

‘Mixed-use’ may not always have a concrete definition

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5501>

At some point early in my marriage, I had to find a way to get my wife to start using the correct term for concrete. After all, being the wife of an architect should come with certain social graces, and one of those is to use proper architectural vocabulary.

The correct term for concrete is concrete, not cement. Every time she called concrete cement, my correction was usually followed by rolled eyes and a kind of “whatever” look. I finally succeeded in my corrective endeavors by referring to cake or bread as flour. It didn’t take long for it to work, though occasionally I have to redepoly some remedial correction.

The method to my madness was to assign a name to something not by the whole of its being, but only to one of its ingredients. Cement is only one ingredient of concrete, just as flour is only one ingredient of cake or bread. Referring to some whole assembly by only one of its ingredients insufficiently defines the overall meaning of the assembly. The only exception I can think of is that Ellie Mae in the Beverly Hillbillies always referred to their swimming pool as the cement pond. Somehow everyone seemed to know what that meant.

Churches, or perhaps more specifically church organizations, have been slow to absorb the real meaning of the sustainability movement. Recently I read an article in a church-related journal that addressed mixed-use developments and how churches might function in this kind of non-traditional setting.

A number of architects were interviewed for the article. One pointed out that churches could be a part of community by being a part of a mixed use development. Another pointed out that although churches were traditionally the focus of community, modern zoning practices had forced churches out to isolated locations.

Another thought that churches could function well in a mixed-use setting without having any architectural identity as a church. Still another thought that the tough economy presented churches an opportunity to reinsert itself into cities by inhabiting buildings that had been abandoned by defunct businesses.

While all of these thoughts have their merit, and I understand that the article was focusing in on one aspect of sustainability, the term “mixed-use” was not well defined. Mixed use is only one ingredient of the sustainability movement. To add to the confusion, sustainability holds different meanings among different groups. To the environmentalist, it means solving global warming. To preservationists, it means keeping a historical building intact when it needs to be torn down. To a city administrator, it means densification and smart growth, which means more tax revenue. To architects, sustainability has become a structured practice, as demonstrated by the trend toward getting LEED certification for building projects in a holistic way. To planners, it means getting rid of urban sprawl and designing communities around people instead of cars. To the federal

government, it means more regulations, and to the United Nations it means regulating everyone on the planet. So who can blame anyone for getting a little confused?

What we can do is look at the outcome of sustainability to know that the results are predictable. Just read the news.

The state of Florida has enforced a smart growth policy for nearly three decades, but it recently repealed its smart growth law. The reason? It had created a shortage of developable land which stopped construction. The repeal will make development easier, thus creating jobs.

In Mandeville, Louisiana, Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Church has been turned down for the third time for a building permit. The church wants to build a beautiful traditionally-styled building, but some residents have objected because of its size and aesthetics.

While one city won't let a church build, another won't let a church tear an old building down. In York, Pa., a church has been ordered by a fire official to raze its building while its Historical Architectural Review Board is fighting to block the order.

Some of the news is good, and some not so good, but one thing that is consistent is that the news is inconsistent. If the whole of the sustainability movement were more fully and accurately understood, and if it were contemplated through the lens of Constitutional freedom, there would be a lot less confusion, fighting, rancor and poverty.

As far as the article on churches in mixed-used settings, I'm glad that I am finally seeing some dialogue in print, but if we really want churches to maintain a presence in the cities of tomorrow, the discussion needs to be deeper. It might just change the outcome for the better.

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