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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

New Urbanism Revitalizes an Old Precedent

Instant communities have tapped into consumers' disillusionment with suburban sprawl by offering compact, sanitized luxury environments with the reassuring predictability of national chain stores ("City Lite: Fake Towns Rise, Offering Urban Life Without the Grit," page one, May 31). These fake towns seem oddly appropriate for a generation that grew up with shopping malls as their downtown. Not only can they purchase mass-market reproductions of antiques, they can now live in homogenized versions of cities without grit—residences that offer amenities without character or history.

Would Hippodamus, the fourth-century father of urban planning, be surprised by today's faux towns? Not likely. We shouldn't be surprised either. The history of cities is largely the story of people trying to build communities of like-minded people. Indeed, these instant towns have significant historic precedent. Gated communities are just the latest expression of Greek city-states or medieval castle complexes. And mixed-use

developments evoke the lively colonial town centers where merchants lived above their shops.

Many of the most charming neighborhoods were developed before modern zoning and building codes. These places grew organically into complex, irregular and fascinating urban forms. Advances in building technology make it possible, perhaps even easier, to rebuild them in a single run. But it seems a pity that to duplicate Harvard Square or Beacon Hill today would be a nightmare of variances and zoning relief.

I can't help but wonder how future generations will look at their ancestors who lived in shopping malls, and whether they will regard these developments as worthy of preservation.

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