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Redrawing the American city

Urban renewal is part of smart growth, but it also means giving the suburbs a face-lift, adding sidewalks, bike lanes and racks, buses and commuter trains, and making it possible to leave the car keys at home.

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By *OnEarth magazine*

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IS IT POSSIBLE?: How do we apply smart growth principles to a giant, snarled metropolis like Chicago? (Photo: jirivondracek/iStockphoto)

On a warm, sunny day in July, I took a ride to the top of the Sears Tower in Chicago. By coincidence, it happened to be just a few days after the city's most distinctive landmark was officially renamed. It's now called the Willis Tower, for a London-based insurance company that acquired the naming rights. I had come to Chicago to contemplate urban sprawl, so the timing seemed symbolic: Sears began to lay plans for the tower in the 1960s and built it in the early 1970s, back when major corporations still saw our historic city centers as the real seats of power. But that would change, and by 1989 Sears was planning to build a sprawling, 786-acre office park some 33 miles northwest of downtown, in a suburb called Hoffman Estates.

Hoffman Estates did not exist at all until 1954, when the father-and-son team of Sam and Jack Hoffman bought a 160-acre farm in rural Cook County and subdivided it into half-acre lots, on which they built hundreds of modest, single-family homes. Their timing was excellent. The federal government had just begun a 79-mile extension of Interstate 90 from Chicago's O'Hare airport to Rockford, Ill., passing right by their new plots. The tollway opened in 1958, the same year that O'Hare's international terminal opened, kicking off a multiyear expansion project that would turn a tiny military airstrip into the world's busiest airport.

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In 1959 the community's residents, then numbering 8,000, voted to incorporate as Hoffman Estates, and after that the Hoffmans kept on building, mass-producing affordable homes for first-time buyers, slapping up as many as four a day. Within 10 years the population of the town had nearly tripled. Today it has some 53,000 residents plus its corporate citizens, which include not only Sears but also AT&T, GE Capital, Siemens Medical Systems and Mary Kay cosmetics. Along the way, Hoffman Estates sprouted all the trappings of a full-fledged suburban town: a shopping mall (built in 1971), eight major hotel chains, and a sports and recreation center (the Sears Center, built in 2002). With most

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complex, the Sears Center (built in 2006), which seats 11,000 and is home to the Chicago Bliss of the Lingerie Football League (women in bikinis playing football) and the Xtreme Soccer League's Chicago Slaughter.

And so goes the story of sprawl in America.

But the point is not to vilify the Hoffmans or their estates. Across the nation, everyone was up to the same game. Our homes and stores, many of which had been compact and concentrated in cities and villages, were streaming out into subdivisions and malls, each one farther out in the cornfields than the last. Our offices moved out, too: Between 1970 and the mid-1990s, the

proportion of commercial office space located in suburbia jumped from one-quarter to two-thirds. During those years America also gave birth to the big-box store, the indoor shopping mall, and the McMansion. Since the close of World War II, the amount of land devoted to living and shopping in this nation has more than doubled on a per capita basis.

In the process, the automobile became an indispensable part of accomplishing a day's work and play: Between 1970 and 1990, personal car use increased twofold. By the century's end, American mothers were spending at least an hour of each day behind the wheel, spread out over five or more trips. Researchers at the [Texas Transportation Institute](#) found that in 2004, the time we spent stuck in traffic cost us \$63 billion in lost productivity and wasted fuel.

Meanwhile, sprawl was stoking another, distinctly 21st-century problem: global warming. The urge to supersize our new suburban homes, offices, schools and shops led to ballooning energy consumption: indoor malls, superstores and megamansions have far more space to heat, cool, light and power up than the small downtown shops and apartments back in the city. The new roads we built had no sidewalks, and there was no mass transit; the only way to get to and fro was the family car. One of the greatest obstacles we now face in curbing greenhouse gas emissions is that our vehicle miles traveled, or VMT, are projected to grow at a rate that outstrips our ability to compensate through improved auto efficiency.

There is an antidote. It's called smart growth, and it is everything that sprawl is not. Smart growth is in some ways a lesson in recycling writ large. In this case it's not plastic that gets a new life but the old infrastructure and buildings that we have, in many cases, allowed to fall into disrepair. Urban renewal is part of that equation, but it also means giving the suburb a face-lift, adding sidewalks, bike lanes and racks, buses and commuter trains, making it possible to leave the car keys at home. Following the logic of smart growth, when we build new we build in, not out: office buildings, homes and stores go in the spaces that exist within the areas we've already developed, not out on the fringe where they gobble up farmland and countryside. This makes it possible for more people to utilize the infrastructure that currently exists; we spend taxpayer dollars to keep it in working order, rather than build anew. Smart growth is all about efficiency.

But how, exactly, do we apply these principles to a giant, snarled metropolis like Chicago? On a clear day you can see for 50 miles from the sky deck of the Willis Tower, a vista that encompasses nearly all of Chicagoland, the 4,071-square-mile metropolitan region that includes 284 municipalities and seven counties, all the way to [Indiana](#) and [Wisconsin](#). The view contains some depressing reminders of why so many of us fled to suburbia in the first place. Things were broken. Crime, poverty and the loss of industrial jobs left many cities in tatters. From the top of the Willis Tower, the remains of that reality are in full view in the empty rail yards and defunct train bridges that lie to the south.

But the new future is visible too. Between the tower and Lake [Michigan](#), patches of green emerge among the skyscrapers—the city's new Millennium Park, a leafy plaza where city dwellers can dine at the Park Grill restaurant, catch a concert at the Pritzker Pavilion, stroll among white oak and flowering cherry trees, or picnic in a quiet spot near the water. What's interesting about the park is where it was built: atop a century-old rail yard that still functions as a commuter and city transit terminal. In 1998 city planners decided that this was a good location to build in, putting places for play a stone's throw from the places where Chicagoans work, which are increasingly where they live, too.

Chicago's urban planners have always had the sense of standing on the shoulders of giants. After all, this was the home of the architect Daniel Burnham, creator of the vaunted White City, site of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, as well as author of the visionary 1909 Plan of Chicago, which Chicagoans feted on its 100th birthday this past year. "Make no small plans," Burnham famously said. Groups like the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) and the civic-minded business organization Chicago Metropolitan 2020 have set themselves a correspondingly ambitious goal. They understand that to accommodate the 2.8 million people



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ambitious goal. They understand that to accommodate the 2.6 million people expected to join Chicagoland's 9.4 million residents by 2040, they will need to reverse sprawl and make creative use of the existing infrastructure, whether it's in newer subdivisions or run-down inner-city neighborhoods. What may appear at first to be evidence of urban blight — empty factories, abandoned railroads, deteriorating housing stock — is also a huge potential asset, and that is true not only of Chicago but also of most American cities.

I traveled back and forth across Chicagoland, covering hundreds of miles by train, by car, and on foot, in search of places that reveal how these ideas might actually work. Three very different communities stood out: Prairie Crossing, an eco-minded development out on the suburban fringe; Blue Island, a down-and-out blue-collar suburb in the region's industrial wasteland; and West Garfield Park, a poor and predominantly black neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago. Each one has laid plans for some strategic improvements, based on a simple principle: always begin with the stuff you've already got.

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