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Cluster Development

By

WILLIAM H. WHYTE

New York: American Conservation Association, Inc. 1964.

Pp. 130, \$3.00

To a person like the reviewer, who was born and raised in the south of England, cluster housing is not a new idea and, as Mr. Whyte points out, cluster housing is not new to the United States. What is new, however, is the application of cluster development to the legal system of single family ownership. Critics of our urban scene can forcibly argue that its ruination has been the meteoric rise of the single family home. This rise has been boosted by the developers and builders who have made the clarion call that, "An American's single family home is his castle—that his mortgage, when paid off, is his passport to security." In this day and age, when most Americans who are able to purchase a house move from one part of the country to another every five or so years, the castle is rather a transferable or even fictitious notion. Meantime, the urban scene, both from a visual and economic standpoint, suffers.

This book, commissioned by the American Conservation Council, points clearly to the positive aspects of cluster development as a means of not merely arresting, but of providing a positive solution to some of the problems of land development which beset our vast urban areas. Particularly in the Southwest, where the traditional sprawl has almost become ensconced in the minds of all, this notion of cluster development provides a vital key to the realistic use of land. So often the barrier to intelligent use of land, like that encompassed by the cluster development theory, is harassed by the problems of who will keep up the land?—is this street wide enough to carry a fire department truck?, etc. So often, developers, until five or six years ago, were not willing to look at the city's standpoint. Today, developers and municipal authorities have joined together and seen the advantages of cluster developments. Mr. Whyte points, however, to a very important thing—that the notion of putting residential housing to one side of a tract of land is not a means whereby the municipality can acquire park land inexpensively. The land which is not actually used for the housing construction is in the ownership of those who will dwell in these houses. It is not a means

of producing high density and giving that open space to the rest of the community. Apparently this problem has arisen in rapidly urbanizing New Jersey.

In the foreword to the report, Laurence S. Rockefeller says:

By applying the cluster principle, developers can put up the same number of houses but on a portion of the tract, with the bulk of the land left for open space and recreation. The promise is two-fold; not only can the individual subdivisions themselves be far better places to live in; the shift to this pattern opens up tremendous opportunities for local governments to join the separate open spaces into a network that will weave the outdoors into the very heart of the metropolitan areas.

Although there may not be heavily wooded areas in the Southwest for which cluster development could obviously take an advantage from a landscape standpoint, there is, nevertheless, a value in understanding what was a community's attitude regarding cluster housing on Long Island—which is well illustrated in this publication. The developer would be permitted to put up 236 single homes on the piece of property. To do this, however, the plan would call for covering virtually the entire tract. Most of the trees would have to be chopped down and the golf course graded away for homes. The open spaces that the older residents had long taken for granted would vanish. The developer asked Victor Gruen, west coast architect and planner, to prepare a series of clusters concentrated on about seven acres of the total. Through this concentration, the rest of the tract could be left open. In addition, the existing golf course would have been retained and another golf course built, as well as leaving a lake and walkways. The plan won high praise from architects and planners. Unfortunately, however, they lived somewhere else. In the town itself, initial reaction was mixed and cautious. At a public meeting, a number of outside spokesmen talked of the values of such a development, but, after a number of weeks of discussion and deliberation in the council chambers, the developer sold the acreage to the New York Institute of Technology to be used for a then unidentified purpose, and the property was then subtracted from the tax rolls.

Whyte points out three statements that are worth noting: (1) the developer was the first to broach the idea; there had been no previous urging of the cluster idea by the town's planners, for there were none; (2) the matter had to be thrashed out in a meeting open

to all comers, and (3) it was not the older members of the community that gave the trouble, but the newcomers, people to whom zoning was a security against the people they left behind in the more dense parts of Long Island or New York City itself. There is an interesting moral to this—that no matter how sincere a developer is, it is a community's obligation to have its staff prepare reports independent of the developer and for the staff to be alert to all developments in the current fields of planning, real estate, and town design.

A lesson for the lawyers is also evident here. No one wishes lawyers to advocate a case that, however desirable, may be unconstitutional, but it is important for the legal profession be alert to these new developments in land subdivision and management. So often, in the past, good ideas have had to be put in the garbage can because lawyers have somehow argued until well into the night that such a concept would be illegal. Is it a matter of being illegal, or is it the lawyers themselves who cannot recondition their ideas to accept what is common and good practice in terms of design? The lawyers, particularly, can be most helpful when it comes to who shall look after the large open areas within the cluster development. The principal methods are: (1) municipal ownership; (2) home owners' associations; (3) special service districts incorporating the area within the cluster development, and (4) landlord maintenance.

The building of homes to accommodate single families and a large number of families has been going on for hundreds of years. Zoning was a relatively new concept, largely devised in this country and developed in the courts over the last forty years. It would seem unfortunate that a notion so new as zoning should be allowed to dominate our urban scene for the next hundred years because of mistaken ideas and ideals formulated during the last four decades. Revealing this, to the reviewer's mind, is one of the underlying purposes of this excellently documented and illustrated report by William H. Whyte.

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