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In the Belly of the Beast

Atlanta's urban sprawl attracts an architect who wants to retrofit suburbia.

by JANE M. SANDERS

Ellen Dunham-Jones has jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire — on purpose.

As a proponent of urbanizing the suburbs through regional planning and denser, traditional neighborhood patterns (no cul-de-sacs, plenty of sidewalks), Dunham-Jones left New England two years ago for Atlanta. Here, as the director of the architecture program at the Georgia Institute of Technology, she hopes to challenge accepted suburban architectural design and development patterns to counter the effects of urban sprawl.

"Sometimes, to make an impact, you have to move to the 'belly of the beast' where the problems are," explains the New Jersey native. "Since moving here, I have been excited to find considerable discussion and hard work on the issues of smart growth.... I am optimistic about the amount of interest in figuring out alternatives to urban sprawl."

But Dunham-Jones — who speaks to many community groups and national organizations — knows the battle she is facing. So she makes her case with cogent arguments and surprising statistics on varied aspects. The professor points to the physical and environmental health consequences of urban sprawl, as well as the often-ignored costs of automobile transportation — not to mention the time it consumes for every Atlantan to travel an average of 35 miles a day. She questions the assumed benefits of raising children in suburbia, rather than in denser, more diverse, more pedestrian-friendly and community-oriented neighborhoods. Dunham-Jones also laments the "disposable" construction standards applied to most suburban development.

"This is not a sustainable system," says

Dunham-Jones, who has conducted research, taught and practiced architecture for more than 20 years. "There is a disconnect between the benefits that tend to accrue to individuals and the costs that accrue to the community as a whole. We need a system where rational, individual choices do not throw the system into an endless, wasteful game of leap-frog forcing more and more driving and allowing existing places to decay."

The kind of sustainable development that Dunham-Jones advocates is based on concepts such as "New Urbanism" and "Smart Growth." She is a charter-signing member of the Congress for the New Urbanism, an organization committed to reforming current development regulations and practices to allow the construction of compact, mixed-use, mixed-income, transit and pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods that sustainably integrate the design of the region, the neighborhood, the block and the building. Dunham-Jones also advocates smart growth, the coordination of regional conservation and development efforts.

Dunham-Jones teaches these concepts to the architecture graduate students within the required course on contemporary architectural theory. But she is most excited about the opportunities in Atlanta to take the ideas beyond the classroom.

"Tremendous energy goes into contemporary theory, but it has only resulted in 50 to 100 exceptionally good buildings worldwide...." she notes. "That rate of impact is minimal relative to the miles of mediocre — or worse — suburban environments we're building everyday as we bulldoze the landscape. Instead of bulldozing rural land, we should be looking at accommodating growth through retrofitting and urbanizing existing suburban developments that are losing value."

That means in-fill development, densification

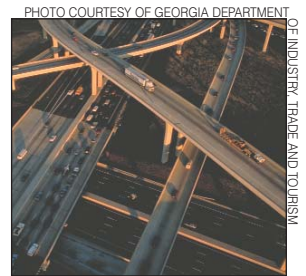


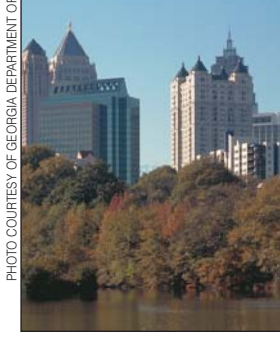
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OF INDUSTRY, TRADE AND TOURISM

Mega malls and heavy commuter traffic are characteristic of suburban Atlanta and other large metropolitan areas experiencing urban sprawl.

As director of the architecture program at the Georgia Institute of Technology, Ellen Dunham-Jones hopes to challenge accepted ideas of residential development to counter the effects of urban sprawl.

INDUSTRY, TRADE AND TOURISM



Dunham-Jones says there should be plenty of living space choices for metro area residents with trees to open rural spaces to preserved land.

Atlanta is often noted for its urban sprawl. Residential construction continues at a fast pace in the city's suburbs. Dunham-Jones says she is optimistic about finding alternatives to urban sprawl.

and adaptive re-use, such as converting old office parks into live-work loft residences. And it means increasing walkability and bikability between neighborhoods, schools, workplaces and stores by installing more interconnected street grids to allow traffic to flow more freely, Dunham-Jones explains.

She cites several recent master's degree student thesis projects that focused on retrofitting suburbia. One student explored the idea of purchasing cul-de-sac lots in older subdivisions and using that space for new roads to connect streets.

"With just a few key connections, the street grid becomes more integrated, block sizes and trip lengths are reduced, and walkability to schools, transit and shops is substantially increased...." Dunham-Jones says. "It was quite astonishing.... And this is not an impossible or ludicrous investment (to purchase the older cul-de-sac lots)."

Conventional suburban zoning segregates uses and lot sizes. Consequently, every single trip has to be made by car, and it becomes de facto illegal for people of different incomes and households of different sizes to live next to each other, she says.

Older, traditional neighborhoods had a mix of uses within walking distance providing easy access to non-drivers, such as teens and senior citizens, Dunham-Jones explains. These neighborhoods also had a mix of lot sizes and building types from houses for varied-size families to apartments and "granny flats" for grandparents and singles. The mix of renters and owners, corner stores, small public parks and services allowed for more diverse group interaction. It also allowed for people to "age in place" and reduced dependence on the automobile.

"This pattern is even more applicable today with the growing percentage of single households, live-work opportunities, digital communication

and the need to better protect our environment," Dunham-Jones says. "Yet, despite evidence of considerable market interest, current regulations do not allow for this kind of traditional urbanism."

Dunham-Jones insists that she and other New Urbanists are not trying to eradicate all conventional suburbs or force people to give up their cars. Rather, she is interested in expanding the choices available to people by encouraging targeted densification coupled with targeted conservation so metro area residents can enjoy a full range of conditions from large and small-town urban to the suburban and the preserved rural.

Regional planning is needed to implement most of these new ideas, and that is often politically difficult, Dunham-Jones concedes. But she is hopeful about the efforts in Atlanta with the recent creation of regional transportation, water, parks and arts agencies. These innovative efforts at regional coordination are a result, in part, of the severity of the metro area's air pollution problems. But they have also fostered very promising conversations between public officials, planners, developers, designers and environmentalists, she adds. As a consequence, other cities are increasingly looking to Atlanta for solutions.

Dunham-Jones also cites the large redevelopment projects of Lindbergh City Center, Atlantic Station and the redevelopment of Midtown Atlanta as an urban model and the "fascinating" example of the Buford Highway area as a suburban model of "retrofitting almost on its own." These metro Atlanta efforts, combined with the city's collective can-do attitude, are having a tremendous impact on the problem of urban sprawl, she adds.

"Atlanta has always had an optimistic boosterism about remaking itself," Dunham-Jones notes. "Tremendous things are happening. That said,



most of the development is still the 'same old, same old' destructive pattern of bulldozing trees and polluting the water and the air.

"Can Atlanta change the bulk of its development? I'm very cautious about that. I can't be especially hopeful. But we're taking some amazing steps."

Atlanta already has many wonderful things to offer. Having grown up in New Jersey, Dunham-Jones especially appreciates the region's mild climate. She also enjoys the city's variety of restaurants and music and its hospitality.

"I love living on porches, chatting with neighbors," she adds. "I live in a loft. My porch is the loading dock of an old factory, adjacent to the neighborhood swimming pool. It's an easy, informal life."

When she needs an escape from the sometimes-overwhelming task of retrofitting suburbia, she heads off to old industrial sites with her husband, a professional photographer. While he photographs steel mills, bridges and blast furnaces, she paints small watercolors of these often-abandoned landscapes.

But soon she is back to her real source of an energized life – new ideas and efforts for making the suburban and urban landscapes better places to live.

■ For more information, you may contact Ellen Dunham-Jones, College of Architecture, Georgia Tech, Atlanta, GA 30332-0155. (Telephone: 404-894-1095) (E-mail: ellen.dunham-jones@coa.gatech.edu).



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Dunham-Jones teaches her students "New Urbanism" and "Smart Growth" concepts within a required course on contemporary architectural theory.

What They Say about Ellen Dunham-Jones...

"Ellen has made a significant impact on the Architecture Program at Tech, as well as on Atlanta in the short time she has been with us. This impact ranges from the successful reaccreditation of the Architecture Program and her recruitment of new faculty to the school to the myriad of contributions she has made to many civic projects in Atlanta, such as the selection of the architect for the new home of the Atlanta Symphony or the creation of student designs for 'capping' the Downtown Connector to assist in the bridging between Georgia Tech and the new Technology Square. Ellen is a delight to work with, always suggesting fresh ideas and new and interesting ways to address critical issues of teaching, scholarship and outreach. We are most fortunate to have her in Georgia Tech's College of Architecture."

— **Thomas Galloway**, *Dean of the Georgia Tech College of Architecture*

"Ellen is very smart, and she knows just about everything. That is common enough among architects who teach. What is rare is that she has a lot of common sense, and that she is open-minded. Her support of a variety of modernist initiatives, as well as the New Urbanists is virtually unique. The breadth of thought available to the students at Georgia Tech must be among the three or four best anywhere."

— **Andres Duany**, *Duany, Plater-Zyberk & Co., Architects and Town Planners*

"Ellen is a voice of balance in New Urbanism, but it is a passionate balance. As a theorist and a person, she is a warrior of the middle. She is open to radically different ideas from diametrically opposed camps and somehow is able to accommodate, if not integrate, them.... Georgia Tech is lucky to have someone with this combination of pluck and openness."

— **Doug Kelbaugh**, *Dean of the College of Architecture & Urban Planning, University of Michigan*

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