

*We should seek the atmosphere and the surroundings that call forth the best that is in us.*

COUNCILLOR

# Introduction

## From Suburbia to Superbia!

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**T**HIS IS A BOOK ABOUT REINVENTING *existing* neighborhoods — both suburban and urban — to make them livelier and more productive, a goal shared by many. For example, many residents of suburban neighborhoods, where the majority of the American population now lives, express a longing for a stronger sense of place, including stronger connections with people, local traditions, and nature. Urban residents express similar desires. This book offers specific ideas for social and physical changes to enrich the neighborhoods we already live in. It's intended as a book of possibilities for reconnecting people with both neighbors and nature.

We believe most neighborhoods have the raw ingredients and resources to become sustainable, resilient, and healthy. We want to help make that transition happen because the potential economic, environmental, and social benefits are huge! But it won't happen automatically — it will take cooperation, vision, and strategy. The truth is, many neighborhoods are currently programmed for dysfunction.

In this book we'll look at three major barriers that limit options in the suburbs:

- The physical layout of suburbs, which results in social isolation and resource consumption (for example, lots of driving and high fuel bills).
- The “mold” of suburban culture, which reinforces extravagant, private lifestyles that often disregard public values and require expensive, time-consuming maintenance.
- Government incentives, municipal zoning laws, and bank lending policies that shaped suburbia but have become obsolete. American culture has changed, but the rules haven't.

*Superbia!* presents 31 specific steps that neighborhood groups can take to overcome these barriers and bring their neighborhoods fully into bloom. The first steps involve the creation of a more active, neighborly culture — a “we” rather than “me” mentality. Later steps take advantage of neighborhood skills and strengths to create significant changes in landscape, architecture, resource use, traffic patterns, municipal landscaping and building policies, and overall functioning of the neighborhood. Instead of just remodeling our houses, we remodel our neighborhoods, using a powerful resource that is often untapped these days — cooperation.

Examples from dynamic neighborhoods on this continent and elsewhere demonstrate techniques for becoming more sustainable — meaning that essential needs are met closer to home and in more environmentally friendly ways. In a sustainable community, energy, health, elder care, day care, entertainment, water, employment and enterprise, transportation, and horticulture are all set up as efficiently and accessibly as possible to meet people’s needs with the least amount of effort and resources. The compelling incentive is that a more efficient, supportive neighborhood will require less time, money, stress, and human effort from residents, increasing their quality of life.

What we propose here are refreshing changes in suburban and urban culture, one neighborhood at a time. With the empowerment of a neighborhood alliance, we can make small but significant changes in both architecture and landscape. Creating sustainable neighborhoods will require flexible thinking and a willingness to experiment, but it can be an adventure that adds purpose and excitement to our lives. The truth is, we need fresh ideas that will carry our neighborhoods through the challenges and transitions that lie ahead.

Compared to thousand-year-old villages throughout the world, our neighborhoods are very young indeed. Suburbs built in the last half-century have not yet faced major changes that occur over long periods of time — changes in resource availability, demographics, work patterns, and other “mega-trends” — but they will. Fortunately there’s plenty of room for adaptation and improvement because many American suburbs, especially those built recently, were engineered for consumption, not efficiency. For cars, not people. They were built to provide housing, not community, even though Gallup, Fannie Mae, and Roper polls report that people value a good neighborhood over a trophy home by a margin of three to one. It hasn’t occurred to most Americans to reinvent their suburban neighborhoods because many are relatively new, and because there aren’t many roadmaps out there like this book, which presents alternatives.

If we begin to think outside the box of the individual home, we can move our neighborhoods beyond adolescence into maturity. It’s a safe bet that no one else is going to do it for us. We urge you to use our ideas to get started, and then add your own customizations to bring your neighborhood into blossom. Write us and tell us what you’re up to! (Our address is in the Appendix).