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# Let's think smart about growth in Kansas City

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Sustainability. It's been a buzzword for quite some time now, but what does it mean to us here in Kansas City?

Here's an interesting fact: Kansas City is one of the least-dense cities of its population in the United States with approximately 1,460 people per square mile, according to the Mid-America Regional Council. Kansas City, Kan., has an average of 1,168 people per square mile.

These figures might seem like random trivia, but this aspect of our urban and suburban fabric poses many challenges as we work toward sustainable living.

If you consider Kansas City's size in area, we are only 13 square miles smaller than New York City; however that city is roughly 18 times denser.

We must plan our developments more purposefully, and our lower density offers us a great opportunity to do that.

We have neighborhoods within our city that are quite dense, while we also have quite a bit of land that is not fully developed, especially in areas north of the river.

Smart growth, a novel concept among planners and urban designers for the last decade or so, challenges us to think about how we can set aside more natural resources and urban agriculture space, thereby focusing our development efforts on revitalizing the beautiful neighborhoods we have and leaving the open land to serve a wealth of purposes, including acting as the "lungs" of our cities, creating cleaner air.

I think about sustainability as maximum efficiency, but also as a way to value the experience of being someplace attractive, diverse and well designed.

I love our city. I love that I can live in a compact, urban community of single-family and duplex homes where my family can walk to coffee shops, the park, a hair salon and the movies, just for starters. (The only thing missing is a local grocery store.)

Many of our first-ring suburbs and residential neighborhoods close to the heart of the city already have the great bones of a sustainable community with ample sidewalks and walking paths, nearby corner shops, parks and other cultural amenities, but we need more housing options in our urban core.

I was speaking with a friend recently, a planner, regarding his difficult search for a home in the Plaza and midtown areas that would meet his needs as a tall, single professional.

The cozy little bungalows are simply too low-ceilinged for him and other homes had too much space.

In our architecture and urban design practice, we talk to many families that are looking for a different kind of housing that just isn't available within the central neighborhoods. Most homes there are not configured for modern living and require too much maintenance compared with the purchase price.

Many of the post-war homes are also nearing their 60- to 75-year life cycle, and foundations are stressed by our clay soils.

The answer can't be to keep building newer developments further out on green fields.

This is shortsighted and not a viable long-term option, though I understand the economic drivers that can make this the easiest and most expeditious route.

We need to find creative ways to look at reinvestment in our existing housing stock or neighborhoods, many of which are truly architecturally significant and can never be replaced once demolished.

This is a plea to stop demolitions in the city's center and to find other solutions. Many folks are thinking along these lines and a lot of effort and good work is happening - from Manheim Park to Strawberry Hill.

So how can we think about reinvesting in our core neighborhoods, maintaining their existing character while applying highly efficient methods of construction and building performance? That is what we are focusing our efforts on in our practice.

