

Economics without tears

Daniel Anderson

Urban Villages : do they pass the Popsicle Test?

There seems no end nowadays to the number of new developments that appear to have it all – self-contained neighbourhoods with a strong sense of community, where all your needs are satisfied within walking distance.

This is the template for the Urban Village. Conceived in the late 1980s, the Urban Village originated in the New Urbanist movement in the United States. It calls for well-designed, mixed-use and sustainable urban areas, with a strong 'sense of place'. The antithesis to sprawling suburbs, housing estates, and gated communities, the Urban Village or its mutations (see sustainable village, Millennium village, eco-village, Traditional Neighbourhood Development, etc.) has been endorsed at various stages by the Prince of Wales, the Department of

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Environment, the Urban Task Force, English Partnerships, DETR, ODPM and now a number of RDAs.

Over time the definition hardened around a fixed set of principles. The ideal Urban Village has a socially diverse population of about 3-5,000 people, living within a mix of housing tenures. It is small enough for everything to be largely within walking distance. The whole range of routine household needs must be satisfied within a relatively short walk. Housing, shops, restaurants, offices,

arts and entertainment, parks and gardens, places of worship, schools and health centres. The Urban Village aims for maximum self-sufficiency.

That last point really cascades from all of the others and is vital to the concept's sustainability credentials. If you can live, work and play in your own neighbourhood, then your need for discretionary travel by car is minimal.

That's the holy grail. Car use has risen consistently since 1990, whilst trips by all other modes of transport (including walking) have fallen. Shopping alone accounts for nearly one-fifth of all car trips. Thirty per cent of car trips are for leisure purposes (eating out, sport and entertainment, holidays and day trips). Add in the school run and visits to friends and relatives and you have nearly two-thirds of all car trips that are completely unrelated to commuting.

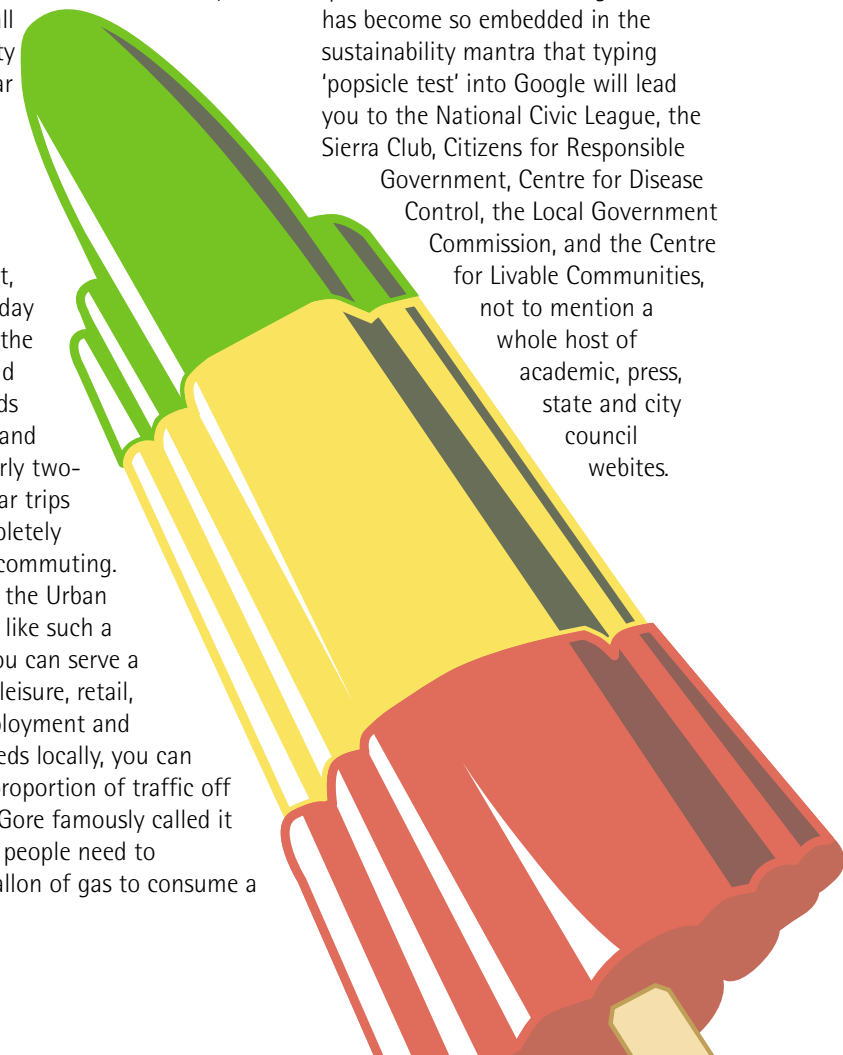
No wonder the Urban Village seems like such a panacea. If you can serve a community's leisure, retail, catering, employment and education needs locally, you can take a large proportion of traffic off the roads. Al Gore famously called it perverse that people need to consume a gallon of gas to consume a

gallon of milk. The Urban Village is the perfect solution. But does it work?

The Popsicle Test

The 'popsicle test' is the New Urbanist litmus test of sustainability. 'Finally,' says the Congress for New Urbanism, 'there is the 'popsicle test'. An eight-year-old in the neighbourhood should be able to walk to a store to buy a popsicle, without having to battle highway-size streets and freeway-speed traffic.'

It is a simple but powerful metaphor, encapsulating the key qualities of the Urban Village. The idea has become so embedded in the sustainability mantra that typing 'popsicle test' into Google will lead you to the National Civic League, the Sierra Club, Citizens for Responsible Government, Centre for Disease Control, the Local Government Commission, and the Centre for Livable Communities, not to mention a whole host of academic, press, state and city council websites.



What an encouraging thought. All of these large and powerful organisations diligently working to ensure that our eight-year-olds can safely walk to the store to get their popsicles. Some of them have taken it even further. For North Carolina's Smart Growth Alliance, it isn't enough that an eight-year-old can safely get her popsicle – in their view of the world, she should be able to make it home before the popsicle melts!

But the popsicle test contains within it the answer to why Urban Villages never seem to work out quite like we plan them. Amazingly, whilst we spare no expense in trying to design communities to ensure that little girls can buy their popsicles, we seldom consider the question from the other side of the counter. How commercially viable is it to operate a store that sells popsicles to 'walk in' eight-year-olds?

Put differently, is the Urban Village a viable economic model? Does the prototypical Urban Village contain the right density of the right markets needed to sustain the services required to meet all of the community's needs? Can it really be self-sufficient? In most cases, it can't.

Testing the Popsicle Test

Break it down into its component parts. You need office space. You need housing. Some cultural or entertainment anchors. A retail and catering offer that will meet basic needs (including popsicles). You need a community small enough to fit within a 'walkable' radius.

Architects, designers, and masterplanners will go hog wild with a brief like that.

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Their vision of that Urban Village will look fantastic. For the economist, however, it's not so simple. Because it rarely stacks up.

Retail poses a particular problem – though not the only one. The variables normally associated with the commercial viability of retail units are size of establishment, type of market and urban density. In a recent paper for Urban Studies, Randall Bartlett tested all of these variables to determine the likelihood of different types of shops surviving on local 'walk in' business.

He considered a range of establishments, from large grocery stores and movie theatres, through consumer durables like clothes and books, to specialised shops like liquor stores and bakeries. For each of these he calculated sales per establishment and the required density (population per square metre) required to generate the throughput and sales needed for commercial viability.

He began with the assumption that local shops

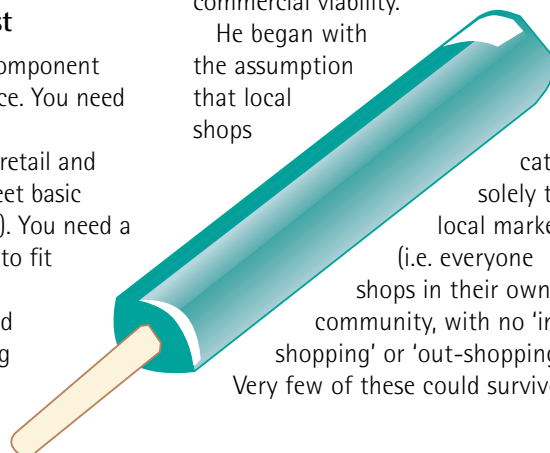
cater solely to a local market (i.e. everyone shops in their own community, with no 'in-shopping' or 'out-shopping'). Very few of these could survive

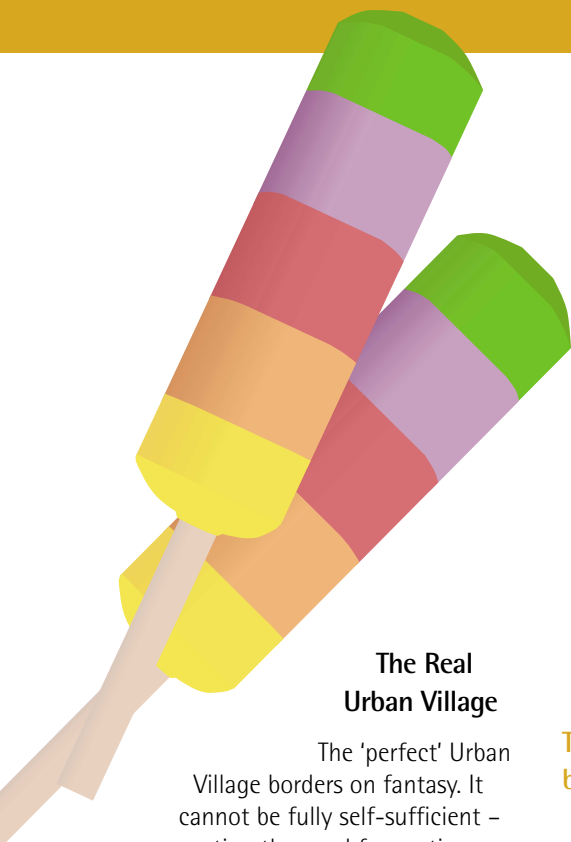
on the local trade of a few thousand people. Under these conditions, local eight-year-olds looking for popsicles would find only boarded-up shopfronts.

Then he turned the question on its head and asked what level of urban density is required to sustain the range of shops needed to meet all of our household needs. In this case, he found that you would need 'villages' of upwards of 30,000 people just to sustain a major grocery store selling a wide range of required goods, let alone smaller, more specialist stores which needed even higher densities. At those levels, you are no longer talking about neatly designed mixed-use developments, but small, densely populated towns.

Then he looked at it from a third perspective. He relaxed the assumption about no 'out-shopping' by local residents and no 'in-shopping' by outsiders. In particular, he asked the following: what percentage of sales from all of these establishments need to be made to 'in-shoppers' if I want my local community to have access to the full range of goods?

Here too, the figures don't sit well with the New Urbanist philosophy. The proportion of 'in-shopping' needed to sustain a major grocery store was upwards of 95%. The equivalent figure was 80% for an off-license, 90% for a full service restaurant, 97% for a movie theatre, etc. In this case, the eight-year-old girl might live within walking distance of the popsicle store, but with all of those 'in-shoppers' she will need to negotiate some busy roads and car parks to get there.





The Real Urban Village

The 'perfect' Urban Village borders on fantasy. It cannot be fully self-sufficient – negating the need for routine car trips – and still call itself an Urban Village. Nor can it have the 'sense of place' of a village and be truly self-sufficient. This is borne out by experience, which – for once! – supports the theory.

Another recent paper from the Universities of Cardiff and Sheffield shows how far the Urban Village concept has travelled since the heady days of a new theory on urban development in the 1980s to its supposed realisation in recent years.

The concept was 'fixed' in the early 1990s, according to the New Urbanist principles described above (small communities, good urban design, social mix, key services within walking distance, etc.). It was enshrined in government policy and planning guidance and endorsed by regeneration agencies like English Partnerships.

Since then, however, planning and development trends reveal a systematic process of 'unfixing' the concept, so that the so-called Urban Villages of today bear little

resemblance to their theoretical forbears. In particular, the past ten years have seen a proliferation of the sustainability rhetoric used to badge almost any major development that is up for planning permission. Because the planning system has never really 'enforced' any particular meaning of the term, the Urban Village, as a concept, has effectively been neutered.

The 'perfect' Urban Village borders on fantasy

Through a questionnaire of local planning authorities, the authors identified 55 so-called Urban Villages either completed or in development across the country. Some were new-build greenfield developments and some were in brownfield regeneration sites. Some in affluent suburbs and some in inner cities. They ranged in size from 160 residents to 15,000. Housing densities varied in completed developments and were largely unspecified in planned developments, suggesting that this is determined by house-builders responding to market conditions, rather than planners as a matter of public interest.

Only 13 of the 55 projects were subject to any detailed set of design guidelines espousing the environmentally friendly principles of smart growth and good urban design. Only two – Ancoats in Manchester and Buckshaw Village in Lancashire – showed a genuine balance of employment, commercial, leisure and

residential uses. Many were predominantly residential schemes adjacent to existing employment or commercial districts. Some were thinly veiled housing projects – oases of prosperity within largely deprived areas.

Critically, detailed case studies of three existing Urban Villages demonstrate exactly what Mr Bartlett's theory predicts: the density of development, in these cases, was insufficient to sustain key shops and services within walking distances.

So Where Do We Get Our Popsicles?

The New Urbanist movement likes to claim that their solution for urban living is nothing new. That's how towns and villages were designed for thousands of years before the post-war boom in housing and motoring fundamentally changed the way we live. The Urban Village is simply a return to that traditional idea of the close-knit community centred on the village square.

What they normally fail to articulate, however, is that the motorway and the automobile didn't simply change our tastes and preferences, as if we can simply re-discover that better way of living and wilfully turn back the clock.

They have fundamentally altered the economic geography of the city.

At the turn of the century, local shops in village centres could depend on extremely high penetration of immediate local markets. With a general lack of inter-urban transport, what choice did people have?





Today, however, we cannot ignore the value and convenience and the economies of scale enabled by out-of-town development. Any viable tenancy strategy in an Urban Village has to accept that a high degree of shopping

outside the village will always take place, just as an attractive and commercially vibrant village centre depends on the custom of people that do not live locally.

One option therefore is to abandon the unrealistic notion of the Urban Village being genuinely self-sufficient, but rather to think of it as a discrete part of a wider urban conurbation. One cell in a larger organism. In this scenario, the challenge for the planner and

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developer would be to ensure that different urban quarters are genuinely sympathetic and complementary, so that each neighbourhood – whilst not self-sufficient – makes a positive contribution towards the urban

environment and does not grow at the expense of other neighbourhoods in the city. In other words, focus on making the city self-sufficient and competitive in place-marketing terms, through the creation of vibrant neighbourhoods within it that all serve different markets.

Even if successful, this scenario implies continuous intra-urban movement which means that it only really works if people within the city are willing to substitute public transport for private. So it has not escaped me that I may be simply substituting one utopian vision for another. The theoretical Urban Village or urban public transport that actually works.

Given everything discussed above, the former seems impossible. The latter is just improbable. If I was a betting man...

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