

## DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC PLACES IN THE DEVICE-BASED CULTURE

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**Bio:** Principal at WHA Architecture and Planning, Mr. Hubbard specializes in walkable neighborhood architecture and planning. In addition, he has spoken at Universities and written for Architecture magazines on these topics.

Also, as part of an education/research outreach, he has produced a ninety minute documentary for a DC-area community television station on the shift from walkable neighborhoods to automobile-dependent developments and the reshaping of the American way of life.

He is founding partner of Neighborhood Media Group and co-producer of a 18-video series on Andres Duany's Techniques of Traditional Neighborhood Development.

He organized a panel at CNU VII on the Culture of Technology.

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Some prominent research has indicated that over the past 30–40 years there has been a dramatic pattern of civic and social disengagement in America. This includes a decline in social networks, norms of reciprocity and trust between people. This pattern of disengagement is manifested in a significant decline in participation in: voting, PTA, fraternal organizations, Unions, Red Cross, Religious Worship, socializing with friends and neighbors, local pubs and the family table to name a few areas of decline.

This social and civic disengagement has very serious effects on democracy and the civic realm as social and civic engagement have been shown to be pre conditions for better schools, safer streets, faster economic growth, more efficient Government and even healthier, happier lives. Three significant factors in this decline seem to be increased mobility and less local rootedness with regional destinations where we are less likely to know others; increased commuting time in the car to work and shopping; and the technological transformation of leisure.

The consumption of the related technologically-based commodities has displaced engagement with our world and the pursuit of excellence in our lives, as Albert Borgmann has noted in his book, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*: television and related devices provide more private, passive and less social entertainment, that has kept us at home more; television also gives a distorted, negative view of our “neighbors” through a disproportionate number of negative stories on the news, which combined with not knowing one’s neighbors can discourage trust in them; the car provides more private, socially non-negotiable, disengaged transportation in an increasingly automobile dependent environment; fast food provides individual meals as opposed to family meals.

However, before WWII, in walkable neighborhoods, one procured one’s needs through face-to-face human interaction. There is a pattern to the consumption of commodities from technological devices as Albert Borgmann has said: “In a device, the relatedness of the world is replaced by a machinery, but the machinery is concealed, and the commodities which are made available by a device are enjoyed without the encumbrance of the engagement with a context”.

The WWII generation’s children and then grandchildren increasingly use these devices

for procuring their needs and hence have disengaged more from public places and people. With this disengagement there is disuse of civic skills and consequential decline in civic skills, e.g. with the rise in road rage and general disregard for traffic laws. The device-based culture has generally displaced place-based culture even in traditional places like walkable neighborhoods – which increasingly have been reduced from a more socially interactive environment to a mere device for dispensing commodities.

Some technologies may be the vehicle for social and civic disengagement, but they are not the driver. Ultimately this post-WWII wave of social disengagement began with the volition of the WWII generation to retire or disengage to - in the words of Ray Oldenburg - “the safe, orderly, quiet haven” of the automobile dependent development after the traumatic war. There is a desire in human beings to be autonomous and to be social, the desire for autonomy has been generally winning out in the last fifty years.

One can see the counter trend to this volition with enlightened, community spirited individuals choosing to move back into walkable neighborhoods in cities, towns and TNDs like Kentlands and Celebration. In these places there is social and civic engagement by desire and choice. John Dewey said, “... Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community.”

The key is the *local* and the *place*. Local face-to-face interaction, with its nonverbal communication, is important for being understood, being held accountable and thus developing trust. Walkable neighborhoods provide practical and sustainable opportunities for local face-to-face social interaction but are not sufficient for social engagement in our cultural context.

The internet to the extent that it allows new connections to be made – and it does – can recover some of our lost social capital if these connections result in local place-based interaction. Some new companies offer web sites to physically defined neighborhoods and therefore the internet can be a cyber bridge back to place-based community. As philosopher Paul Ricoeur said, the trick is to become modern and return to the sources.