

How Do You Want to Live? Where Do You Want to Live? Why? Lessons for Smart Growth Reformers, Drawn from Southwestern Cities in the United States

MaryAnne Borrelli

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Professor MaryAnne Borrelli is an Associate Professor of Government at Connecticut College. She earned her Ph.D. in political science from the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences at Harvard University. Professor Borrelli is known for her study of environmental policy issues and her research and publications on gender dynamics in the United States presidency.

For her talk Professor Borrelli chose to focus on three Southwestern cities; Salt Lake City, Las Vegas, and Phoenix all of which face issues with long term environmental sustainability. In each of these cities there is an imposition of one culture (contemporary Western culture) upon another (Native American culture) which has affected both the physical and social composition of these cities. Furthermore, each of these cities can be characterized by an abdication of a response to a water ethic, having negligible public space, and abjure public zoning. Cities in general are a center of environmental sins and of modern culture. The environmental sins that have occurred in the cities have been purposeful and it is naïve to expect penance for these sins. In her study of these cities and their social and environmental sins, Professor Borrelli aims to answer three questions: what makes the sins so attractive, why are they important, and how can they be reformed?

Professor Borrelli first defined a city in terms of cultural concepts. She argued that, as a result of imperial culture, in modern terms city means the same thing as civilization. Cities are seen as civilization because they contain sacred spaces and they are economic utopias. As an example of a city that contains sacred spaces Professor Borrelli chose Boston. The city of Boston

was originally founded as the “City upon a Hill” an incipient religious message that still exists today throughout the city. The city is not only designed around its many prominent churches such as Trinity Church, but the architecture of the city is also designed to draw the eye to the churches. The reflection of religion throughout the architecture and geography of the city gives the impression that there is no conflict between religion and intellect.

As an example of the imperial culture that US cities are built upon Professor Borrelli chose Santa Fe. In 1573 The Law of the Indies was passed in Santa Fe; rule 134 of the Law of the Indies was that all buildings are to be built in the “Santa Fe” style. This not only showcases how an imperial power controlled the city but how cultural imprints are so powerful that they can completely erase that which came before them. While the choice of “Santa Fe” style architecture for the city may seem like homage to native cultures it is in fact a method of transforming Native culture and replacing it with Western culture.

For an example of cities as an economic utopia Professor Borrelli chose the Chicago World Fair in 1893. The end of the nineteenth century was a time when people began to recognize many of the horrors that were the result of industrialization. Even with this societal awakening people still came in mass to the Chicago World’s Fair, which was an example of both economic might and industrial strength. Twenty seven million people came to Chicago for the fair to see the “White City”. White buildings were constructed throughout Chicago and the street lights were put in place to make the city give off a white gleam. The message from this fair was that cities are orderly, policed, clean, and racially pure. The “City Beautiful” movement that for years prescribed the structure and development of cities grew out of this Chicago World’s Fair. The massive numbers of people that came to the fair, which is notable for a time without modern

social networking technology, reflects, along with the movement that grew out of it, the economic power and cultural importance of the city.

In the Southwest, which is full of vast deserts, the emphasis on cities as the cultural and economic centers of society is further heightened by the common myth and misconception that desert is wasteland that serves no social or economic purpose. Many celebrated artists, such as Georgia O'Keefe and Ansel Adams, have chosen the desert as a subject of art. The desert has been viewed by many as a highly reflective place; as a place for both art and religious experiences. However, instead being aware of the possible relationship with desert land most people think of desert as something that needs to be fixed or reclaimed. Southwestern cities are examples of how desert can and, according to many people, should be reclaimed and developed.

For the sake of development in Western cities the Colorado River has been turned in to a "plumbing system". The Bureau of Reclamation has greatly changed the face of the Colorado River by damming it and rerouting it repeatedly to bring water to dry desert areas. The most notable change in the River is Lake Mead, the Hoover Dam reservoir. The size of Lake Mead is so incredibly large that it actually causes the crust of the Earth to buckle. Lake Powell is another example of the massive alterations made on the Colorado River, and how they have been damaging to the environment. Lake Powell, another dam reserve and popular vacation spot is shrinking due to evaporation and leaving behind a greatly damaged environment. Lake Powell, Lake Mead, and the dams that have created them are symbols of US nationalism and power. A sign on the Glen Canyon Dam states that the workers who died in the construction of the dam died to make the desert bloom; but the question is why was it necessary to make the desert bloom?

Salt Lake City stands in stark contrast to its surrounding environment. The Great Basin Desert which surrounds the city has no trees whatsoever but Salt Lake City is full of maples, oaks, and elms. The city has entirely recreated the desert into what some would consider a utopia, but the development has created environmental devastation. The amount of water that Salt Lake City needs to sustain its current lifestyle is completely unsustainable and is damaging to the surrounding natural environment. The rate of water consumption in Salt Lake City is so great that Utah is the only Western Mountain State to have been part of the Dust Bowl.

Phoenix, which is full of palm trees and green golf courses, is another Southwestern city that stands in stark contrast to its surrounding natural desert environment. The majority of the water that Phoenix consumes comes from the Colorado River. Phoenix's water travels 336 miles from the Colorado River to water the city's lawns and gardens. At several points in the redirection of the Colorado River water needs to be pumped uphill in order to reach Phoenix. The water also travels in open air canals through the desert which leads to large scale evaporation of the water. The new ecosystem that has been built in Phoenix has caused problems for the natural ecosystem. Plants with lots of pollen have been introduced to Phoenix where they have no natural competition; the city now has severe pollen problems.

Las Vegas is also quite distinct from its natural environment but in a different way than either Salt Lake City or Phoenix. Unlike the other two cities there has been no attempt to make Las Vegas a city full of vegetation; instead the focus has been creating a city full of technological marvels that consume a stunning amount of water. The Las Vegas strip is governed by casino owners who use as much water as they need to compete with their peer casinos. Famous casinos like the Venetian, Mandalay Bay, and the Luxor are home to fountains, eleven

acres pools, canals, manmade lakes, and golf courses. Development in Las Vegas has been built around extremely high levels of water consumption.

Professor Borrelli's study of these Southwestern cities has led her to several different conclusions. Her first is that the environmental sins that have been committed throughout the Southwest and in particular in these three cities are so attractive because, for those who are profiting economically from the growth of these cities, committing these sins affirms their values in the city as the center of civilization and make them feel virtuous. She believes that it cannot be expected that these cities, or those who are in charge of them, will take kindly to smart growth. For these cities to embrace smart growth their will need to be cultural changes. To create these cultural changes it is important to appeal to something other than logic because those who are anti-smart growth have it, and to recognize the power of nationalism. Professor Borrelli concluded that to further promote these cultural changes an environmental standard of sustainability needs to be created, there needs to be more education about smart growth, and there needs to be a greater emphasis on the ethic of shared responsibility.