

## SUBURBAN SPRAWL, THE AMERICAN DREAM, AND THE CUBAN CHALLENGE

What do all these things have in common? A seemingly hermetic and disassociated title to a brief thirty minute speech, it actually speaks to the fundamental causes that have brought about the current state of affairs, and the many dangers, challenges and opportunities they pose.

The last twenty to twenty five years of continuous economic growth and ever increasing wealth in America \_which can be traced farther back to the beginning of the post WWII bonanza, with the 1974 recession as a contrasting pause\_, have set a mind frame and an understanding of how things work; which was based on a completely unsustainable model, and one that turned two generations of Americans into creatures of comfort, with higher expectations and unbridled optimism. The American dream, as defined by the urge to attain homeownership and become one's own boss, creating a personal idyllic paradise scaled to the size of one's checkbook, never seemed so close and reliable as until a mere few months ago \_or in any case, not more than a year and a half...\_. Then, suddenly, everything caved in, just out of the blue...

Or was it? In fact, it was not. There were plenty of signs of what was coming, but it took a perfect storm for the American people to realize the big *imbroglio* we are in, and kind of discern how we got ourselves into it, as well as start thinking what we can do to work our way out.

Why a perfect storm? Because anyone old enough to have lived through any of the former economic downturns and recessions can tell there is something bigger going on. The truth is there are up to three or four separate crisis happening at about the same time, and feeding from the same source.

It all started with the Real Estate bubble. The one that just burst shared a lot with all the ones preceding it, but what it can certainly claim as its own is the new level of absurdity that inflated it. The long run to it was characterized by a great deal of abstraction, a creation of restless minds that put together the intricate financial derivatives that moved and created wealth around, without being substantiated by the true worth of the physical assets supposedly backing them. I will never forget an anecdote by Andres Duany, who once met one of the top "honchos" at John Hancock, as he was trying to find out why it was so difficult for lending institutions to conceive the idea of extending loans to non-conventional building types like Live-Works, regardless of how soundly built and insurable, and how demanded by buyers they were, or how spotless the latter's credit scores, and the astonishing answer went something like this:

"I have \$6 Billion a year to invest in Real Estate properties \_commercial real estate, specifically shopping malls\_. Do you think I will spend time visiting and fully understanding each and every one of the properties we buy? I couldn't, even if I wanted to. I simply have a checklist, and as long as the shopping malls of a certain kind we buy have the right square footage, 32,000 car-trips a day, and two major national anchor

tenants present, we buy them, in bundles of 200 shopping centers at a time. In the end, it is just an investment...” Soon enough, the mortgages on all those pieces of property would be securitized and sold to new investors, and so it would go endlessly. In short, the live-works, as building types, were not dumbed down and generic enough or that many, to be put in bundles, and their mortgages resold. That is the same driving force behind the cookie-cutter, cheap tract housing that has turned so commonplace in infinite pods and clusters, the cheap vinyl siding of which starts decaying within months of occupied.

On top of it all, Peak Oil hit as another looming crisis matured. The consensus is that world oil reserves have hit the maximum production output they can muster. It is not like some doomsayers claim, that the last drops of oil will dry up from the open spigots in a matter of a couple of years; it is not even that the fields will deplete in masse. It will simply not be cheap ever again. Increased demand has met stalled production, and it has come to happen at a point in our history where all of our society and infrastructure runs on that ever scarcer oil.

In the meantime, we are using close to 840 million gallons of petroleum products a day, and the \$400 billion dollars a year we send overseas find their ways to the hands of the Sheiks and leaders of Middle East countries, who spend them to build the tallest building in the world... every year \_with no one to inhabit them\_, multiple lane highways, man-made beaches and islands, and whatever their whims dictate. When they are done with all that, they still have money to come in and buy the Rockefeller Center, the Chrysler building, aim to take a stake at our ports and infrastructure, and if they so choose, finance the dedicated terrorists waging Jihad against us.

We not only pay this exorbitant amount of money for fossil fuels to countries that may not like us much, we have also succeeded in the dismantling of many of the great American industries that created much of our prosperity. Where is the vast rail road network that allowed the taming of the West, and which would come so handy now, as a much less energy intensive means of transportation? What has come to happen to the Big Three, the former heart of America’s favorite industry, now a ghostly shadow of its own self, a victim to poor management and outdated labor regulations...? This time around, we are less strong to face our problems; we no longer even control our monetary policy, as we have to take into consideration the rightful concerns of the main buyer of our debt obligations \_China\_, before moving ahead to change our interest rates.

Add to it the menace of Global Warming, which can be more perceived than real for many people; but at the same time gets more and more supporting evidence behind. Its catastrophic potential was first unveiled a couple of decades ago, but the masterful piece of propaganda concocted by Al Gore provided a sense of urgency to it, and built an appealing case for what is deemed as a ticking time bomb; of which the smoking fuse is the melting ice caps of mountain ranges, and the disintegrating glaciers. At some point, the discussion of to what extent is part of a normal, cyclical geological and climatologic process, or fruit of men’s behavior, becomes really irrelevant.

Finally, the deepest facet of this perfect storm is the cultural crisis. The weakening of our backbone, and the indulgent, overweight beings we have become, who run away from sacrifice and virtue \_ which shows in the kind of leadership (or lack thereof) displayed by many of our elected officials as of lately\_, make it harder for the living generations to face the tough challenges we have ahead.

At the center of all four crises, there is a common thread: the lifestyle of the American Middle Class, as it happens within the Suburban Sprawl that created it. Itself the brainchild creation of government bureaucrats and zoning code writers and planners filled with good intentions and a lot of contempt for the accumulated experience of their forefathers.



The proliferation of Housing Subdivisions, Office Parks, Shopping Centers, Civic Institution complexes and Roadways has created a disparate world of soccer mom's doing a job similar to that of a Beach Master, in Normandy, during D-Day; only to be able to switch kids between home, school and soccer practice through countless traffic jams, where getting a simple cup of coffee involves no other choice but at least a one mile trip in a gas-guzzling SUV to the nearest Starbucks, and where the long term trend is one of equity loss and depreciation for a large chunk of the building inventory.

These are all the products of the greatest misallocation of resources and infrastructure in the history of human civilization, which has taken place in the last forty or fifty years in America.

We have to rethink our paradigms.

A come back to our senses, retaking sustainable communities as the only viable habitat of human beings \_in a well understood environmentalism\_, where uses are no longer segregated, but rather support each other, pedestrian life can recover its center stage role \_while happily coexisting with the automobile\_, and yield a much reduced energy consumption and more socially stimulating experience, are part of the solution. Retrofitting forty to fifty five percent of the built sprawl and rescuing it to viable communities that can be connected by transit is fundamental. Remodeling many of the McMansions that will lay unoccupied due to foreclosures, and modifying zoning ordinances to allow these to become boarding houses, and to coexist with many proven alternatives aimed towards affordability in housing, will also contribute to do more with less.



A whole change in attitude needs to take place, and a new vernacular approach to architecture can be of enormous help. Always understanding “vernacular” not as a nostalgic historical style, but as a mind frame focused on making things work, not devoid of historic memory, but intent on using the best technique and solution at hand for any given problem, achieving a more climate responsive, culturally coherent, practical, lovable and lasting architecture, normally within the scarcity of resources typical of a peasant, and not too unfamiliar in needy times like these.

The example of the New Deal generation that last faced a turmoil of comparable, and worse, proportions, is an uplifting one to see, when it comes not just to the durable, beautiful and rational infrastructure and buildings they left behind for us, but also as far as the resilience they showed. It is also a reminder of how careful we must be with getting tangible results from any monies invested for the sake of stimulus and economic recovery.

How we succeed to achieve all this will be of the utmost importance to ourselves and our children; and it will also play a fundamental role in the course of events in Cuba and elsewhere.



The country we left behind is very close to open up to the rest of the world. Sooner or later, and no matter what the Castro brothers' wishes and desired path of events would be, the unavoidable historical trend is for the present state of affairs in the Island to evolve, and for an increasing volume of development pressures to exert itself upon its real estate market, as it takes shape. Regardless of how successful the Obama administration approach to relations with the communist dictator at the helm might be \_when it comes to bringing about democratic changes\_, or of how misguided it could prove, the truth of the matter is that an influx of American capital and investments in Cuba also seems unavoidable, for better or worse.



Even if it fails miserably to outright remove the yoke of communism, such influx will no doubt exert a substantial impact on the Cuban economic dynamic, and cause a large volume of much needed interventions. That is both good and bad news, for in spite of all the ill of Communism, at least one good thing has come out of the five decades of misery and mismanagement: the preservation \_unintended at first, aimed at exploiting it for tourism purposes later on\_ of the historical cities. Havana is the last great city standing South of Washington D.C., by virtue of its scale and the quality of its urbanism and

architecture \_even run down as it is. Its isolation from the free world kept it largely immune to the sacrifice of large portions of the historic fabric to the demands of modern fashions and speculative operations. The same can be said for provincial capitals and towns like Camaguey, Santiago de Cuba and Trinidad.

That is the reality we face, and we must act up to it. Avoiding the gross mistakes that took shape with many of the Spanish funded interventions in Havana, Varadero and elsewhere along the island, finding a delicate balance between preservation and necessary development within an up and coming market \_while also avoiding the mistakes already committed in America\_, and achieving ways to engage and favor a strengthening of civil society, through working with the many Cuban professionals there, would be essential to accomplish anything transcendent, and to save whatever little is left of the Cuba we carry in our hearts; never loosing sight of our ultimate goal of recovered freedom and a better life for all Cubans.

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