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Creating Self-Sustaining Communities

The "cell" or village concept is an effective design solution to reverse negative effects from decades of sprawl.

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"For all the implications of 'sprawl'—from job loss and economic decline, to alarming obesity, asthma rates, and segregation, to the loss of habitat and global warming, to our dangerous dependence on foreign oil—all of them are driven by one fundamental problem: the mismatch between where we live and where we work."

This statement, made by Shaun Donavan, secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in a White House blog in June 2010, depicts the serious issues facing the United States and other countries caused

by decades of impractical and inefficient development. Sprawl, both urban and suburban, has had extremely negative consequences, aggravated by impractical zoning regulations and development trends that isolate residential, office, entertainment, and retail districts.

Separating the places where people live, work, and socialize has created lifestyle disconnects. Fractured development essentially mandates automobile ownership and multiple vehicle trips to accomplish everyday tasks.

It is important to recognize that sprawl is a relatively new phenomenon, having only existed at its current level since the middle of the 20th century. With contemporary intelligence and experience, governments, planners, and citizens of developed and developing countries can seek opportunities to avoid the mistakes of the past and develop new, self-sustaining communities.

Replicable Development
An effective way to reverse the negative effects of decades of sprawl is to implement a "cell" or village concept. This concept focuses on creating *replicable* developments that seek to reduce sprawl and encourage density in smaller areas. The cell, or village, integrates a variety of land uses in one place, including housing, retail, office, and entertainment, as well as educational, cultural, and religious destinations. This model helps produce communities capable of sustaining themselves and results in more active, vibrant, and walkable environments.

The primary goal of the cellular development concept is to incorporate many of the destinations and amenities people visit daily or weekly into one place or a much smaller, denser area than typically found. Coupled with nearby access to transit and provision of complete streets—allowing safe use by pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and users of public transit—this development framework contains the components needed for creating vibrant, successful, self-sustaining communities.

One recent example of successful cell development is the Annapolis Towne Centre in Parole, Maryland. It includes a combination of residential, retail, restaurant, and entertainment destinations, creating a pleasant downtown atmosphere. The combination of uses has significantly reduced the need for vehicle trips while generating a sense of community.

However, parking plays an important role in its success. Parking facilities, which provide infrastructure needed to support the site's increasing density, integrate street-level mixed-use space to create an attractive pedestrian scale and blend seamlessly with the architectural features of the surrounding buildings.

Key Design Guidelines
For this development framework to succeed, the following design principles and guidelines must be considered and implemented:
▷ **Plan early for parking**. Parking can play an important role in encouraging pedestrian movement at the street level and spark growth in surrounding areas. Early consideration during planning will identify

the best opportunities for integrating parking and create the potential for incorporating a greater density of uses. Implementing shared parking to serve various users at different hours—for example, transit users and office employees during the day and residents and retail customers during evenings and weekends—helps maximize use of facilities and reduces the amount of parking needed.

▷ **Design for the pedestrian**. Creating walkability and pedestrian-scale development will create a positive impression for communities and help establish a more attractive sense of place. The emphasis in cities nationwide on complete streets accommodating a variety of transit modes enhances these efforts.

▷ **Create value through transit**. Many people place a lot of importance on the availability of transit in deciding where to live or work. As development trends continue to shift toward creating density and mixing uses, convenient access to transit will be vital to those who choose to live and work in these communities.

▷ **Focus on security**. Creating activity and street-level vibrancy not only provides a more attractive sense of place for residents and visitors, but also helps establish a greater feeling of safety and security. Avoid layouts that create opportunities for crime.

Though this cellular-development framework is replicable and can be applied to existing and new communities, the goal is not to create cookie-cutter developments. Careful implementation of this framework and associated best practices can create unique and vibrant developments, sustaining cities and neighborhoods by reducing dependence on the single-occupant vehicle and expanding transportation options. **UL**