

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

First, Shoot all the Cars

While Virginians seem hell bent upon raising taxes and building roads, Ameri-kiwi Claude Lewenz envisions a different path to a superior quality of life: Auto-free villages.

By James A. Bacon

Claude Lewenz is an American living in New Zealand. He has absorbed the keen environmental conscience of his Kiwi compatriots, but he retains an Yankee conviction that he can change the world if he's just bold enough to try. He has published a book, "[How to Build a Village](#)," which amounts to an audacious thought experiment. If you could design a community from scratch with the goal of maximizing the quality of life, what would it look like? How would it function?

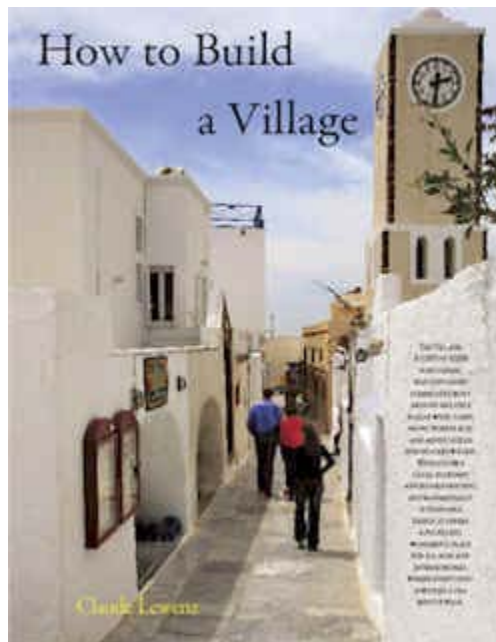
The first thing you'd do is get rid of all the cars.

The very idea of developing an auto-free human habitation any larger than a hippie commune may sound like the utopian musings of a fool or a charlatan. Most people would be tempted to dismiss the notion as preposterous. Live without cars? We tried the horse-and-buggy thing 100 years ago and decided we didn't like it.

Even a New Urbanist friend of mine, who is devoted to promoting alternatives to America's auto-centric human settlement patterns, deems the idea unworkable. It's one thing to reduce the role of cars in our lives, he says, quite another to get rid

of them altogether.

An idealist he may be, but Lewenz is no fool. He spent the better part of his career as a corporate executive in America before moving to New Zealand to live. He understands how business works -- indeed, his plan for making his vision real is very much a capitalist endeavor. But in his travels, he has ob-



served that a handful of other communities in the Western world have created a quite satisfactory quality of life without automobiles. Perhaps, he suggests, their example could be emulated and improved upon.

Lewenz lavishly illustrates these and other heretical notions with

photos from around the world: from historic Italian city centers to Greek island villages, from Poundbury, the experimental community underwritten by Prince Charles, to a building compound on Waiheke island that he constructed himself.

Lewenz envisions a self-contained village consisting of some 5,000 to 10,000 souls -- any less, and it would lack economic critical mass; any more and it would become ungovernable.

The outer boundary would be demarcated by a village wall: a tangible boundary between human habitation and the countryside, between the world of people and the world of cars.

The village would be organized around a series of Italianate plazas, each with a distinctive architectural character and function, linked by means of pedestrian thoroughfares. The largest street would be broad enough to handle a village parade, and even the narrowest would be wide enough to accommodate small, electric-powered vehicles. No point would be more distant than a 10-minute walk from the village center. Inhabitants could

own cars in order to interact with the world beyond, but automobiles would be relegated to a motor pool/parking garage on the village edge.

Banishing cars from the village would make two very important things possible. First, it would free an enormous amount of



space dedicated to roads and parking spaces. Sweating out that fat allows houses, shops, workplaces and public amenities to be located physically closer to one another, hence more easily accessible on foot. Second, spared the cost of spending millions of dollars on streets, sidewalks and parking spaces, the Village Organizing Committee (a development group run by village founders) can invest its capital instead in such things as underground utility ducts, waste recycling systems or village enterprise funds.

There is more, much more, to Lewenz's vision than just a town without cars. His village is green through and through, designed to minimize its waste and carbon emissions. It also is a humane place that incorporates the elderly into the community instead of shunting them off to nursing homes, and makes all the village a school rather than segregating children from the world of adults. Lewenz's villagers would create a market for locally grown produce (preferably organic) and they would practice what he calls a "slow food" lifestyle. Lewenz is a passionate advocate of "vernacular" architecture built from local materials and decorated by local artisans. He has developed interesting ideas about parallel real estate markets -- smaller housing units that can be sold only to buyers meeting certain age and income criteria -- as a way to preserve

affordable, workforce housing. Moreover, he has given considerable thought to a village governance structure that can survive the inevitable stresses that occur when residents of diverse cultures, incomes and political proclivities rub elbows.

(Anyone interested in building more humane, more sustainable communities can find stimulating reading in "How to Build a Village." Buy the book on Amazon.com or consult the website www.villageforum.com for details.)

I have never met Claude in person, although I feel that I know him. Our connection is purely electronic, based upon e-mail correspondence -- the antithesis, ironically, of the face-to-face relationships he sees as a great virtue of village life. I encountered him through my mother, who lived several years on Waikheke Island near Auckland. As Americans on a small island, Claude and my mother inevitably discovered one another. And as hyper-opinionated individuals with views on a wide of topics, they struck up a correspondence (even if they had to agree to disagree). When my mother returned to the U.S., they maintained an e-mail dialogue on the great issues of the day, and I got sucked into their orbit.

After a couple of years of spirited debate over the U.S. invasion of Iraq, global warming and America's unsustainable balance-of-payments deficit, Claude and I discovered that we shared many of the same interests. While our politics were poles apart, we had reached many of the same conclusions by divergent paths about how to create more prosperous, livable and sustainable communities.

Bacon's Rebellion and "How to Build a Village" are trying to accomplish much the same thing.

With my fixation on transportation, the ideas I find most compelling in "How to Build a Village, are those that could help us emancipate ourselves from servitude to the automobile. Although Lewenz envisions his villages residing in bucolic countryside surrounded by mountains, shoreline or other beautiful vistas, he acknowledges that his ideas could be applied in metropolitan regions as well.

Lewenz draws upon two types of communities for inspiration -- the historic city "centros" of Italy and the pedestrian villages of the Greek isles. (It is with tongue in cheek, I suspect, that he says he also looks to the American mall, with its cloistered pedestrian experience, for guidance.) In either setting, cars are kept outside a well-defined perimeter. "Inside the walls," he writes, "people walk, ride bicycles and are permitted to use especially designed low-speed electric (or fuel-cell) vehicles," akin to electric golf carts but with more features and panache. The critical criteria: The vehicles must be small, slow and safe around pedestrians.

"In all the various aspects of a Village," Lewenz writes, "we suggest that this is the one element that must remain non-negotiable. A Village with cars is not a Village. ... There can be no compromise on cars. Cars cannot be domesticated by design tricks like winding roads with variable widths or speed bumps."

In Lewenz's scheme, people could own as many cars as they wanted -- they just couldn't bring them into the village. Residents could buy or lease a parking space in the motor pool ga-



rage. They could use their car any time they wanted to travel outside the village. But villages would be largely autonomous -- with a "balance" of jobs, housing, retail and amenities, in Ed Risse's vocabulary -- so that routine needs would be provided within the village, thus reducing the need for outside travel.

The layout of the village is critical to making the system function well. Lewenz recommends organizing the village around plazas. Each plaza acts as a focal point for a distinct neighborhood with its own architectural flavor, its own character, its own mix of houses and businesses. But the plazas also share a common function:

Their purpose is to provide a gathering place, a place to stroll and to connect. Plazas are places to sit, some with warm outdoor seats to read the paper, others with outdoor cafes. They should have room for children to run without disturbing their elders. ... The plazas are the stage upon which Village life is played out.

Then, Lewenz advises, connect the plazas with different types of streets and lanes.

Not all homes and workplaces will be on the plazas, some will be on the connecting streets. Family hotels and guest houses

are better placed on the quieter streets, nicely lined with potted plants. Shops and store fronts work best on the main pedestrian thoroughfares. ... Encourage high ground floors and permit upper floors to overhang, some with open balconies and others with extended residences. This becomes especially valuable to protect pedestrians from the rain.

Lewenz envisions streets of different widths, surfaces and configurations -- elevated sidewalks, for instance -- depending upon their function. Some streets are lively promenades, public places to see and be seen. Others are tranquil lanes, where privacy and quiet are at a premium. Drawing from ancient Italian cities, he urges village founders to frame gateways by such means as monuments and archways to indicate the transition from one district to another.



In modern society, it is impossible to conduct all business on foot. Garbage must be picked up and recycled. Goods must be delivered. The Italians have shown how such things can be done. They have designed a wide range of vehicles that run

on battery power -- compressed air is an emerging alternative -- and look quite stylish.

I don't think there's any argument that car-free villages would be *desirable* places to live. Tourists spend good money and scarce vacation time to enjoy the quaint pedestrian experience in locales as varied as the aforementioned Greek and Italian villages and, to mention places that I have visited, Harbor Island in the Bahamas and the French Quarter of New Orleans when the streets are closed during a music festival.

The question is whether car-free villages and districts would be *practical* places to live. People have to work somewhere, and villages are not good places to build a large factory or office campus. Lewenz skirts around that problem by suggesting that village economies would be largely autonomous; some residents could find employment with the abundant service jobs that would be available. He does allow for a small industrial park on the village outskirts that would support some blue-collar jobs. But the locomotive of the village economy would be knowledge workers who made their living through telecommuting.

Perhaps there are enough telecommuting knowledge workers in the Old Dominion to fill a dozen Lewenz-style villages in the Virginia countryside. But the fact is, most residents of an *urban* village would work somewhere else. Placing villages on a commuter-rail or bus line might make sense. But there is no escaping the need for some automobile travel.

The fact that Lewenz's villagers cannot emancipate themselves 100 percent from the automobile is no reason, however, to

pooh-pooh the idea. If car-free villages could cut automobile trips by 80 percent -- or even 50 percent -- they would represent a dramatic improvement over Business As Usual. Lewenz offers a powerful vision for market-driven transformation of society. It would be marvelous if his dreams took root here in Virginia.

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