Fellow planners: I have been much moved by the presentation of the builder from Hopkinton. I thought it was an excellent presentation, and it showed that he and his committee had done a lot of homework. But he was not happy at the several prospects for the development of the Mezzit lands. As his presentation continued it became ever clearer how he and his townspeople were caught. They could find no way out of the facts (his cliché, bottom line) of today’s economic practices, but they knew what was going to happen was going to destroy what they now have and like. In this attitude he spoke as most Mass. suburban people now do.

What is going on? By contrast with the 50s there is now no sense that growth is good. The idea is that we must have economic growth, but we won’t enjoy it. By contrast to the 60s there is no sense that any basic reform is possible. Consider the fact that currently there is no political party or major politician who has a platform of hope. All the fighting is how to prevent things for getting worse, how to fix bad outcomes. In Europe they struggle to keep their social democratic high welfare economies going, in Asia heedless growth is the euphoria, in the U.S. we have neither social democracy nor hope.

As planners we are caught in the middle. We are supposed to worry about class injustice, about not ruffling the economy, and about protecting the natural and human environments. I leave to you all to think evaluate the American economy from a social justice point of view. I want, however, to call your attention to the relationship between the economy and the natural environment. The economy is growing to be an ever-larger share of the natural environment: It is using it up. By our present methods of accounting we do not add in the environmental costs to our reckoning of economic growth, GNP. (Please look at Herman E. Daly, Beyond Growth (1996) if you do not know of these national and world accounts problems.) The local suburban feeling of growth ruining the town is an up-front recognition of this national and global problem. So as planners we are asked to find some compromises between the economy and the environment. Could we as a class do better than just some sensible mitigation? a rehash of Smart Growth? an application of some Best Management Practices?

I think we can, if we try a number of fresh alternatives and combinations. First of all, we have to be the teams with hope. We want designs that make Hopkinton better for the ordinary folks who live there now and who will come. A fancy landscaping according the best high-end resort practices won’t do. Too expensive, and boring!
So let’s announce ourselves as the inventors of the “The New Landscape.” What is the New Landscape? It is not just the preservation of a remnant New England town. It is not an Olmstedian park and suburb. It is not a town of patches of Trustees of the Reservation forests and wet spots, but it is a proposal for dynamic relationships among townspeople and their environment.

What sort of ideas might we have to work with? Fields are wanted, fields for the children to play sports, fields to farm and look at. So let’s design better sports fields with careful use of trees clumped at an edge of clusters and open lawn. They have their beloved stonewall and maple-lined roads. What sort of walking and bike path system can we make that unifies the town and its neighborhoods? What will be the landscaping for such pathways? Surely we have to cluster houses in some ways. Will there be a hierarchy of clusters grading up to the existing center? What sort of houses? What sort of alignments to the streets? The streets surely will be woonurfs. What sort of yards? Will they be unfenced? Will the rear yards make the wild corridors Sarah Stein speaks of? Can’t there be wild patches in every neighborhood for the children to escape the parental eye? Will there be rows of trees to help with HVAC costs? How about Community Supported Agriculture fields scattered about town? Such farm operations can exist on high-cost land. What about a town farm to enliven the big fields? There are now town farms in Weston, Lincoln, and Natick.

These are the ideas that come to my mind. I suspect that in a class like ours there are many more. But I am keen that we be positive about the future. Our alternatives have to try to suggest that a more built-up Hopkinton will be a real good, even a better place to live. What’s our competition? Some version of resort architecture, like Pine Hills in Plymouth. Surely we can do better.

Your assistant,

Sam