Chapter 1.5
Planning Sustainable Communities:
An Appropriate Basis for Sustainable Residential Communities?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter evaluates the impact of commodification of land and housing on the sustainability of the residential built environment. Commodification, an institutionalized practice in the western industrialized world, refers to the capacity of individuals to trade land and housing freely in the marketplace. This practice is so commonplace that it rarely undergoes any fundamental analysis in terms of its potential impacts. In order to consider the appropriateness of commodification to sustainable communities this chapter examines its effect on three factors identified as being important to their viability: the existence of a commonly held normative framework; the capacity of a community to reinforce or discourage individual behaviour, and; the need for appropriate resource requirements. The commodification of residential land and housing is found to encourage effects that may negatively impact upon the environmental and social sustainability of communities, and to potentially lead to their re-absorption into a less sustainable surrounding context. The paper also identifies a tendency of social and legal structures to protect the operation of the free market, which may act to undermine the capacity of communities to achieve self determination. Finally, it is suggested that the types of resources required by a community as a consequence of commodification may be inappropriate to the maintenance of long-term sustainability.

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INTRODUCTION

The challenges posed by the creation of a more sustainable built environment are profound and far reaching. They require innovative solutions and potentially fundamental changes to the existing status quo. The need for these changes has in no small part been caused by a heedless approach to progress, which failed to adequately consider the potential ramifications and consequences of our emerging settlement patterns. Research, therefore, has a key role to play if we are to avoid simply repeating the same mistakes, and in order to be sure that we are producing a truly sustainable built environment.

Research, however, does not occur in a vacuum any more than other socially constructed activities do, and as a consequence it may be bounded by a researcher's sense of what is possible or appropriate. It is widely acknowledged that researchers operate from a foundation of largely tacit, unacknowledged values and assumptions regarding what may be possible or legitimate (Held, 1980). However, in the face of a crisis that may require radical change, every aspect of the policy environment must be examined. This includes underlying assumptions of processes which are regarded as common sense, or which are simply so widely accepted as to escape consideration. The growing challenge of creating a sustainable built environment is one which requires this form of fundamental re-examination.

The built environment contains many opportunities to engage in change leading to greater sustainability. In particular, it is recognised that it is of crucial importance to create sustainable residential developments. Our homes are at the very centre of the fabric of human settlements, and issues related to shelter and home ownership are often of tremendous importance personally and politically (Cahill, 2001). Tremendous amounts of research energy and resources have been directed towards the development of sustainable residential communities. However, much of this research has been focused upon the technical aspects of sustainability, such as housing materials, energy sources, waste management, and water (see, for example, Blassingame, 1998; Capello & Nijkamp, 2002; Lee et al., 2002; Berke, et al., 2003). While it is acknowledged that this perspective is of great value, this chapter suggests that it needs to be accompanied with a similar systematic examination of the relationship between sustainability and the various social and legal relationships that underpin residential communities (Maser, 1997; Costanza, 1999; Scott et al., 2000).

The practice of the commodification of residential land and housing is an example of a social convention which has received little critical analysis with respect to its impacts upon sustainability. Commodification in this respect refers to the capacity of individuals to freely trade land and housing in the market, a system that is so commonplace and accepted in our society that alternatives are rarely, if ever, discussed or considered. However the commodification of land and housing is just one of the many alternatives that have been the basis for human settlements throughout history. Even in contemporary society many communities worldwide have demonstrated that the commodification of housing and land may be substantially restricted, or even completely abandoned as part of traditional land tenure systems, in order to pursue particular goals. Communities may adopt total communal ownership of all land and housing, may allow some private ownership of housing but retain collective ownership of land, or embrace full participation in the real estate market, or perhaps utilise a mixture of systems (Rexroth, 1974; McLaughlin & Davidson, 1985). The importance of non-commodified land holding systems has been recognised by the World Bank as being efficient and effective in many developing world contexts (Deininger & Binswanger, 1999). It is generally only in the developed world that such a monoculture of land and housing tenure seems to exist and, in many respects, the integration of alternative non-commodified forms of housing