

**The hardly  
complete and utterly  
unofficial 3rd Rate Guide to**

# **Second Rate Urbanism**

***by Alex Schafran***

**They say that it takes one to know one, and when it comes to second rate urbanism, it helps to hire a 3rd rate urbanist. If there is anything this armchair quarterback knows, it is that each and every city, no matter how great, has second-rate places. Perhaps the difference between the A-list cities and the D-list disasters is merely the quantity of top-notch space – places that inspire, awe, entrance, and move. That and the food.**

**As a planner, the question in many ways is not what constitutes second rate urbanism, but rather what produces it? How have we taken hundreds of years of urban knowledge and harnessed it to create utter mediocrity? In my vain attempt to morph into the love child of Peter Marcuse, Jane Jacobs and Bill Simmons, I happily present some key ideas of how to make your city the mecca of second-rate urbanism:**

**1. Make sure that transit stops at midnight, and preferably runs on 15 or 20 minute headways the rest of the time.**

**Nothing makes a place vibrant and diverse like round the clock transit, and vibrancy and diversity are the enemy of 2nd rate. If you have ever been packed like sardines on an uptown 2 train at 3:30 in the morning in New York City, you will understand how it is the hours of the transit system and not merely the physical infrastructure that is the backbone of its glorious urban fabric. Round the clock transit allows people to carve out interstitial spaces within the city, allowing more room for more lifestyles, jobs, circadian rhythm's and opportunities, an utter necessity in a dense environment. Much better to shut down transit early, and make it run every half hour past 7pm.**

## **2. Don't plan for sidewalks, bike lanes or pedestrians.**

**Only poor people, hippies and Europeans ride bikes, and walking is likely to cause seriously harmful exposure to UV rays. Real Americans drive places, as it is our right and duty and contributes to our economic expansion. Those other things undermine our way of life, contribute to prostate pain, and destroy the beauty of a perfectly smooth traffic pattern.**

### **3. Make the city more affordable to dogs than to children.** Noth-

ing ruins a good city like children – they are loud, noisy and don't have the purchasing power of a pooch. Better to become like my native metropolis, San Francisco, where dogs now outnumber children and where the school district is losing 1000 kids per years. (1) Schools are so expensive to run, but the new luxury dog hotels with flat-screen TV's contribute to the tax base, and the rooftop dog cocktail parties just scream "This is my kind of city!" Dogs don't tag up our storefronts at night, and now their waste is being turned into a source of alternative energy. Hell, U.S. pet owners in general spent \$38.5 billion on their ersatz offspring in 2006, which is only \$17.5 billion shy of the national education budget. Especially with the rising power of dog owners - DOGPAC is a rising player in San Francisco politics and "posing with dogs has become the equivalent of kissing babies" - this gross disparity should soon be a thing of the past. (2)

**Who needs good schools and affordable housing  
is everyone is a DINK with a dog?**

**4. Eliminate  
fleamarkets, street  
vendors, sidewalk fairs  
and anything else** that interferes

with efficient movement or otherwise reduces sales in chain stores. Urbanism is not about providing opportunity for budding entrepreneurs, a delicious bite to eat for 4 bucks, or colorful places where you can buy an African drum and then play it in a drumming circle right away. That kind of garbage would never happen in a proper shopping mall. How could you possibly make a wise consumer decision without air conditioning and florescent light? Why would you want to clutter up the sidewalk with humans beings? This type of unplanned, spontaneous human activity is anathema to the second rate and should either be banned or taxed into oblivion.

**5. D o n ' t  
even consider  
things like rent control,  
inclusionary zoning, indus-  
trial retention, or community  
land trusts. Policies like these help main-  
tain economic diversity, which means that poor  
people and people of color may actually be able  
to maintain some sort of right to the city. Better  
to allow the geography of poverty to completely  
invert, creating a fortress of wealth at the urban  
core and glaring poverty on the fringes. What  
could possibly be second rate about an urban  
environment where the man washing  
the plates at your new brasserie  
can actually afford to live  
there?**

**6. M a k e  
every old industrial  
city just like Emeryville,  
California.**

**Rezone all of your industrial land for big box stores, biotech and condos, make all public space corporate, and work to siphon off retail dollars from nearby major cities. If you really want second rate perfection, make corporations more important citizens than people – they are far more orderly and have nice logos that help structure public space. Don't spend any of your tax windfall on affordable housing or improving your schools, as that may bring in more people that can vote, thereby diluting the power of your true citizens.**

**Thankfully, this recommendation is being taken to heart, as you would be hard pressed to find an economic development director or planning consultant in the western United States who has not been to Emeryville and who doesn't keep pictures of pretty lofts in their powerpoint portfolio.**

**7. Enforce  
open container  
laws religiously.** Thankfully, grin-

**golandia was founded by Puritans, so most cities in  
the US already have strong open container laws and are  
wise to spend precious resources on sending men and women  
with bullet-proof vests walking through parks to make sure your  
paper bag only contains high-fructose corn syrup. Drinking a beer in  
the park on a hot day in the summer is completely uncivilized and not  
even really that much fun – look at horrible places like Rio and New  
Orleans – who would want that? If you are going to serve beer, make  
sure to pen all the drinkers into a confined space with police bar-  
ricades, bar children (it is always a good idea to force people  
to choose between drinking and bringing the kids), and  
make people feel like the heathens they are for  
possibly wanting to consume alcohol  
in public.**

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**As the pursuit of second-rate is never truly complete, one could continue – for example, faux vintage and pastel colors make wonderfully second-rate places. Yet part of the joy in our work is how many ways we have of truly turning the awfully vibrant into the wonderfully mundane. There is no reason to settle for diversity, spontaneity, good design, accessibility or energy in a place. Not only is the dream of a 2nd rate urban world possible, we may just see it happen in our lifetime.**

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**Notes:**

**(1) Meredith May, "S.F.'S BEST FRIEND: Where pooches outnumber kids, impassioned, doting owners and hounds dressed to the canines treat all days like dog days," San Francisco Chronicle, Sunday, June 17, 2007**

**(2) Ibid.**