

EAST COAST HOME DESIGN

CONNECTICUT | NEW JERSEY | NEW YORK



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CONNECTICUT... LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT. SO THEY'RE LEAVING. NOT GOOD.

Yes, it is a slightly inflammatory headline. But if I'd said the future of Connecticut for the next 50 years has everything to do with zoning regulations and land use approvals, would you have even read this far?

Story by Susan Heller | Photography by Neil Landino



Chris Quinn and Foster Lyons

WHO ARE YOU?
HOW COULD THIS AFFECT YOU?
WHAT CAN BE DONE?

FIRST UP: WHO ARE YOU?

Do you work in Connecticut? Are you a retailer here? Do you have a home in any of the 169 towns? Are you a Millennial, a Boomer, do you own or work in any of these businesses in Connecticut?

Professionals:

Surveyor
Architect
Civil Engineer
Structural Engineers
General Contractor

Materials Suppliers:

Lumber & Trim
Concrete
Windows
Roofing
Doors
Drywall
Paint
Door and Cabinet Hardware
Plumbing Fixtures
Lighting Fixtures
Electrical Materials
Tile Materials
Appliances
Nursery

Subcontractors:

Demolition
Excavator / Sewerage Connections or
Septic / Stormwater Management
Foundation
Framer / Window Installation / Exterior Trim
Structural Steel
Roofer
Plumber
Electrician
Mechanical HVAC
Wood Flooring
Tile Installation
Shower Glass
Insulation
Drywall
Interior Trim
Millwork and Cabinetry
Stairs and Rails
Painting
Landscape
Labor and Cleaning
Rubbish Removal

Because, if you count yourself among any of those listed above, the combination of zoning and land use issues will have a very direct impact on your world. The estimate is that for every house not built, we

lose 100 jobs, not including businesses that serve construction sites like food trucks and temporary toilets, or the loss of retail commerce. That, combined with the other estimate of 25,000 people leaving Connecticut every year has a lot of people very worried.

I've covered four out of the last five Builders & Architects Roundtables and this one was by far, the quietest. The 'most subdued. I might even say ominous insofar as the subject matter under discussion is concerned. It's about the collision of two major worlds. WHAT WAS: Baby Boomers creating beloved homesteads, and WHAT'S EVOLVING: the Millennials who are now "The Majority" and their desire for minimalism.

Think about how the world of the Baby Boomers played out in the post-war era. Everybody headed for the suburbs and the cities were faced with blight. The same thing is happening today only in reverse and at what some might call, warp speed.

CHRIS PAGLIARO:

"We are living through history – a changed clientele that as mature business professionals, we don't quite understand yet. That does not bode well for our business. The Millennial is nothing like we can relate to in our lifetime. They would rather walk to a train than have 2 acres and a 3-car garage. They want to live in town. They would rather hike on a Saturday than mow a lawn. We used fax machines, they think email is slow and antiquated! Our world is changing before our eyes, and all of us – including towns – need to keep up."

So what is the fly in the ointment?

169 towns, 169 different Zoning Boards each with different regulations and sensibilities about how to best preserve the character of their town and accommodate (or not) the influx of future generations. Those who serve on zoning commissions are either volunteers or appointees. Their terms run from 2 to 4 years, but multiple back-to-back participation is not uncommon. Serving on various boards and commissions within the town planning environment affords the opportunity for an individual to exert influence over a wide range of issues for an extended period of time. Outside of possible political machinations, most people are doing what they consider their civic duty, and for the most part, are not professionals involved in the housing industry; which is both good and bad given the complexity and technicality of the issues they must deal with. That said, consider the following about the regulatory environment before the 2008 Recession hit:

ROB SANDERS:

"During the go-go years, say the mid-2000's, I can say there was almost an active effort to retard development through regulation because people were feeling their community character and values were being challenged, things were moving too quickly. So what happened was that in the name of community preservation, the bar and consequently the cost for meeting that bar, was raised for individual home owners."

Now as so many times in our history, the pace of change has turned on a demographic; that of the Millennials (or Gen Y: 1977 to 1995) who are the largest target market for the foreseeable future. Their preferred life-style (and that of Gen X: 1965 to 1976 and Gen Z: 1996



Rich Rosano, Rob Sanders and Ross Teifenthaler

I explain the whole zoning approval process and their reaction “WHOA!” Then I get an email, and this has happened three times in the last four months. “We decided to bag this project.”



Brenda Costantini and Brian MacDonald



It's about the collision of two major worlds. WHAT WAS: Baby Boomers creating beloved homesteads. WHAT'S EVOLVING: The Millennials who are now The Majority and their desire for minimalism.

and later) has everything to do with multi-family housing developments along with the social interaction and direct access to shopping that is attracted to those neighborhoods.

All over the country, builders and developers are creating a world of town houses, condos, apartment buildings, and single-family housing neighborhoods, each of which is focused around a Downtown. Restaurants, coffee shops, markets, parks, movie houses, clothing stores, mass transportation, all within easy walking distance. It isn't just the Millennials who are flocking to these mini-Meccas featuring a more integrated, social life style.

Remember the old adages that Florida is for the elderly, Arizona attracts rich retirees, and California was hippie and surfer heaven? Think again. Gorgeous club houses, pools, golf courses, large-screen TV viewing rooms, screened-in pavilions with backgammon boards, chess, and billiard tables are standard amenities in addition to all of the life-style elements cited above often at much more realistic price points. The ease of living is actually creating diverse communities: people from their early 20's to those in their 80's, are reimagining life in the "village" reborn and refitted with the technologies of today.

In our part of the world, this seismic shift in life-style is translating to a major advantage for cities as multi-family housing developments

are booming in places like Norwalk and Stamford. However, according to one architect, "It is suicide for single family home builders who are dealing with outdated regulatory environments."

HOW COULD THIS AFFECT YOU?

Part of the issue for Fairfield County is that basic zoning regulations were written 50 years ago. Almost every new house or development has builders and architects undergoing multiple meetings with a myriad of departments and agencies, none of which are overseen by a coordinating body. An excellent recipe for chaos; multiple agencies saying yea or nay without ever talking to one another, issuing contradictory rulings, resulting in more meetings in an attempt to untie the Gordian knot. Zoning boards are afraid to break precedent even when simple common sense tells them a variance should be granted, because it would open the floodgates to every petitioner thereafter. So the process is ridiculously long, complicated, and expensive.

Case in point: a typical project, meaning it was not a high-end house; involved a home that was to be 4,820 square feet. There were no major issues, but they had to go through the Zoning Board of Appeals. It took 7 months and \$186,000 before they received a simple site plan approval. That's 92% of the cost of an average home in the United States, before a single shovel hit the dirt. What is the average cost of a home in the U.S.? \$202,000, all in.



Scott Hobbs and Bob Tucker

There's an interesting question here, can you legislate good design? This goes back to zoning. Look at Darien – with purposeful, thoughtful design, the town is getting a buzz.

BOB TUCKER:

"Change is very hard. Most of the communities we work in create their own difficulties when they take everything and make it non-conforming. The process to address that is 6 to 7 months. Part of the problem is the smaller towns can't afford the planner to do the planning. They face a major struggle when a big developer comes in and they're worried it will destroy their town."

ROB SANDERS:

"There's an interesting question here, can you legislate good design? This goes back to zoning. Look at Darien – with purposeful, thoughtful design, the town is getting a buzz. Hey, this is great, we can go hang out and have coffee, see a movie, they've made the Darien Theater a nice experience, and there's a little arcade you can walk through, tables outside for dinner. This is what people want."

A final point is one you will hear echoed by every town council and commuter in Connecticut:

HOWARD LATHROP:

"If Connecticut doesn't do something about transportation, it's going to kill itself. More people, young people, want to live downtown so they can walk someplace."

And I would add to that comment, so they can take a train to work in Norwalk, Stamford or New York City.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Possible solutions to this crazy-quilt pastiche of planning for disparate locations? Towns must become proactive rather than reactive or risk losing the very thing that makes them unique, the people who live there. Clearly, regional planning with a focus on highways and mass transit as well as an update of antiquated zoning laws that addresses the present and the next 50 years has got to happen. If it doesn't, the steady bleed of people leaving the state will turn into a hemorrhage. Where will the money (and the leadership) for such sweeping change come from? Good question.