

## According to Plan

*Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia, and The Woodlands* by Ann Forsyth. Published by University of California Press, 2005. 396 pp., \$29.95

Reviewed by Stephen Fox

Ann Forsyth, professor of urban studies at the University of Minnesota, has written a valuable comparative study of three of the best-known examples of the “new community” movement of the 1960s and ’70s: Irvine, California, between Los Angeles and San Diego; Columbia, Maryland, between Baltimore and Washington, D. C.; and The Woodlands north of Houston. These are functionally defined as “satellite cities” (meaning they were planned to be big, mixed-use, and part of existing metropolitan areas), constructed according to master planning processes meant to be carried out profitably over decades. Forsyth examines these three communities within the broad context of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American suburbanization to evaluate how different and effective they have been as reformist models. She also evaluates their performance over 30 to 40 years to see how they compare to the principles of Smart Growth and the New Urbanism. One of the most commendable features of the book is its critical assessment of suburban planning models that, from the perspective of current suburban critiques and models of reform, may now seem dated. Forsyth forcibly makes the point that many of the attributes of both Smart Growth and the New Urbanism (if not the latter’s design imagery) also pertain to the New Communities movement.

Forsyth first outlines the general issues that New Communities responded to in the 1960s: urban crises, socioeconomic inequity, racial discrimination, the decline of American center cities, the problematic record of federally-subsidized Urban Renewal programs, and a pervasive cultural critique of postwar suburban development encoded in the term “sprawl.” The critique of sprawl is a recurring theme in this book. It is both the image and the practice against which all three communities were constructed. Yet the extent to which each community is implicated in the processes of sprawl

gives Forsyth’s generally positive assessment a note of ambivalence.

Each community had a different origin. Irvine was a 93,000-acre ranch in private ownership that lay within the path of metropolitan Los Angeles’ southward growth. Because state and federal government agencies had begun to use their condemnation power to install infrastructure within the ranch domain, the Irvine Company commenced planning in 1959 for an expansive new town linked to a new campus of the University of California. The first sector was opened in 1964, and in 1971 much of the ranch was incorporated as the City of Irvine. As Forsyth notes, what sets Irvine apart from the other two communities was that the developer did not have to buy the real estate, but did have to contend with community residents, who acquired the political power to alter its plans through agencies of city government.

James Rouse developed Columbia outside his home city, Baltimore. Rouse founded the Rouse Company, a major mid-century real estate development corporation; as Forsyth notes, he invented the concept of the festival marketplace. The initial 15,500-acre site was assembled between 1961 and 1963 and the first of Columbia’s “villages” opened in 1967. What was unusual about Columbia was Rouse’s personal commitment to providing for income and racial diversity, setting Columbia apart from the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area and its prevailing real estate practices. Columbia is also territorially fragmented, unlike the other two examples.

The Woodlands also embodied the personal commitment of its founder, Houston independent oilman George Mitchell, to exploring alternatives to suburban sprawl. Mitchell began buying what would eventually be 27,000 acres of timberland in Montgomery County from lumber companies in 1964. Planning for a new town began in 1966. A second town plan was prepared in 1969 in order to secure a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Title IV grant, and a third plan was prepared beginning in 1971 by Wallace, McHarg, Robert & Todd of Philadelphia and other consultants to obtain a Title VII grant. (Of the three, The Woodlands is the only community to have made use of public funding.) What Forsyth describes as the



### ReFormInG SubURbiA

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ANN FORSYTH



“ecological vision” of Ian McHarg gave The Woodlands its identity. Forsyth states that in all three communities, landscape design was a key component. But in The Woodlands, landscape was treated ecologically rather than scenographically: as “different plant species and soils of different porosities, with different capacities to recharge aquifers.” However, Mitchell took advantage of the expertise that had gone into the planning and development of Irvine and (especially) Columbia in his hiring of consultants and staff.

Forsyth is very effective in describing the development of each community. She extensively interviewed participants in the process (as well as consulting corporate archives, public documents, publicity material, and news stories) and she notes differences in recollections stemming from who was where, at what time, and what their stake in the process was. Because she recognizes and constantly reminds readers of the crucial role of the market in determining the success or failure of all three communities, she is attuned to the tensions between ideals and pragmatism—and rivalries between competing interests—that figured in the history of each community. She also explores the relationships between the development corporations and agencies of local government, which often had the power to thwart the developer’s proposals by refusing to grant waivers or pass new legislation. Forsyth captures the sense of elation and optimistic enthusiasm that prevailed in the planning of Columbia and The Woodlands, as well as the consequences of the cyclical economic downturns that affected both communities at vulnerable moments.

Forsyth’s analysis is so carefully constructed that her favorable assessments are not easily disputed. Yet they don’t seem entirely satisfactory either. Forsyth notes at the outset that none of the communities is environmentally sustainable, in part because planning for each was premised

on use of the automobile as the primary mode of transportation, even within the community. This qualification touches on the issue of sprawl. As different from surrounding suburban developments as The Woodlands is, it seems to contribute to metropolitan sprawl rather than serving as an antidote to it. Forsyth connects the economics and politics of sprawl to the presence of small-time operators and their incremental processes—precisely the factors that loom so large in the economic and political landscape of Houston. Each community profiled represents an exceptional commitment to integrated master planning that requires access to large reservoirs of capital and the ability to measure out profitable returns over decades. She acknowledges that the scale of operations involved in the three communities is an important reason that they remain exceptional. Forsyth also observes that one of the constituencies most consistently critical of the three communities is “high style professionals in architecture.” Forsyth implicitly accepts such criticism as insignificant because it seems to focus obsessively on style. Had she pursued this critique more methodically, she might have found that it is not about style but substance. For instance: Lot owners in The Woodlands buy property from a builder, not The Woodlands Corporation. To maximize their profits, builders tend to choose pre-packaged products. Therefore, architectural design at almost all scales undermines the sense of distinction and authenticity community developers profess to want to construct.

The carefully wrought conclusions Forsyth comes to give authority to her comparisons between New Communities and Smart Growth/New Urbanism. What she questions is the efficacy of reformist models “to achieve real progress in areas such as housing affordability and energy use reduction;...and influencing others to adopt even the level of change that has occurred” in a political and economic climate “dominated by products that externalize the costs of growth.” *Reforming Suburbia* is constructed and written with clarity. This enables Ann Forsyth to make a compelling case about the importance of the New Communities movement historically and the continuing relevance of Irvine, Columbia, and The Woodlands to current debates on American urban and suburban practices and policies. ■