The Antithesis of Sprawl: A Comparison Between the Merits of Sprawling Suburban Development and the Traditional American Town

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Americans are no strangers to the suburbs. Roughly 50 percent of the American public lives in low-density, car dependent, sprawling suburban communities. Yet in a quality-of-life survey conducted during the same time period, 57 percent of respondents claimed that sprawl is a “very important” or “somewhat important” problem. Opposition to sprawling suburban development patterns is pervasive and stems from concerns regarding (1) high levels of traffic congestion and pollution resulting from high automobile reliance and use, (2) the deterioration of authentic social interaction, and the (3) lack of diversity caused by segregation of income groups within these communities. In response to these concerns, many authors, social activists, and urban planners have advocated the return to the traditional American town, often referred to as New Urbanism. This movement is a culmination of a renewed emphasis on multi-use development that allows residents to work, shop, and live within their community, all with little need to depend on personal automobiles. These pedestrian-friendly communities claim to be the antithesis of sprawl, a bold, yet noble, claim.

The goal of this paper is to establish if this claim in well founded in research. By conducting a thorough literary review and compiling research on both forms of development, this paper shall compare the alternatives by addressing many of the most predominant criticisms of sprawling suburban developments.