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Back to the Future for a Better Way of Life?

Posted on July 14, 2010, 11:44 pm.

By Marion Brady

Some time ago my wife and I spent several days in the village of Windwardside on the tiny Caribbean island of Saba. Near the center of the village lived an artist, her kitchen and adjoining studio hugging the street.

We walked by one evening just about dark. She was washing dishes. When we paused to look at her paintings, she pushed the casement window open a little wider, leaned out, and asked if we'd like to come in and look at her work.

"Yes," we said. She dried her hands, walked directly from her kitchen into the attached studio, opened the door, and welcomed us.

That could rarely happen in America. Combined living and working spaces were the rule in colonial America, but the arrangement is now exceedingly rare.

The matter needs to be rethought. We're in a crisis economy. It's common knowledge that small businesses are a major engine driving the economy, but we've put in place often insurmountable obstacles to their creation.

Move that artist to most places in modern America and she'd be out of business. To profit from exposure to pedestrian traffic, there would have to be pedestrians. For them to see her work, she'd have to have a shop. But the shop couldn't be part of her house because zoning laws usually prohibit businesses in residences, and prohibit residency in businesses.

She'd have to have both a house and a shop – two entirely separate structures. Two structures to buy or rent. Two structures to maintain. Two structures to pay taxes on. Two structures to insure. Two structures to heat, cool, and light.

Then, of course, she'd need a car to get from home to shop, a car that had to be bought, licensed, fueled, maintained, and insured. Not living on site, she'd have to have someone available to fill in if she wasn't feeling well, with attendant responsibilities for their Social Security withholding and other bureaucratic requirements.

If she was a really good painter, she might eventually be able to make enough money to pay for health insurance. But on top of all her other business expenses, that seems highly unlikely.

She's out of business before she even gets into business.

Relatively speaking, there aren't many artists. But there are a great many people with skills and abilities and goods and services they might be able to turn into a living if their overhead costs were low enough – gardeners, cooks, bakers, decorators, tutors, repairers of musical instruments, electronic equipment and small-appliance technicians, therapists, other health-related specialists, and consultants of all kinds. A teacher or teacher team could open a neighborhood school in a house, an arrangement generating its own long list of potential benefits. Who knows what other small businesses would emerge if start-up costs were minimal or non-existent?

Reviving a Colonial Village Lifestyle

There's much else that those colonial villages with their combined living and working spaces had going for them. If they were revived, the young could witness firsthand how economies work, could know there were alternatives to flipping burgers and stocking shelves in big-box stores, could see for themselves the fruits and satisfactions of creativity and inventiveness, could grow up with an appreciation of the connection between individual initiative and a satisfying lifestyle.

And from clusters of small, village-scale enterprises with live-in families could come something else the loss of which has cost America dearly – a sense of community to counter the “me and mine” self-centeredness so evident in American culture. A pharmacist or grocer living over or behind the store and responding to a neighbor’s need could remind us of how dependent we often must be on each other.

As with any change, altering zoning laws would generate problems. But the potential benefits of recapturing important aspects of a way of life that once worked well should prompt city councilors, town planners, developers, and private citizens to give thought to the matter.

We’ve created a way of life that can’t be sustained, and is going to change whether we like it or not. The merit of deliberately shaping and reshaping neighborhoods to make them more human before energy and environmental problems force change on us is surely worth considering.

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