the township is blocking him. "He could sue and probably win, but confrontation is not Dick's style. Instead, he's approached me to see if I would be willing to take the project off his hands. I'm interested, but it's still too early to know how serious the township really is."

I've heard architects and city planners argue for more density and open space, but here the demand is coming from the citizens themselves. I ask Duckworth if he knows what has pushed the township in this direction. "I'm not sure," he says. "It may have been their planning consultant, Tom Comitta."

I happen to know Tom. We share an interest in garden suburbs. He introduced me to Yorkship Village in Camden, New Jersey, which was built during World War I to house shipyard workers, and I repaid him by showing him Roanoke Court and some of the other residential groups in Chestnut Hill. If he's involved, that might explain a lot. I decide to pay him a visit and find out more about this unusual township.

Tom Comitta lives and works in the town of West Chester, the seat of Chester County. His office occupies half of a brick Victorian twin on Chestnut Street. The sign on the door says, THOMAS COMITTA ASSOCIATES, TOWN PLANNERS & LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS. Though he is trained as a landscape architect, much of Comitta's business is advising small rural municipalities that need professional help with planning, zoning, transportation, and other development issues. One of his clients is Londonderry Township, the site of Dilsheimer's proposed subdivision, which Comitta calls the Wrigley tract. "Londonderry is a small rural township in

southern Chester County, at the edge of the Brandywine Valley," he tells me. "They originally hired me to advise them on a large subdivision of three hundred town homes called Honeycroft Village. It's a nice name, but it was an unimaginative plan with identical houses in groups of threes and fours." The township supervisors were dissatisfied with the layout. "What else can we do?" they asked Comitta. He suggested a visit to a new planned community in another part of the county that would give them an idea of an alternative approach to residential planning.

Considering it was a Saturday morning, the turnout was surprisingly good, he told me. The group included the three township supervisors, the township engineer, members of the planning commission, and a representative of the developer. The new community consisted of large houses, two-car garages, front lawns, and attractive landscaping. But as the group walked around and Comitta pointed out various features, it became apparent that in many small ways this development was different. To begin with, there were sidewalks shaded by trees growing in planting strips. The lots were smaller, the buildings closer together—and closer to the sidewalk. Cars were parked on the streets, but there weren't any driveways or garages—these were in the back, accessed from rear lanes. Many of the houses had front porches and picket fences. These features gave the development a compact, villagelike appearance.

They met a woman driving her car out of a lane. "She'd been living there about eighteen months, and she was rhapsodic," Comitta remembers. "She said that it reminded her of her mother's hometown." The township engineer expressed some skepticism about the narrowness of the streets, but Comitta saw that most of the group were favorably impressed. The visit lasted about two hours. Afterward, they stood around talking. The representative of the Honeycroft developer said he was concerned about the time it would take his client to redesign the plan and go through an entirely new approvals process. Then the chairman of the planning

commission said, "We might not be able to do this in Honeycroft, but wouldn't this kind of thing be better for the Wrigley tract?"

"That's how it began," Comitta told me. "The township was unhappy with Dilsheimer's proposal, and the visit suggested an alternative at just the right time. The planning commission approved Honeycroft, but they want Dilsheimer to change his project. They've really given him a hard time, so I can understand why he wants to pull out. Now the township has asked me to work with Joe Duckworth on the Wrigley tract and see if we can get something that will be better than what we've done before."

2

Seaside

How a little resort community with porches and picket fences became a touchstone for suburban planning.

The villagelike community that Tom Comitta had shown the Londonderry Township officials is an example of what is often called neotraditional development, a planning movement that began in the nineteen eighties. It was sparked by two events. In 1981 the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York City mounted an exhibition called "Suburbs." A large part of the show was historical and featured many of the early garden suburbs, such as Chestnut Hill and Yorkship Village, which Comitta had shown me. It also included forgotten classics such as Tuxedo Park outside New York City, Forest Hills Gardens in Queens, and Palos Verdes Estates in Los Angeles.

The organizer of the exhibition was a forty-two-year-old architect and Columbia University professor, Robert A. M. Stern. Stern had become interested in the early garden suburbs thanks in part to Chestnut Hill. "I can distinctly remember Bob Venturi touring me past French Village in the late sixties," he told me. The Cooper-Hewitt exhibition made an important polemical point: suburbs are an integral part of American urbanism. This was a bold claim. At the time, serious architects considered suburbs and suburban houses beneath contempt. Not Stern. "The modest

single-family house is the glory of the suburban tradition," he had written earlier. "It offers its inhabitants a comprehensible image of independence and privacy while also accepting the responsibilities of community."[1]

John Massengale, a University of Pennsylvania graduate student working in Stern's office, coedited *The Anglo-American Suburb,* which accompanied the exhibition.[2] It was the first time that many of the developments had appeared in print in over fifty years. What was the inspiration for the book? "Traditional town planning was something that was in the air," Massengale recalls. "There was a general dissatisfaction among young architects with orthodox modernism, especially modernist city planning." One could argue that the unpopularity of modernist houses, which Joe Duckworth had mentioned to my students, was a matter of taste, but there is no question that the modernist city planning policies of the nineteen sixties had been a disaster. Highway construction and urban renewal destroyed neighborhoods, and public housing, though built with the best intentions, by concentrating the poor in high-rise blocks created more problems than it solved.[3]

The architectural reaction to modernism became known as postmodernism. But postmodernism proved too glib and weak-kneed, and unwilling to question the underlying premises of modernism. Tom Wolfe once compared postmodern architecture to Pop Art, calling it "a leg-pull, a mischievous but respectful wink at the orthodoxy of the day."[4] By the nineteen eighties, postmodern architects reached a parting of the ways. Some returned to the fold, so to speak, embracing various modernist revivals: minimalist International Style, early forms of Russian deconstructivism, and sculptural German expressionism. Others, including Stern, sought inspiration in a more distant past. In that sense, the renewed interest in the old garden suburbs should be seen not only as a revival but also as a desire to continue a tradition.

Massengale calls *The Anglo-American Suburb* "the opening salvo in the whole garden suburb renaissance of the eighties." The first fully realized project of that renaissance was not designed by Stern, nor was it even a suburb. Seaside, begun in 1982 and completed over the next two decades, is a holiday resort on the Florida Panhandle, consisting of approximately three hundred houses and roughly the same number of guest cottages, as well as shops, restaurants, and commercial buildings. Most Florida resorts are designed to look like country clubs; Seaside is different. Narrow streets radiate from a central green as in a New England village. The houses are vaguely Victorian, with traditional pitched roofs, porches, and white picket fences. The lots are small and the buildings extremely close together, bordered by heavy undergrowth. Sandy footpaths provide shortcuts behind the gardens. The casual atmosphere and cottagelike houses recall an old-fashioned beach community.

The first time I saw Seaside was in 1989.[5] The place was less than half finished, but it made a powerful impression. I belong to that generation of architects for whom the central issue in architecture is housing. As a student, I dutifully visited the modern housing that was considered exemplary: Le Corbusier's Marseille apartment block, with its famous shopping street in the sky; Mies van der Rohe's Lafayette Park in Detroit, which combined low-rise and high-rise buildings on an urban site; and Louis Kahn's Mill Creek public housing in Philadelphia, then considered a model of its type. Truth to tell, these projects were uniform, standardized, and lifeless. I sensed—even if I didn't quite admit it—that none was as lively as the old Italian and Greek towns and villages I visited on my student trips. I assumed it was just a question of time. Any residential development built all at once was bound to be uniform and somewhat dull, I told myself. Seeing Seaside was a shock, since here was a brand-new development that was neither uniform nor dull; instead it was varied and animated.

Seaside was planned by Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, a young husband-and-wife architect team based in Miami. They had both graduated from Yale in 1974. Duany had briefly worked for Stern, and the couple had contributed to *The Anglo-American Suburb*. Although Duany and Plater-Zyberk were among the cofounders of Arquitectonica, a chic Miami architectural firm, they had since moved away from modernism and become interested in traditional urbanism. They both taught at the University of Miami, where they did town planning projects with students, studying old Florida towns such as Key West. Not coincidentally, they lived in the garden suburb of Coral Gables.

George E. Merrick, who developed Coral Gables in the twenties, grandly called his project "America's treed suburb." Later planned suburban developments were known as "subdivisions," and their developers as "subdividers." Over time, *subdivision* acquired a pejorative connotation and was supplanted by the more wholesome *community*, as in *golf course community* and *retirement community*. But Duany and Plater-Zyberk did not refer to their project as a resort community—which is what it was—they called it a town.

The small town occupies an iconic position in American popular culture. All countries have small towns, of course, but in the United States the small town embodies a particular ideal of neighborly democracy, self-sufficiency, and independence. In the mid-nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that "the town is the unit of the Republic," but the popular image of the small town really came into its own a hundred years later.[6] Artists as disparate as Mark Twain, Thornton Wilder, Frank Capra, and Norman Rockwell stoked the small-town myth. So did Walt Disney, who made a small-town main street the centerpiece of his first theme park. Such images penetrated the public consciousness. When a 1990 Gallup poll asked people where they would prefer to live, despite the fact that four out of five of the respondents resided in a metropolitan area, small towns were strongly favored

over suburbs, farms, or cities.[7] By calling Seaside a town, planning it like a town, and incorporating small-town features such as picket fences and front porches, Duany and Plater-Zyberk were tapping into a powerful cultural tradition.

Time, which featured Seaside in its 1990 "Best of the Decade" issue, speculated that "the 1990s might be ripe for the Seaside model . . . to become the American planning paradigm." Between 1988 and 1990, Duany and Plater-Zyberk designed two dozen Seaside-like planned communities across the country. Although the recession of 1990 stalled or halted most of these projects, the end of the decade saw several new garden suburbs take shape, some designed by Duany and Plater-Zyberk, and some by others. The largest and best-financed was built by the Walt Disney Company near Orlando, Florida.[8] The new town of Celebration included a high school, a primary school, and a health care facility, as well as a full-fledged town center next to a lake. The first phase of what would eventually house ten thousand was inaugurated in 1996. Closing the circle that had begun fifteen years earlier, one of Celebration's architects and planners was Robert A. M. Stern.

Despite the publicity, this handful of developments was hardly the new paradigm that *Time* foretold—it was a drop in the bucket among the tens of thousands of suburban developments built during that period. Yet the impact of the new generation of garden suburbs has been greater than their small number might suggest. This is thanks largely to Duany and Plater-Zyberk, who in addition to being talented planners are zealous and energetic advocates. They have codified the Seaside approach and coined the term *traditional neighborhood development*, or TND. They created a foundation that distributes information to interested municipalities, and they convinced President Clinton's Department of Housing and Urban Development to incorporate traditional

neighborhood principles into its inner-city housing projects. They conduct workshops and courses for the Urban Land Institute, the research and education arm of the real estate industry, which has endorsed traditional neighborhood development as a type of suburban planning. They are also cofounders of the Congress for the New Urbanism, which has become the prime forum for planners and architects interested in the subject. Thanks to the influence of Duany and Plater-Zyberk, new, large neotraditional urban neighborhoods have appeared in Denver, Albuquerque, and Orlando.

Andrés Duany is harshly critical of conventional suburban planning. "The classic suburb is less a community than an agglomeration of houses, shops, and offices connected to one another by cars," he says, "not by the fabric of human life."[9] His point is that suburbs have the right ingredients but that they are improperly put together, strung out along collector roads, functionally segregated, housing over here, office buildings over there, shopping elsewhere. "These elements are the makings of a great cuisine, but they have never been properly combined," he says. "It is as if we were expected to eat, rather than a completed omelet, first the eggs, then the cheese, and then the green peppers."[10]

In a typical lecture he shows a slide of contemporary town houses, stepped back in a sawtooth pattern, with desultory landscaping and parking slots facing the front doors. He contrasts this banal arrangement with a street scene in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia. He points out that the basic elements—attached row houses, asphalt, parked cars—are similar. He talks about how, in Alexandria, façades line up to form a wall defining the street, how slight variations between the houses make all the difference, how the sidewalk and the street trees separate the houses from the cars parked on the street. You don't have to be a town planner to see which one is better. "The market shows that people are willing to pay several times as much to live in Old Town Alexandria as

they are to live in a modern townhouse in a typical development, several times as much for termite-ridden beams and parking that on a good day is two blocks away."[11] Duany delivers the punch line with a flourish, like a conjurer pulling a rabbit out of his hat.

about rules and regulations. He needed to be reminded of the physical reality of planning. "Walking around these old towns, I saw the delicate relationships that exist between large spaces and small, the progression from narrow to grand as one passes from street to plaza," he explains.

Comitta stretched his leave to almost two months. Shortly after returning home, he invited his largest clients to a slide show at the town hall. It wasn't exactly "My European Vacation." Comitta told the audience that the old ways of mixing uses, such as residences, shops, and community buildings, were more effective than modern zoning, which separates uses into different areas. The point was not to copy English garden cities and German medieval towns, he said, but to look to our own urban traditions, the old small towns of southeastern Pennsylvania. His message was that, rather than resist new development, municipalities should actively direct growth to complement and improve their communities. He spoke in his usual calm and deliberate fashion, but in the context of southeast Pennsylvania—or, indeed, in the context of almost anywhere in the metropolitan United States—Tom Comitta was preaching revolution.

"Some people must have been put off by the pictures of the dense center of old Rothenburg, for the next day, two of the townships called and politely fired me," he says. "On the other hand, two others told me they liked what I had to say." Encouraged, Comitta started writing new kinds of zoning ordinances that would allow small rural communities to grow in ways more compatible with how they had done it for the last hundred years. He says, "I tried to figure out what people liked about their old towns and to write ordinances that would permit *that*."

4

Last Harvest

Thanks to the failures of zoning, we hide our communities behind landscaped berms.

Tim Cassidy works for Tom Comitta as an architectural designer and landscape architect. He also happens to serve on the Londonderry planning commission. Since I'm interested in learning more about the township and the Wrigley tract, I arrange to visit him one Sunday morning. A tall, intense man of about forty with a ponytail, he's in the middle of renovating his home, a rambling yellow farmhouse. His two young daughters play among the sawhorses and the construction debris. His wife, Carolyn, holds little Rebecca, born last year. He is the eighth generation to live in the area. "My great-grandfather is buried in a graveyard down the road," he tells me. "When my parents were children, they lived across the street from one another. I was born less than two miles from this house. How's that for provincial?"

Outside, he shows me the line of white pines—fifty of them—as well as spruce and viburnum that he has planted to hide the new housing subdivision that is being built in the field behind his home. The young trees barely screen the unfinished houses and the raw, exposed earth. "I now have a new crop of vinyl where the corn used to grow," he says. Cassidy doesn't like developers.

"Ten years ago Londonderry was not a real estate market," he

tells me. He says that when he was growing up, he felt removed from the urbanization of Wilmington and Philadelphia. In fact, Wilmington is only a twenty-five-minute drive—his wife, a veterinarian, commutes there to work—and King of Prussia, with its vast shopping mall, surrounding office parks, and convention hotels, is only thirty miles away. As the region continues to attract tens of thousands of jobs—QVC is headquartered in West Chester, Vanguard, with eight thousand employees, is in nearby Valley Forge—home builders and developers have turned their attention to southern Chester County, including Londonderry.

It was after a developer bought the field behind his house that Cassidy started going to township meetings. Thanks to his professional background, he found himself taking an increasingly active role in discussions. With his deep family roots in the area, he was quickly accepted by the locals and was invited to serve on the planning commission, which reviews all real estate development proposals and land-use issues for the township.

Local responsibility for land control varies widely across the United States. Constitutionally, states control land use, but except for a handful that have formal statewide zoning controls or some degree of statewide control over land use, most states—including Pennsylvania—have devolved regulatory powers over land to local governments.* All American states are divided geographically and politically into counties (called boroughs in Alaska and parishes in Louisiana), a practice derived from the age-old English shire system, but the power of counties varies considerably. In the South and West, counties control land use as well as, in many cases, schools, libraries, hospitals, law enforcement, and judicial administration. In the Northeast and much of the Midwest, counties have much less power, and control over land use resides in much

*Hawaii has statewide zoning, and both Oregon and Florida exercise state control over land use. Maine, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Tennessee, Vermont, Georgia, and Washington (and to some extent Wisconsin and Minnesota) also have a degree of statewide zoning control.

smaller units, called townships. In New England, counties have no real power. Control of land is in the hands of local municipalities, which resemble townships but—confusingly—are called "towns" and can be as large as sixty square miles.

Pennsylvania, with more than 2,600 local governments, is an extreme case of so-called home rule. Whether such a system is a good or a bad thing depends on your point of view. On the one hand, home rule satisfies local property owners, since their voices are more likely to be heard on issues such as zoning and land use. On the other hand, it frustrates advocates of regional planning, who are obliged to deal with many different—usually parochial—constituencies. It also complicates the lives of real estate developers, since each township has its own priorities and ways of doing things.

Londonderry Township was founded in 1734, when a group of Scotch-Irish settlers voted to break away from Nottingham Township. Over the years, Londonderry itself was subdivided until it reached its present size of twelve square miles. Its sixteen hundred inhabitants live in scattered houses, farms, and small residential subdivisions; there are no towns or even villages. But the small population is far from homogenous. According to Cassidy, there are four distinct groups, each with its own attitude to development. The first he calls the "old-guard farmers." Although Chester County was once entirely agricultural, it is being rapidly urbanized. In 1994 *The Wall Street Journal* listed the county among "America's twenty hottest white-collar addresses," the fastest-growing, wealthiest, and most educated concentrations in the country.[1]* *Philadelphia* magazine has called the county the successor to the Main Line.[2] The part of the county closest to Philadelphia is the most suburban; the rest is more rural but changing fast. Londonderry, for example, looks like a farming area,

*All twenty "hot" areas, which include places such as Fort Bend County, outside Houston, and Douglas County, south of Denver, are rural counties.

but farmers make up only 10 percent of the population. Cassidy describes them as free-marketers when it comes to property rights. "They would prefer no development, but if it is to happen, they want the option of selling their land." This transaction is sometimes referred to as "the last harvest."

Another 10 percent are wealthy landowners who live on large estates and are devoted to what the University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Dan Rose has called "the culture of the horse."[3] This way of life includes raising Thoroughbreds, attending polo matches, and taking part in horse shows. The cornerstone of the horse culture in Chester County is the foxhunt (of which no fewer than eleven survive). A successful hunt requires a special landscape: not simply flat fields but a combination of rolling meadows, farmland, woods, and copses, divided by jumpable rail fences. Since the riders and hounds go for miles—a foxhunt can last six to eight hours—foxhunting relies on cooperative landowners who will allow the hunt to cross their fields. In other words, not only is foxhunting an intensely social activity, it requires a high degree of cooperation among its adherents.

The modern horse culture came to Chester County in 1912, when W. Plunkett Stewart, a wealthy Baltimore securities trader, bought several thousand acres in the area, some of which he resold to wealthy friends who shared his enthusiasm for foxhunting.[4] In 1945, when one of his neighbors, Lamont du Pont, head of the vast chemical company, put his five-thousand-acre holding on the market, Stewart arranged for his friend Robert J. Kleberg, owner of the vast King Ranch of Texas, to buy it. Later enlarged to nine thousand acres, the land was used as a fattening range for cattle shipped from the West.[5] "When I was a schoolboy," says Cassidy, "the fathers of some of my classmates were cowboys—Stetsons, chaps, and all."

By the nineteen eighties, it no longer paid to ship cattle from Texas to Chester County, and the King Ranch put its grazing land up for sale. The rumored buyers included the Disney Company,

which was said to be looking for a theme park site, and James W. Rouse, the developer of Columbia, Maryland.[6] To preserve their countrified way of life, the surrounding landowners turned to the local Brandywine Conservancy, which, aided by unnamed investors, bought the ranch. The conservancy added conservation easements, which forbade further subdivision, and sold the land in parcels of hundreds of acres. Thus began a scheme that eventually put 37,000 acres of land, more than two hundred square miles, under permanent protection—protection from development, that is.

Cassidy offers to show me this acreage. We drive through a spectacularly beautiful landscape of slightly rolling hills and sloping meadows interspersed with small stands of trees. I haven't seen countryside like this since I visited England; the swelling pastures and tree clumps could have been laid out by Capability Brown. Some of the estates go on for miles. As in Nantucket, wealth and preservation go hand in hand. Cassidy sardonically refers to the large landowners as the equestrian elite and characterizes them as born-again environmentalists. "They are essentially antidevelopment, or will accept as little as possible," he says. He appears torn on the subject. On the one hand, it is thanks to the equestrian set that so much of the landscape of his childhood is intact. On the other hand, he can't help being cynical about the preservation of so-called agricultural land as a playground for the rich. "But I'm really just jealous," he jokes. "I wish that I had a trust fund and could spend my time riding horses."

Eighty percent of the population of Londonderry are neither farmers nor foxhunters. Some are what Cassidy calls "old suburbanites," working people who settled here in the nineteen sixties and seventies, when land was inexpensive. Many are now retired. Their modest ranch houses and split-levels are in stark contrast to the larger and more expensive houses of the "new suburbanites," who have been moving here during the last decade. Cassidy says that there is not much mixing between the two groups. The old

suburbanites attend public meetings, get involved in community activities, and volunteer for committees; the new suburbanites keep pretty much to themselves. But if the old and new suburbanites don't have much in common, they do agree about one thing: they don't want any more development.

A township's most powerful legal tool in regulating land use is zoning.[7] Zoning ordinances consist of two parts: first, regulations describing different land uses, the minimum size of lots, how much of the lot can be covered by buildings, and so on; second, a map showing how these uses are distributed in the township. Londonderry, for example, is cut up into roughly a dozen so-called zoning districts, defined according to agricultural, residential, and commercial uses, and various combinations of the three.

The first American city to adopt zoning was Los Angeles.[8] In 1908, after experiencing runaway growth thanks to several real estate booms, and citing the fire hazards of unregulated use of land, the city created zoning ordinances that distinguished between residential and industrial uses. Such legislation seemed to fly in the face of individual freedoms, but the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of these regulations.[9] In 1916 New York City introduced a comprehensive zoning ordinance. After that, with federal encouragement, the concept spread quickly. Within a decade, almost all states adopted laws that enabled local governments—cities, counties, boroughs, and townships—to enact zoning ordinances.

According to a textbook on zoning, states empower local governments to zone "for the purpose of promoting health, safety, morals, or the general welfare of the community."[10] That sounds sensible—having a glue factory in the middle of a residential neighborhood is not a good idea. However, the popularity of zoning is also explained by its secondary effects. Since zoning governs the minimum size of lots, it represents an effective way to control

the size of the population—larger lots mean fewer residents. Since large lots generally cost more than small lots, mandating lot size is also an indirect but effective way of defining the type of person who can—and cannot—afford to live in a particular community. This is referred to as exclusionary zoning.* Zoning also has a physical dimension. Requiring very large lots, for example, means that houses will be far apart, reducing their visual impact on the landscape.

If most people in Londonderry don't want development, why doesn't the township adopt stricter zoning? I ask Tom Comitta. "I'm often hired to draft zoning ordinances that will prevent development," he says. "This can be done to some extent by enacting environmental restrictions on wetlands and slopes. It used to be common to limit development to as few people as possible by mandating large lots. But it's no longer that simple." Pennsylvania is one of the many states whose judiciary has imposed limits on home rule. In the early nineteen sixties, a developer brought a suit against a Chester County township that had raised the minimum allowable lot size on his land from one acre to four acres. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled in his favor, on the grounds that a township could not insulate itself from urbanization by mandating larger lots. "A zoning ordinance whose primary purpose is to prevent the entrance of newcomers in order to avoid future burdens, economic or otherwise, upon the administration of public services and facilities can not be held valid," observed one of the Justices.[11]

Comitta refers me to other important zoning cases. In a 1970 ruling concerning an urbanizing township, the Pennsylvania

*From the outset, zoning had a socially restrictive aspect. Los Angeles ordinances prohibited hand laundries, for example, which just happened to be largely owned by Chinese; elsewhere, zoning was explicitly aimed at excluding African-Americans. Racial zoning was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1917, although it took more than thirty years for the Court to rule that it was unconstitutional.

Supreme Court called residential lots of two and three acres "a great deal larger than what should be considered as a necessary size for the building of a house, and therefore not the proper subjects of public regulation. As a matter of fact, a house can fit quite comfortably on a one-acre lot without being the least cramped."[12] The unstated implication is that, if a township wants to avoid legal challenges, it should make sure it permits at least some lots that are one acre or smaller.

Reading the court rulings proves more interesting than I expected. Unlike most writing about town planning and architecture, which is concerned with how things *should* be, the law baldly confronts the world as it is. In one case, the Pennsylvania court found that a township could not refuse out of hand the request of a developer for a variance to build apartment buildings even though the land was zoned solely for individual houses. "Perhaps in an ideal world, planning and zoning would be done on a regional basis, so that a given community would have apartments, while an adjoining community would not," stated the majority opinion. "But as long as we allow zoning to be done community by community, it is intolerable to allow one municipality (or many municipalities) to close its doors at the expense of surrounding communities and the central city."[13] In other words, communities cannot insulate themselves from the world around them.

The result of such legislation is that townships in southern Chester County are forbidden from stopping development outright. What they can do is to draw out the permitting process, throw up environmental roadblocks, and grudgingly—and slowly—comply with the letter of the law, as Londonderry has been doing with the Wrigley tract. In any confrontation with a developer, a township has four important advantages. First, since the courts review zoning on a case-by-case basis, the burden of proof is on the developer. Second, lawsuits take time. This is not a problem for the township, but since the developer has money

tied up in the project, time is generally his enemy. Third, most small developers are loath to sue, since legal action is expensive and tends to sour relations with the community. Last, since the developer usually doesn't buy the land until permitting is complete, his commitment to a project is generally tentative, and in the face of protracted opposition, he will usually forfeit the option fee and try his luck elsewhere, which is exactly what the township is hoping for.

Despite Dick Dilsheimer's problems on the Wrigley tract, Londonderry Township is not known as exceptionally obstructive. The supervisors and the planning commission do not create artificial delays or throw up roadblocks in the face of development. They have worked diligently to create a balanced zoning plan. The northern half of the township, which contains most of the large estates, requires residential lots to be at least four acres. The southern half generally allows two-acre lots and contains several districts where lots can be as small as half an acre and where attached houses, like those being proposed for Honeycroft, are permitted.* It looks logical on paper, but the results have not been satisfactory. Subdivisions are scattered across the landscape without rhyme or reason. It has gotten so bad that each new development proposal is greeted with dread by the planning commission. "We discuss environmental issues, runoff, the percentage of impervious cover, and other technical questions, but basically, nobody likes the way these new things look," Tim Cassidy tells me after we finish our drive. "Our half-baked solution is to insist that developers build landscaped berms around their projects, so we won't have to look at them."

The situation in Londonderry is hardly unusual. Many rural communities across the United States are experiencing the same growing pains. The problem is not simply the pressure of devel-

*Londonderry also has zoning districts for mobile homes, shopping strips, agricultural business, and commercial-industrial uses.

opment; after all, from the beginning America has been characterized by expansion and population growth. The problem, rather, is the lack of effective ways to manage growth. Single-use zoning has proved to be notably unsuccessful in organizing the environment, since it does not address the three-dimensional nature of our physical surroundings and instead reduces everything to a crude technical measure. No wonder the popular idea of planning is simplistic: high density bad, low density good. Except that scattering houses over the landscape is *not* good. That is what Londonderry Township has discovered, and that is why they want to try something different.

I ask Cassidy about the Wrigley tract. He explains that the township requires developers to submit fully engineered plans, together with a fee to cover the cost of review. Once an application is filed, the township is obligated to render a decision within thirty days. To get a reading of the commission's preferences—and save money—developers often ask their planners to prepare preliminary drawings and present these at public meetings. In such cases, the township is under no obligation to respond quickly. "If a developer is willing to submit more alternatives, that's fine with us," says Cassidy. "That's what Dilsheimer has been doing. Because we've been focused on Honeycroft during the last few months, we haven't paid much attention to his project, except that we aren't keen on what he's proposing.

"The Wrigley tract project dragged on for several months," Cassidy explains. "We weren't getting anywhere. Finally, at our last meeting, Dilsheimer told us he was withdrawing from the project and introduced Joe Duckworth." Cassidy isn't fully converted to Tom Comitta's ideas about neotraditional neighborhoods. He's still smarting from the subdivision going up behind his house, so he's wary of new projects, but he says that he is willing to give a different approach a try.

5

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Estate

How America's first mega-developer hobnobbed with Founding Fathers, amassed six million acres, and landed in debtors' prison.

Tim Cassidy talks about real estate development in his area as if it were something new. But it was a real estate transaction that was responsible for the British colony of Pennsylvania, of which Chester was one of the three original counties. Charles II granted the 30 million acres to William Penn to settle a £16,000 royal debt to Penn's father. A devout Quaker convert, and something of a visionary, Penn maintained that the new colony was a "holy experiment," but his description of Philadelphia is distinctly secular: "The Improvement of the place is best measured by the advance of Value upon every man's Lot," he wrote. "I will venture to say that the worst Lot in the Town, without any Improvement upon it, is worth four times more than it was when it was lay'd out, and the best forty." He fretted that "it seems unequal that the Absent should be thus benefited by the Improvements of those that are upon the place."[1] Penn was being disingenuous for, as Proprietor, he was by far the largest absentee owner in the colony. "A Map of ye Improved Part of Pennsylvania"

8

Meetings

Why developers hate to go to public meetings.

The Londonderry board of supervisors meets on the second Tuesday of the month at seven in the evening. The township building, which is in Daleville, is a long industrial shed with a row of garage bays for trucks and road maintenance equipment. The township offices are attached to one end, a little civic afterthought.

I arrive early. The gravel parking lot is beside a large unmowed field identified by a sign as the Londonderry Township Park. Lower down the slope, on the far side of the field—I can't bring myself to call it a park—is a relatively new subdivision whose name I noticed as I drove in: Mindy Acres. Since there are no trees, no hedges, and no fences, I have a panoramic view of the entire development. Except for a strip of asphalt roadway—no sidewalks—everything is green turf, which makes it look a little like a golf course. The large houses, far apart on what look like one-acre lots, are turned this way and that, tenuously connected to the winding streets by long driveways. It's hard to characterize this artless arrangement. Mindy Acres exists in some not-quite-rural, not-quite-suburban limbo.

The parking lot fills up with pickup trucks and SUVs, and I go inside. The township hall is a large, undecorated room with a low

suspended ceiling and fluorescent lights. There is an American flag in the corner. About fifty metal folding chairs are set up in rows on the carpeted floor. Most are occupied. The three supervisors, who are the township's elected government, sit at a long table at the front of the room. The chairman, Howard Benner, tall, in his seventies, has long worked for the school district; Clair Burkhart, a ruddy-faced man, owns a local excavating business; and Fred Muller, bearded, in shirtsleeves, runs a small organic farm next to Mindy Acres. Charlotte Wrigley, an elderly lady with white hair, sits at one end of the table with a notebook, while Bob Harsch, the township engineer, is at the other end. He is the only man in the room wearing a tie.

Tom Comitta bustles in with an armful of papers. Township meetings are his bread and butter. "I have sixty years experience," he jokes, "thirty years in the day and thirty years in the evening." He is followed a few minutes later by the Duckworths and Dave Della Porta. Jason is carrying a large leather portfolio, from which he removes several presentation boards that he pins up on the wall. The large plans, colored to highlight the trees and landscaping, are titled "New Daleville." "It was time to name the project," he says.*[1] "We wanted Daleville in the name, but the township didn't want us to use Daleville alone, so we brainstormed different combinations. We considered Daleville Center, Daleville Farms, and Daleville Village. My dad suggested New Daleville, and it stuck." The room is full, which for Jason is not necessarily a good sign. "But compared to some other projects Arcadia has done, this one has gone pretty smoothly," he tells me. "We think the vote is going to go our way. But I still have this feeling in my stomach that something could go wrong."

Punctually at seven, Benner calls the meeting to order. He

*The practice of naming residential subdivisions originated in 1811 in England, with John Nash's suburban Bristol development, Blaise Hamlet. Llewellyn Park, Riverside, and Wissahickon Heights are early American examples.

announces that the Chester County planning commission is meeting tomorrow afternoon to discuss the proposed neotraditional ordinance and has asked for a postponement of the supervisors' vote until next month. The news that there will not be a vote produces a dissatisfied grumble from the room. The law requires advance notice of zoning hearings, and people have made a special effort to come and have their opinions heard. Benner apologizes for the last-minute change and says that there is no reason why a discussion can't take place as scheduled. He asks Comitta, as the township consultant, to describe the new ordinance.

Comitta launches into a spirited explanation of the philosophy of traditional neighborhood development. He talks about the need to rethink conventional planning and criticizes dependency on cars and the large lots of conventional residential developments. He casts the proposed ordinance as a high-minded alternative to sprawling development. Warming to his subject, he points out the window to Mindy Acres. "That's the sort of thing that we're trying to avoid."

During Comitta's presentation, a bearded man and his wife who are sitting directly in front of me have been angrily whispering to each other. When Comitta finishes, the man stands up to ask a question. It appears that he and his wife are residents of Mindy Acres. "Do you mean to say that we've been doing it all wrong?" he asks incredulously. "All this time? Really?" Then he adds more belligerently, "I *want* to drive to work. That's why we moved here. To get away from the traffic and congestion." There are murmurs of agreement in the room. The audience is a mixture of people, not farmers but rather working people living in a farming area. Many appear to be "new suburbanites" who live in the immediate surroundings. Obviously, they don't see having more neighbors as a plus. Comitta's call for denser development has not gone over well.

"I moved here about ten years ago," says a mild-mannered man, "and when the house I live in was built, there was probably a

meeting like this to complain about it." When the laughter dies down, he continues. "I'm not against development, but I am concerned about the extra traffic. How will this affect our standard of living? Are we going to be paying for road repairs and improvements afterwards?" There are a number of other questions along the same line. If families with children move into the area, will school taxes go up? What about the cost of policing? Couldn't the township make the developers pay extra to defray such costs, someone asks.

These questions touch on one of the conundrums faced by all communities in the path of development. The township is legally obliged to accept new residential subdivisions, but the extra property taxes generated by the new residents will not be sufficient to pay for the costs of the additional fire protection, policing, road maintenance, and garbage collection. More families also mean bigger schools. Townships that are next to major highways can hope to attract office buildings or shopping centers, which pay higher commercial property taxes and don't increase school enrollment or generate traffic on local roads. But there aren't any major highways going through Londonderry. That means that, in the long run, property and school taxes will probably go up.

Benner, unflappable, deftly steers the discussion from one topic to another without actually responding to the questions. He asks if someone from Arcadia would like to speak. "It makes sense to have my dad lead the conversation," Jason says later. "He has the most experience and the most stature." Joe Duckworth, with his longish hair—no beard this month—and casual clothes doesn't look like most people's idea of a developer. He describes New Daleville as a walkable community with lots of open space. Unlike Comitta, he steers clear of polemics. New Daleville is an alternative, he says, a different sort of housing. "It may not be for everybody," he adds. He politely reminds the audience that it was their neighbor who decided to sell his farm. Arcadia got involved because the township was unhappy with business as usual. He

makes himself sound like a guest in their home. He also calmly but forcefully makes the point that the Wrigley tract will be developed, one way or another. The question is how.

Duckworth explains the master plan. He describes it as a compact village, with sidewalks and public greens. There will be walking trails and play lots. The garages will be behind the houses, he says, reached by rear lanes. He makes the point that half of the site will be left unbuilt. He also talks about the sewage treatment system, which will infiltrate treated wastewater into the ground. "Where will this take place?" asks a man sitting near the water-cooler. Duckworth points to an area of open space. This raises a clamor, since it sounds as if the unbuilt area he had mentioned earlier is really a septic field. Duckworth explains that the sewage treatment area is not included in the open space calculation, but the misunderstanding leaves the impression that he has been caught cheating.

"We know what's in it for the developer," someone says brusquely, "but what's in it for us?" He doesn't mean the people who are going to live in the new houses—they are not represented in this room—he means the people who currently live in the township. Benner points out that the developers will donate land for a future township building and that the open space on the site will be for everyone. There appears to be skepticism in the audience on this point. Is it really going to be public? "It's up to you," says Duckworth. "We could deed it to an agricultural trust that would keep it as farmland, or give it to the township for recreational uses, ball fields and so on." This sounds too good to be true—a developer giving something away. "The proposed ordinance says that there may be up to twelve thousand five hundred square feet of retail or office space," says a woman who has obviously taken the trouble to read the document. "I'd hate to see golden arches here." "Or a Wal-Mart," someone chimes in. Duckworth assures them that 12,500 square feet is very small, not a large building, something like a convenience store or a professional office.

There are a number of questions about the houses that will be built in New Daleville. How big will they be? More important, how much will they cost? The latter is a key issue for the people who live in the nearby subdivisions. They own one-acre lots, whereas Arcadia is proposing something much smaller, and they are concerned that cheaper houses will bring down their property values. Duckworth says he expects the houses to be about two thousand square feet in size and to sell for about $200,000, which is comparable to current local house prices. He adds that, in other neotraditional developments, prices have generally risen over time. In that case, a woman asks, why does he need so many houses, why not a few less? "We're hoping that the prices will rise," says Duckworth, "but it's still risky." He explains that the larger number of houses is needed to cover the costs of curbs, sidewalks, lanes, and landscaping. He doesn't say that it also covers the cost of the long approval process, drawn out by meetings such as this one.

Despite Duckworth's well-considered attempt to persuade the audience, the general mood remains one of mistrust and antagonism. It's clear that if a floor vote were taken, a majority would vote against New Daleville. These people have not been impressed by neotraditional development. Walkability, the village concept, even the large amount of public open space, have not swayed opinion. As far as they are concerned, New Daleville could be as pretty as a Currier & Ives print but it's still a new development, that is, it's new houses on what was previously farmland. New houses mean extra cars, extra traffic at rush hour, more kids in the schools, and in the long run, higher taxes. Above all, new houses mean more people. The residents of Londonderry live here because they like the remoteness and the open countryside. They put up with driving some distance to work and to shop. Their isolation will be diminished by *any* development, whether on big lots or on small. Arcadia has a long way to go to convince them that New Daleville is a good idea.

The discussion lasts an hour. Citing a full agenda, Benner thanks the Arcadia team and calls for a brief recess. Jason and Della Porta, who have not spoken during the meeting, collect the presentation boards and go out to the parking lot. Nearby, the lights of Mindy Acres gleam prettily in the darkness. It's quiet, except for the low hum of occasional traffic on the highway, several miles away. The vast dome of the sky sparkles with stars. It's easy to see what attracts people to live here, and why they are reluctant to accept change.

Jason, who was hoping for a vote tonight, looks glum. "I thought that went well," Della Porta says to cheer him up. "These meetings can be much worse, with shouting and insults. Tonight was pretty mild." Comitta is not so sure. He's surprised both by the large turnout and by the hostile atmosphere. "The previous meetings of the planning commission rarely had more than three or four people in attendance. I've never heard so much negative comment about this project." He has to go back inside, since the preliminary plan of Honeycroft Village is slated for a vote. He doesn't expect any serious opposition. "Honeycroft is up in the northwest corner of the township, and it has few neighbors, so it's not in anyone's backyard," he explains. "In addition, the developer promised that the town houses would be mainly for retired and older home buyers without children, so schooling is not a big issue." He's right; the Honeycroft preliminary plan is speedily approved.

"In thirty years I've never been asked by the county to defend a proposed township ordinance," says Comitta, who will represent Londonderry before Chester County. He thinks the planning commission may be concerned that the county master plan designates Daleville as rural, whereas the new ordinance proposes a village. In fact, when Duckworth got involved in the Wrigley tract, he verified that the county was not opposed to a zoning change.

Duckworth believes that the unusual request for a formal presentation is caused by the fact that he himself is a member of the Chester County planning commission, and currently serves as chairman. "The commission staff are just being very careful," he says. "They want to make sure that there is no perception of favoritism or conflict of interest."

The county offices are located on the outskirts of West Chester, in a large, modern building that Comitta, when he gave me directions, described as resembling "a really big Circuit City." The meeting is in a spacious room on the first floor. There are five commissioners, three young women—a township supervisor, the president of a local resources council, and a foundation president—a young man who is a lawyer, and an older man who is a borough councilman. They sit at a U-shaped table. Comitta comes early with a stack of presentation boards, followed by Jason and Della Porta. Comitta will do most of the talking, but they are here in case there are any questions he can't answer. Joe Duckworth is the last to come in, very businesslike in a dark blue suit. He excuses himself for being late, explaining that he has been meeting with the county commissioners.

As chair of the commission, Duckworth sits at the head of the table and opens the meeting by calling for a minute of silence—it is September 11, a year after the attack on the World Trade Center. Approving the minutes of the last meeting, the commission launches into a flurry of motions, seconds, and votes on dozens of zoning ordinances and sewage facility plans. There is no debate, since the staff has already reviewed these cases, and the motions pass rapidly. Following a brief discussion of agricultural easements and land conservation, the agenda arrives at the Londonderry ordinance. Duckworth explains that, as the developer of New Daleville, he is recusing himself from the proceedings. He leaves the table and sits at the side of the room.

The first to speak about the Londonderry ordinance is Bill Fulton, who is the executive director of the commission, in charge

of the professional staff. He gives some of the background on the Londonderry ordinance, explaining that originally the county proposed that Fagg's Manor should be the village center for the township. The supervisors felt this was an inappropriate location, so the village designation was removed from the county master plan. However, a village center is needed somewhere, and this now appears to be Daleville, he says. No problem there.

Comitta gets up to speak on behalf of the township. He hands out copies of the current zoning map and a short description of the neotraditional concept. He places plans of New Daleville and of the original Dilsheimer proposal on an easel and outlines the differences. He says that the township wants to use the extra open area as a public playing field. One of the commissioners asks if there is any opposition to the proposed zoning change. Comitta says that there is overall support. He doesn't mention the tied vote of the planning commission.

After answering some general questions from the commissioners, Comitta sits down. A young man speaks on behalf of the county planning staff. He has some technical questions about water supply and the width of the streets. He says the staff is concerned that the proposed ordinance may be challenged as spot zoning. Spot zoning means that an ordinance is so narrowly applied that it benefits the owner of a particular property to the detriment of his neighbors. Comitta tells me later that spot zoning is a murky concept which has no precise legal definition but is often cited by opponents of a particular zoning provision. In the case of New Daleville, the county appears to be uneasy that the new ordinance is being applied solely to the Wrigley tract. Although there are a few technicalities to be ironed out, this seems to be the main issue. The staff member concludes by recommending acceptance of the ordinance. Minor adjustments can be worked out with the township later, he says.

The commissioners have few questions. Unlike during the previous township meeting, there are no serious objections to the

zoning amendment. The truth is that Arcadia's neotraditional project is just the sort of development the county has been encouraging. Jason, who has clearly done his homework, responds to some of the technical concerns, and Comitta embarks on a complicated rebuttal of the objection to spot zoning. He says that the township solicitor will review the ordinance and communicate with the county. I have the feeling that everyone is merely going through the motions. Duckworth was right, it is just the staff being careful. When the vote is taken, all five commissioners raise their hands in favor. New Daleville is still on track.

9

Scatteration

Every year, year in and year out, the American home-building industry produces between 1 million and 2 million new homes, four out of five of which are single-family houses.

When Tom Comitta spoke at the township meeting, he characterized traditional neighborhood development as an alternative to sprawl. Whatever their opinion of development, most people believe that sprawl is bad. Conservationists decry the loss of agricultural land; proponents of mass transit don't like spending more money on highway construction; environmentalists oppose continued dependence on fossil fuels; sociologists claim that low-density suburbs undermine community; urban planners see suburban sprawl as consuming resources that would be better spent on revitalizing inner cities; architects object to sprawl on aesthetic grounds; and, of course, opponents of development see sprawl as their chief enemy.

It is not so simple. For example, sprawl is often blamed for urban poverty, on the grounds that peripheral growth removes jobs from the inner city. Yet Anthony Downs, a Brookings Institution researcher and a longtime critic of sprawl, has found no significant relationship between sprawl and urban decline. "This was very surprising to me," he wrote, "and went against my belief