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Suburban Renewal

As the fuels that spawned our far-flung, energy profligate suburbia get more expensive, fears of the cost of replacing that multi-billion dollar investment begin to worm their way into our consciousness.

We sat down a couple of years ago to brainstorm what a conversion of suburbs to a saner, more conserving way of life would involve. The news was good. It's easier to get simpler than to get wasteful! The space-grabbing demands of the automobile required whole new urban and regional infrastructures. Adapting to its demise requires only ingenuity and self-interest, which we've never been short on. We got our friend Diane Schatz to draw up some of the possibilities:

* We wring our hands too much over prime agricultural land lost to suburbia. Fritz Schumacher reminded us some time ago that intensive gardening and Tender Loving Care (TLC) in suburban gardens has been shown in England actually to increase food output per acre. The Farallones Integral Urban House in Berkeley and other projects across the country have also shown a very substantial part of a household's food needs can be met with very little space or labor. Our main concern should be to avoid poisoning the ground so heavily with "lawn care" products as to make future food production impossible. Fruit and nut-bearing trees can provide both food and natural air-conditioning in the summer.

* Water, power, streets, sewers, phone and other utilities are already in place in suburbia. Reduction of use through conservation measures means that many more families can be served by the same utility network. Some possibilities:
  —Conversion of large suburban homes to duplexes or apartments. Many have multiple baths, would convert easily and would provide a better retirement investment than pensions.
  —Street houses and backyard apartments. Closure of unnecessary streets can provide opportunity to build additional housing or neighborhood gardens in their place.

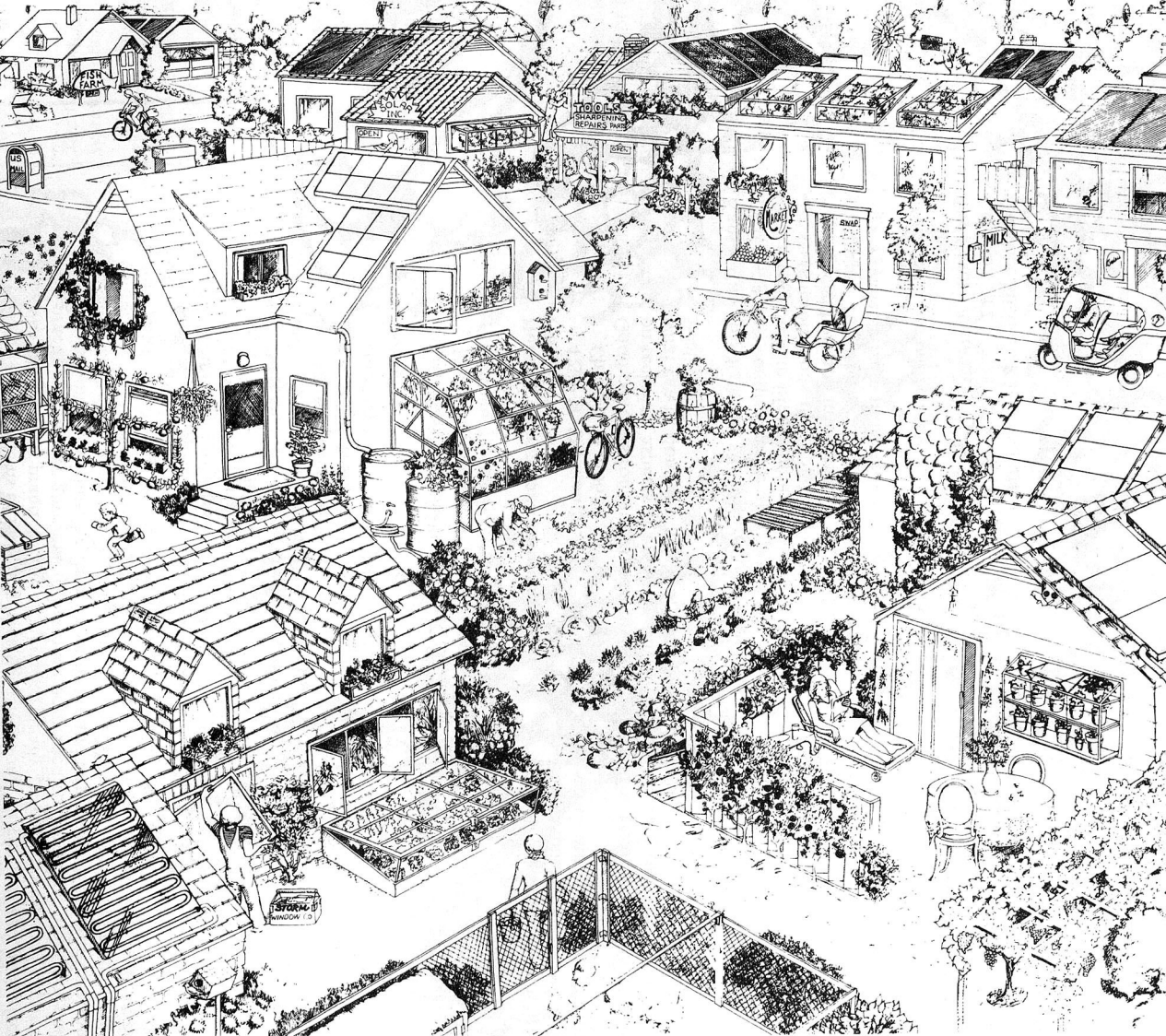
* This doubling of the use of existing housing, utility networks and roads makes possible increasing the density of desired areas to levels where public transit becomes more economical. It also makes neighborhood shopping more feasible by increasing the number of people within walking or bicycling distance of a shop.

* Home businesses are already becoming more common, in spite of prohibitive zoning regulations. Conversion of garages to businesses, home workshops to furniture making and repair, and spare bedrooms to home offices is likely to occur more and more frequently as people discover working patterns that eliminate commuting, that can be started themselves with minimum capital, and that provide rewarding and secure work. Renting guest rooms provides a low-cost alternative to freeway motels.

* Neighborhood or community-sized renewable energy systems can augment individual conservation and solar systems at less cost than conventional power plants. Solar collectors on the roof of shared parking, laundry, or shop space, connected to large heat storage tanks serving a whole block, are already coming off the drawing boards, and community wind-electric systems are now operational.

It looks like what already exists in suburbia can be used much more intensely, creatively and effectively. What needs to change is our habits and our patterns—the physical environment can be adapted quite readily.

—Tom Bender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