

Insight & Outlook

THE CITY OF TOMORROW An Interview with Peter Calthorpe

From the radio series *Insight & Outlook* hosted by Scott London

There is a growing recognition today that the modern city – and especially its offshoot, the suburb – has failed to live up to the promises of turn-of-the-century visionaries like Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. As *Newsweek* magazine put it in a recent cover story, “Most of us actually know what we want in a neighborhood – we just don't know how to get it, because developers have been building the wrong thing for 50 years.”

One person who has pioneered a new approach to urban planning is Peter Calthorpe. Under the banner of the “new urbanism,” he is one of a handful of architects and community planners articulating a comprehensive new vision of the American community, one that emphasizes the principles of connectedness, walkability, diversity, and ecological sustainability.

Peter Calthorpe is the author of two books: *Sustainable Communities* and *The Next American Metropolis*. He heads up Calthorpe Associates in Berkeley, California. I met with him there in to explore his views on the future of the American city.

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SCOTT LONDON: You began speaking out against suburban sprawl and postwar urban planning many years ago. Now all of a sudden a flurry of studies and articles in magazines like *Newsweek* are beginning to prove you had a point. Do you see this as a sign of change in the way we go about urban planning today?

PETER CALTHORPE: I think we are just on the cusp of major changes. The first and most profound sign of it is the anti-growth movement in which people are saying “I don't want any more development.” It's so ironic to hear people who live in suburban sprawl say “I don't want more of it around me.” There is a certain paradox. At some level, they don't feel they have any choice but they know that what it is is not particularly grand or healthy or desirable, so they don't want more of it.

LONDON: If they don't want any more of it, and if, as you say, there is a growing recognition that suburbia is not the answer, why do we continue to develop the way we do?

CALTHORPE: There is profound inertia in the system. It didn't just come about through the ideologies of some designers. There are profound subsidies in place that make it happen. Suburban sprawl wouldn't

have happened at the scale it's happened in the United States without two major subsidies from the federal government: the Federal Highway Bill, starting in 1956 with the interstate system (which is, by the way, the largest public works system in the history of mankind). Without that armature of freeways none of it could have happened. That was a fully subsidized project through the military budget. And then the single-home mortgage deduction, a huge subsidy that moves people toward single-occupancy, single-family homes. We are the only industrialized country in the world that has those deductions, and that skews the marketplace toward that.

LONDON: But America no longer looks like it did following the Second World War.

CALTHORPE: Right. If you really look at the demographics, America is only 25 percent married families – that's two people with one or more kids; the other 75 percent are “other.” And one size doesn't fit all when it comes to housing. However, everybody invests in the same house because of resale and mortgage deduction and a bunch of externalities that I think are dampening the true diversity of our communities. We should be seeing communities where there is a much broader spectrum of housing opportunities – from apartments that are conveniently located, that aren't just ghettoized, to townhouses for people without kids who don't particularly want to take care of yards and want to be close to things, to duplexes to small-lot, single-family homes. Before World War II, we used to start a home with a bungalow – it wasn't a condominium, it was a small-lot, single-family home. All those variations seem to have been wiped out by these underlying subsidies.

LONDON: How do we accomplish any real change in the face of these kinds of subsidies?

CALTHORPE: It gets easier, of course, as we watch the infrastructure dollars begin to be depleted. We can't build our way out of congestion anymore. The interstate system basically created an incredible armature that's taken thirty years to fill up. But it's filled up. We don't have the money to go back and keep doing it more and more. We also have enough wisdom to know that that's not the best answer – when you start adding the dimensions of air quality, open space preservation, and things like that. So I think these underlying things are changing.

LONDON: What do you make of the fact that a city like Cleveland has expanded by a third between 1970 and 1990, according to *Newsweek*, while the population has actually declined?

CALTHORPE: It's because we're building lower density suburban subdivisions at the periphery of regions. We're not going back in and repairing and recycling older neighborhoods in inner-city areas, or even older suburban areas. We are just continually moving outward.

It's a disposable-society strategy to how you build cities – basically you use them and then throw them away and move on to some virgin land. It's a pioneer ethic. I think it's no question that it's in the blood of America. But at some point we have to come to a certain maturation where we're no longer pioneers on a frontier. There are a lot of people who say, “Well, gee, it's just the American nature. We'll always just move out. We'll always have all this land, so why don't we just go out and take it.” I just don't think that's a particularly progressive way of looking at our future.

LONDON: In a nutshell, how would you describe good urban design?

CALTHORPE: Walkable. Very simple short answer. A well-designed city is a place where you enjoy walking, where your destinations are close enough to walk to, where you feel safe enough to walk. It's a

place that is interesting enough socially to make you feel that walking is perhaps something more than just getting from A to B – perhaps seeing your neighborhood or smelling the blossoms on the tree or seeing some kids play or what have you. I think that's the heart of it. Quite frankly, it can happen at the densities of Greenwich Village, or it can happen at the densities of Elm Street in any small town.

LONDON: I flew in to Los Angeles Airport the other day. When one gets an aerial view of a metropolis the size of Los Angeles, it's hard not to have serious misgivings about the future. How do we approach the problem of grotesque, over-developed cities like L.A.?

CALTHORPE: There are some pretty straightforward answers, to tell you the truth. It's exciting to think about how the answers begin to create their own synergy. Urban growth boundaries is a topic that I think is really central to a lot of what we need to think about. They have one in place in the state of Oregon, and Portland has been one of the prime examples of that. The amazing thing about an urban growth boundary is that it creates all sorts of political coalitions that you didn't think were necessarily possible. On the one hand, the environmentalists are obviously in favor of it because it preserves open space, it preserves ag lands and habitats and wetlands, and it preserves it at a regional scale in such a way that those open spaces really aggregate together and mean something. It's not a little piecemeal, postage stamp wetland here, a little strip over there, or a little buffer zone over there. It's really substantive in the way that the environment and ecology operates.

But simultaneously, the moment you draw an urban growth boundary, it means that the economic life of that region has to begin recycling its dollars back into existing communities. It can no longer afford to continue to spend those dollars spreading outward over the natural environment. That all of a sudden creates a consciousness in which reinhabiting older neighborhoods, rehabilitating strip commercial areas, and reinvesting in urban centers all become naturally viable. The moment we've said, no, those investment dollars can't continue to spread outward the people who are really concerned with inner city issues have common cause and actually a common purpose with environmentalists. To a certain degree, we've watched those groups go their own separate ways for too long, in my mind. But this is a strategy that really binds them together in a productive way.

LONDON: What you are talking about here are some of the social and political ramifications of urban planning. I think a lot of people don't realize that urban planning has profound social and political consequences.

CALTHORPE: And environmental.

LONDON: Yes. Let's talk about some of the environmental consequences. You've written about the importance of “ecologically sound” communities. What do you mean by that?

CALTHORPE: There are lots of layers to it. Some people argue that we ought to be using materials that demand less of the global resource-base to build communities. Other people have pointed out that we can make more energy-efficient buildings. I worked in these fields in the 70s. I've focused in the last 10-15 years more on just how destructive the automobile is – socially, aesthetically, and environmentally. Given that we are doubling, actually tripling the number of vehicle-miles traveled per household per year, this upward spiral of auto-use grabs my attention the most. It's also something that is most in all of our faces. We now live in worlds with six-lane arterials and parking lots. The only peaceful place left is our living room and our backyards, so it's no wonder that we tend to retreat away from community and neighborhood. Once you get out there, it's just cars.

So I focus on that one. You can lead that one down lots of paths: the amount of land area it takes to create the parking; the impact on water quality that all that asphalt surface creates; lack of percolation in the soil; natural aquifer recharging; amount of land-area in terms of displaced ag and habitat; the air quality is the one most people talk about, clearly – we have EPA standards so we can do a trace on that. This all gets rooted back into a really simple thing, which is that we have a myopic transportation system. We don't allow walking in the way we design our communities. We don't provide for decent transit systems. We don't provide alternatives to the car.

When you follow it back in the other direction – what does it take to create alternatives to the car – you have an equally rich and divergent set of patterns. You have to begin to create neighborhoods that are walkable. That is the foundation. Because if you want a transit system to function, you have to arrive at a place that's walkable – otherwise you are going to want to take your car there. You would like to be able to walk to the origin of the transit trip, rather than drive and pay \$5,000 a year just to have a car sit in a parking lot, it's kind of absurd so it doesn't happen much.

So you need walkable neighborhoods. All of a sudden that brings you back to all those simple urban design principles that we seem to have forgotten about tree-lined streets, local destinations, front porches, and a whole range of things.

LONDON: Your book *The Next American Metropolis* sets forth an innovative urban philosophy coupled with some very practical strategies for effective design. I would like to talk about some of those specifics. Let's begin with street width.

CALTHORPE: Street width is a great example of how we've lost track ... [sighs] We've become a society of specialists. So the traffic engineers are taking care of this, and the civil engineers are taking care of water drainage, and the landscapers are taking care of creating visual buffers, and the architects are doing the facades. Nobody is thinking about the whole composition. What is a street? A street is a neighborhood. It's not just a utility for the car. It is everybody's most immediate neighborhood. That's what it used to be: it's a place to walk, it's a place to bike, it's a place for kids to play, it's a place to park cars, it's a place for trees, therefore it's a place for birds. It's all of the above. To think of it just as a utility for cars is so absurd. And yet that is exactly what is happening, because the way we segment design is to say that the traffic engineer will design the streets and the civil engineers are going to design the utilities and the architects will design the buildings, and all three are separate acts. Narrower streets win in every way. They make cars go slower, which means that it's a safer neighborhood for kids, it's more enjoyable to walk on a street where the cars are going slower.

LONDON: How about traffic-calming devices?

CALTHORPE: Narrower streets are the best traffic calming devices. You can get into lots of retrofitting strategies where the street is too wide so you have to do something to make the cars slow down. But the best thing is just to make the street narrower.

We did this one proposal up at Laguna West in Sacramento where we wanted to plant trees in the parking lanes. Part of the problem of the streets being too wide is that you've got two travel lanes, which are already too wide, and then you've got two parking lanes which are never used because we have county ordinances which require more than enough – typically, way too much – on-street parking, i.e., parking lots, garages, and things like that. So the on-street parking gets used once a year for a Christmas

party, and the rest of the time it's open, which means the street looks like you could land an airplane on it.

So we said, why don't we "park" some trees in these stalls so you can still park cars between them. The public works official said, "Well, you can't do that, the cars will run into those trees." And I said, "Well, why don't they run into the parked cars, they are in the same spot?" And he was very quick to answer. He said, "Because the cars have reflectors on the back."

We actually got those trees in the parking lane approved and we are going to apply reflectors to the trunks of the trees, which finally satisfied him. But the idea of parking a tree in a street is kind of a metaphor for the whole thing.

I'll give you another dimension of the same idea, and this is how all these things always have to weave together. In Sacramento, where we proposed that, the new suburbs in the periphery without street trees are on the average ten degrees hotter throughout the summer than the old downtown Sacramento which has a beautiful tree canopy. It has a tremendous microclimate impact, especially in hot climates like that. Now that feeds into what's the air-conditioning bill. That is passive solar design at the community scale. So at Laguna West we have planned 15,000 trees. It's going to be a completely different microclimate from the subdivision right next door to it.

LONDON: How do we confront the problem of shopping malls and strip-development?

CALTHORPE: That is a very interesting topic, because I'm just in the middle of a huge battle in the city of Boulder with a group of people who, I think, first succeeded and now are failing. They first succeeded by getting Safeway (a major retailer) to actually consider and then propose doing a mixed-use retail center. Rather than being a standard strip center with a parking lot in the front and a big box with some small shops behind, it actually incorporates a village green, a library, a day-care center, sixty units of housing, offices, small shops, a live-work component, and their store. And it actually configures it with the small shops and the office buildings right out on the main street, with the parking lot behind. So I consider that a huge victory.

How can you change these things? You can change them quite nicely, quite frankly. Now the same citizens are against the project, because they don't like the idea that the Safeway is going to be there, period. They don't want a 50,000 square foot grocery store, even if it's in a mixed-use environment and even if the parking lots are screened from the main streets.

LONDON: Some of this is being called the "New Urbanism," or "Neotraditionalism." What do these terms mean?

CALTHORPE: What we are really trying to say here is: Look, a lot of the things that worked in the 20s were great. We have to find our way back to those principles, but recognizing that we are living in a different world now. The idea that we are going to return to mom-and-pop grocery stores is really fallacious. So the idea is: How do you create a hybrid between the realities of today and the needs for a return to community at a human scale?

LONDON: We've been talking a lot about communities here in the United States. Do you see similar trends at work in other parts of the world?

CALTHORPE: Funny you should ask that, because I just came back from a trip to Tokyo. We've been doing several large projects in Southeast Asia. Most of what I have to report is rather depressing. China, for instance, is going in totally the wrong direction. They just put across a policy that said that the automobile is going to be their chosen transportation system. That is a very frightening decision. Very frightening. But that is how they are going to steer their infrastructure dollars and their industrial investments. That one decision is monumental.

There are a few little counter-movements. We've been involved with one in the Philippines where one of the bigger development companies looked at the standard development patterns. Of course, Manila is a basket case – you cannot get from A to B because of congestion. So there is a lot of peripheral growth going on outside of Manila. New industrial sites. I.e., this is where the jobs that are leaving the U.S. are ending up. So we were hired to design a new city around one of these job-growth areas. The first question was, “How many autos per household do you plan for?” It is so much at the core of everything. I don't want to oversimplify things, but these are really critical points of decision. And they said, “Well, look, we have to design for at least one car per household because it is the future.” There is this expectation that the future is America. The phenomenon of emulating the worst of what we do is really dangerous.

We were able to convince them to design it according to a totally different system. It's a wonderful, ad hoc and completely unplanned bus system where each driver fights for and gets his own space and route and time and customizes his stretched Jeeps to look absolutely gorgeous. It turns out to be one of the most efficient mass transit systems on the globe, because these guys are not on anybody's schedule. It's not an engineering problem – they are organically at the right place at the right time because it's their livelihood. Everybody knows each other, and they all have their own drivers and there is a whole social dimension to it. They just deck these little buses out. So we said, “Look, let's build our city around this. This is the culture you have.”

The other thing we said was, “Let's build the city around the tradition of *baragan* which is the village tradition of the Philippines. Most of these people are moving from villages into cities. It's a classic case of urban industrialization. It's a Catholic country, about six people per household. Only one of them has a job. The other five are in the neighborhood. So we said not only, let's make the city into a series of villages, with their own center, their own church, their own schools, their own wet and dry market, and all of that, but let's put a greenbelt around each of these villages so that these people can still go out and do truck farming, grow their own vegetables and things. Simultaneously we solved a lot of drainage and other infrastructure problems with these greenbelts, and we also created identity for each neighborhood and village. But we also allowed them to maintain their connections with their own history and their own roots, I believe. So that is one intervention.

LONDON: You were born in England and moved to the United States when you were a boy.

CALTHORPE: Yes, five years old.

LONDON: Did you grow up in a suburb?

CALTHORPE: It's interesting, we first moved to Coral Gables, which is one of the most beautifully masterplanned new towns near Miami. I can remember, it was such a formative experience when I was a kid, arriving from London to Coral Gables and seeing these huge trees that literally spanned the streets. My friends and I would go up and play in those trees. We would play tag and we would actually go from

tree to tree, that is how dense they were. We were able to cross the street without ever touching the ground. Coral Gables is of course a great model of how we should be building suburban towns. Then we just lived in different places around the country. We lived in New York for a while, in Manhattan. We finally ended up in Palo Alto, which is also a formative experience because it was in the 60s and, of course, Palo Alto was a hotbed of alternative thinking. I got involved through my college, Antioch, in teaching at an alternative high school up on the mountain above Palo Alto. I remember being there and looking down on the peninsula and seeing this huge blanket of smog – which was actually worse in those days, because it was before the air quality standards came in. Just thinking, what a malignancy this sprawl was, those kinds of feelings stayed with me.

I also at that point, working at Pacific High, came into contact with Bucky Fuller and got all involved in geodesic domes which was really a dead-end.

LONDON: If you had to pick an architectural symbol of the counter-culture, that would be it!
[Laughter]

CALTHORPE: Yes, it was meant to be a symbol of doing more with less, but, boy, it was a terrible failure. They all leaked and they didn't fit any specific use or any specific place. There were a million ways in which they were wrong. But his message about thinking in terms of whole systems, never trying to design by optimizing a single individual piece but looking at the linkages all the way around is really at the base of everything I do.

LONDON: It's been fascinating. Thank you very much, Peter.

CALTHORPE: Thank you.

This interview was adapted from the public radio series *Insight & Outlook*, hosted by Scott London. The transcript is available on the web at <http://www.scottlondon.com/insight/scripts/calthorpe.html>

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