

Three Good Community-Building Ideas From Abroad

BY GEORGE W. LIEBMANN

We are so accustomed to government and business acting on a large scale that we neglect the many ways smaller bodies, private and governmental, can address social problems. Although we hear a lot about reviving "civil society" and improving our community life, this talk rarely includes specific examples. So let's consider three simple but effective institutions that have improved community life in other nations and could benefit Americans as well.

Woonerven in the Netherlands, Germany, & Denmark

The odd-sounding *woonerf* (the plural is *woonerven*) is a very local scheme of government that allows residential streets to be controlled by the people who live on them. *Woonerven* first appeared in the Netherlands in 1976. Precursors can be found in earlier laws in England and New York that permit the transfer of street-uses from traffic to people. The Dutch innovation rests on what Rodney Tolley has called the "startling and revolutionary notion" that in residential areas, traffic and people should be integrated, with traffic "admitted on the residents' terms...slowly and without superior rights."

To make the streets more resident-friendly, physical changes are often made. New laws actually allow curbs to be eliminated, and sidewalks and roads to be integrated into one surface, giving the visual impression of a residential yard. "Pedestrians may use the full width of the road," and "playing on the roadway is also permitted. Drivers within a *woonerf* may not drive faster than [about 8 to 12 mph]. They must make allowance for the possible presence of pedestrians, children at play, unmarked objects." While in a *woonerf*, "drivers may not impede pedestrians," who in turn may not "unreasonably hinder the progress of drivers."

Traffic in *woonerven* is controlled by ramps, speed bumps, narrowings, street furniture, planters, and trees. Parking is permitted only in designated spaces. These innovations aid child-raising, improve safety, and help create a sense of community in both suburban and city areas. In the Netherlands, establishing a *woonerf* requires 60 percent approval by a majority of neighborhood citizens. Because they result from local initiative, *woonerven* have proven highly popular. By 1983, 2,700 *woonerven* had been created, leading to a 50 percent reduction in injuries within them.

The same scheme has become highly popular in Germany and Denmark as well. In many new developments in Denmark the streets are privately owned, so residents who want "traffic calming" like those used in *woonerven* must pay for them themselves, with the cost per household approximating that of a new refrigerator. Similar private street regimes exist in parts of St. Louis, and in many of the newer American residential community associations.

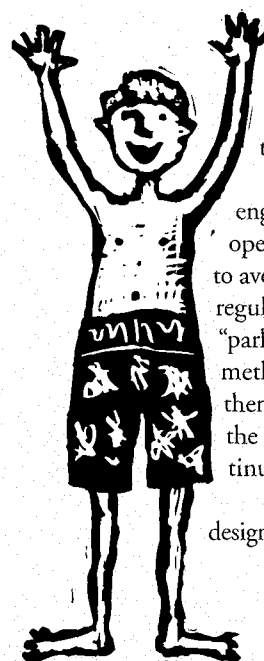
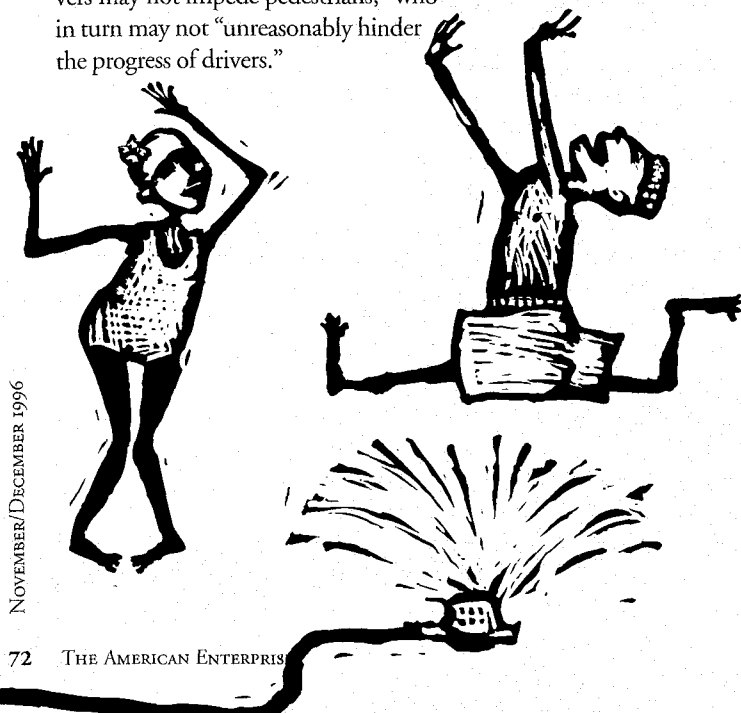
The popularity of *woonerven* has led to broader efforts to calm traffic in residential areas through the use of 18 mph speed limits, numerous four-way stop signs, street narrowings, speed bumps, and other speed-reducers. These techniques have also been popularized in the United States by Oscar Newman and others who promote the idea of using "defensible space" to protect neighborhoods.

If *woonerven* are to be accepted in the United States, they must be presented as an expansion of the legal rights of property owners. This can be achieved through a Dutch-like mechanism for creating them via neighborhood petition, or by allowing them to be created by residential community associations, or by street privatization on the St. Louis model. In the short

run, the Dutch mechanism is simplest and results in "stronger social cohesiveness, much brought about by the involvement of the residents themselves in a sophisticated process of planning their own surroundings."

In some places, bureaucrats and traffic engineers have resisted *woonerven*. The developers of Seaside, Florida, found that in order to avoid rigid government street-width and curb regulations, they had to call their *woonerven* "parking areas." But interest in traffic-calming methods is increasing, and the literature on them, beginning with the pioneering work of the late Donald Appleyard, an American, continues to grow.

The writer Carol Rose championed well-designed and -maintained public spaces, arguing



that "in the absence of the socializing activities that take place on inherently public property, the public is a shapeless mob, whose members neither trade nor converse nor play." Paradoxically, various forms of privatization are now the best way to ensure that streets fulfill this vital function of public space.

Land Readjustment Associations in Europe and Asia

Americans assume there are only two ways to assemble land for urban renewal. The first is "eminent domain," where the state condemns land so it can then be sold off to developers. There are few legal restrictions on this technique, but it has disadvantages. Since each property owner whose land is condemned has a right to a jury trial, delays and unpredictable costs occur, even though few condemnees end up pleased with the results, because juries drawn from taxpayers are frequently parsimonious. In addition, the public authority must pay for each lot of land as its value is determined, and then sit on the lots as they are assembled and construction proceeds, which can result in heavy capital and carrying costs. Meanwhile, as all this is going on, property maintenance ceases and "planning blight" descends.

The other standard method of acquiring land is through private acquisition, such as the Rouse Company used to create Columbia, Maryland. This requires great stealth and the use of dummies to avoid alerting speculators. And convincing the last few landowners to sell almost always requires payment of exorbitant prices.

Cost, coercion, and planning blight have discredited American urban renewal by means of "eminent domain," and private land assembly is rarely attempted on a large scale in cities, where news of buyer interest travels fast. Private developers find it easier and less costly to acquire open land in the countryside, which in turn encourages urban sprawl.

There is, however, a third method of acquiring land for development or redevelopment, and it has been used in other countries for a century. Called "land readjustment," it has proven especially useful in reclaiming decayed slums and repairing war damage. At a time when many American inner cities resemble war zones, with vacant lots and vandalized buildings, this technique deserves exploration.

Under land readjustment, a specified supermajority of owners petition the local public authority for permission to establish a redevelopment area. When its boundaries are established, dissenting homeowners have the right to be excluded. Other dissenters can insist that the petitioners immediately buy them out at an impartially appraised value, a remedy like the one dissenting shareholders receive in corporate reorganizations. The remaining petitioners then receive proportionate shares in the common enterprise. A management committee is elected, which either funds construction by borrowing against land values or enters into joint ventures with builders. When work is complete, each petitioner re-

ceives either a building representing his share of the new development, or cash payments, or a prorated share as owner in common.

Landowners thus have a profit incentive to cooperate, rather than hold out against redevelopment. The scheme also makes redevelopment possible without the necessity of first raising funds to acquire and hold the land. And so long as the scheme is approved by public authority and provides adequate compensation for dissenters, it presents no constitutional difficulties.

The system originated in Germany, where ever-smaller farm holdings eventually required that mechanisms be devised to consolidate land in a fair and efficient way. During the first ten years this method was tried in an urban context, in Frankfurt, 14 areas totaling 375 acres were pooled and redistributed. Originally consisting of 643 lots belonging to 149 owners, the land was redivided into 198 parcels after a deduction of 25 to 40 percent was made for new streets and common areas. Extensively utilized after World War II in the reconstruction of cities like Kiel and Rotterdam, variants of the scheme accounted for more than half of reconstructed housing in Japan, as well as much housing in Korea and Taiwan. Land readjustment has also been successfully encouraged in parts of France, India, Sweden, and elsewhere.

Accessory Apartments in Germany and Japan

In recent years, homelessness and a shortage of child care have been two of this country's gravest problems. Yet the commonly proposed solutions seem tailored mostly to the interests of various service providers, not to average households. The conventional prescription for homelessness, for instance, is to subsidize the building of new shelters (an idea popular with industry, unions, and public-housing activists). Similarly, the greatest enthusiasm for new public subsidies for day care comes from prosperous two-income professional families and the social-work bureaucracies competing to administer such programs.

But today's lack of inexpensive housing does not stem from a lack of construction, but from the misallocation of existing housing stock, thanks to rigid zoning regulations combined with dramatic changes in family size. As for child care, the desire of many women to burn the candle at both ends is greatly exacerbated by the physical separation of generations and income groups—also a product of rigid zoning. On both fronts there is a simpler solution: get regulators out of the way and encourage more *accessory apartments*.

Consider some little-known statistics: The number of single persons requiring their own small apartments tripled between 1960 and 1985. The number of households containing six or more persons—for whom many of today's large houses were constructed—declined by approximately half during the same years. As a result, many people live in more house than they need.

Meanwhile, the percentage of widowed women over 65 living with relatives declined from 58 percent in 1950 to 17 percent in 1994. In earlier times, these women would have been available to mind children. Instead, they now typically live alone, often far from family members.

Our housing market has had trouble adapting to these changes, and one reason is that zoning rigidities prohibit carving

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The 3 Generation

Life and Death Under One Roof

By Cathy Myers

When our first child was small, we lived thousands of miles from either set of grandparents, near Mexico City. We were paid in pesos, and when the peso began falling rapidly, our delight in this Mexican adventure faded. My parents urged us to come back to New Jersey and live in their walk-out basement while we regrouped, and we accepted their offer.

Our second child was born shortly after we moved in, and my parents relished the daily interaction with their grandchildren. When Grandma came home from work she would “yoo-hoo” as she opened the front door, and my son would run to greet her. She’d change into “play clothes” and the next hour or so was his. They had tea parties, played ball, and scooted cars across the floor. When the baby got fussy, Grandpa would scoop her up for a walk outside “to see the birdies.”

Meanwhile, my husband was changing careers and working long hours on top of a long commute. And I was struggling with the loneliness of being an at-home mother in the early 1980s in an outer suburb that I knew was a temporary place for us. When Fred found a position in the Washington, D.C. suburbs we were sad to be moving our children away from Grandma and Grandpa, but relieved to be financially independent again.

We settled into our new community, and my parents came to visit several times a year. As they approached retirement, we began to talk about sharing a house again. Their income was limited, and their house and yard required more upkeep than they could manage. We decided to find a house to share. As we searched, though, we found that the advertised “in-law suites” were often small, dark after-thoughts, and many of the neighborhoods with larger homes were too remote for our tastes. We began to think about renovating instead of moving. The children could keep their familiar routines, we would stay close to friends, and our location near shopping, a library, a recreation center, and public transportation would make it easier for Dad to live with his decision to stop driving when they moved down.

We drew up house plans, met with builders, and consulted an attorney for advice on the financial aspects of sharing a house. The attorney advised against co-ownership, but we didn’t have the resources to finance this project ourselves. So my parents gave us a loan and some cash which would be counted in the future as our part of their estate. They also agreed to pay us a monthly rent.

My daughter and my mother studying.



We planned a large bedroom, a handicapped-accessible bathroom, and a modest living room for my parents. We would share the kitchen, dining room, and laundry area, all on the same floor as their rooms. We moved out of the house and construction began. Four months later, we moved back in.

My parents were thrilled with their space, and we began integrating our daily routines. We cooked and ate together, Dad attended many of our son Scott’s baseball games, and our daughter Michelle often invited friends over to play cards with Grandma.

But then, one morning just nine months after moving in we heard my Mom shouting for help. My dad had suffered a major stroke. After several weeks in therapy, he came home. Though he could speak very little, I discovered he could sing along to familiar songs. We began to sing together every night after dinner, and were glad to be able to include him in the rhythm of family life. He and I went to watch Scott’s baseball games, singing “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” on the drive. When we couldn’t go, Scott would come in after the game and describe the action to Grandpa. Scott was by now 14, approaching six feet tall, and he would guide his grandfather to his place at the dinner table. After about a year, my father died.

My mother kept telling us how glad she was to be with us. She spent more time in the kitchen, telling us stories about herself I had never heard before. She enjoyed doing crafts with Michelle, and Scott would visit in her living room after school to talk about his day. She insisted she didn’t mind the volume of his guitar in the basement. Soon it was an entire rock band, and still she didn’t mind. She went off on a beach vacation with my brother, attended a reunion of high school friends, and spent weeks visiting in New Jersey and welcoming her sixth grandchild into the world. But within the year she was diagnosed with cancer, and after calling in hospice she died in our home, surrounded by her children and grandchildren.

So life with my parents in this house didn’t quite turn out as we expected. It was much too short. We have wonderful, comforting memories—and we also have unsettling worries about our financial future with this big house.

For now, we’ll use Grandma and Grandpa’s bedroom as a guest room. Perhaps another family member will share the space some day. One who can put up with a rock band.

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Cathy Myers lives in Northern Virginia.