OPEN SPACE AND DENSITY

Bob Simon
October 13, 2010

New York City prides itself on its Central Park. Reston prides itself on its Nature Center. Central Park extends 2 and 1/2 miles from 110th Street to 60th Street. Its open space occupies the distance between the high rise residential buildings on Fifth Avenue and Central Park West. The extension and boundaries of our Nature Center are less definable, but suffice it to say that its open space makes a major contribution to the population of Reston's 7500 acres.

South of Central Park, extending two miles and more, lies what could be considered New York's City Center, the core of which is Times Square. There is O% open space in this City Center if streets and sidewalks are excluded from the definition of open space, but combining this City Center with Central Park there is 50% open space. Woe unto Times Square, a world-acclaimed example of urbanity, if well meaning theoreticians postulated that a specific percentage of green space had to be forced into its mix.

Conclusions to be drawn:

1 Let the dictionary definition of space as "distance, area, volume" take over, with "open space" accordingly being defined as the distance, horizontally, between structures, period. This definition forestalls the confusion arising from the variety of definitions of open space being offered---proposals to exclude parking lots, roads and certain sidewalks from the calculation of percentage of open space, as well as proposals to include features such as certain sidewalks, parks, recreation areas and green areas.

2. Density is what makes for successful town centers all over the world; and it also will make Reston Town Center, as well as other Reston areas such as metro stops and village centers, successful. Density maximizes walkability, thus reducing automobile traffic with its congestion and pollution. Density fosters closer communities.

3. For comparisons of percentages of open space in various localities to have validity, the comparisons must be based on (1) a common definition of open space and (2) localities of comparable size and general characteristics. It makes no sense to think any valid conclusions can come from making comparisons of open space percentages among Montgomery County, Arlington, D.C. and Reston Town Center, none of which are comparable in size or are similar in general characteristics.

4. New York's City Center does not suffer from lack of green spaces. Its open spaces are largely paved at street level. Broader avenues producing more "lebensraum" (German for room in which to live) generate higher values, just as green spaces do.