Urban Outfitted

There's no single prescription for successful city planning, but "dense" and "sustainable" are the buzzwords for forward-looking development. Both of the projects in development shown here have attempted to create communities that promote a convenient, green, walkable, and lively lifestyle.

A. Best in the U.S.: Sonoma Mountain Village in Sonoma, California
From an abandoned 200-acre high-tech campus arises Sonoma Mountain Village, a mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, suburban-meets-urban planned community located an hour north of San Francisco. Slated for completion in 2020, it will be the first North American development designated as a One Planet Living Community by BioRegional, a United Kingdom–based nonprofit that helps developers and cities reduce their residents' ecological footprints. Naturally, sustainability guides the design, from framing made from locally recycled cars to alternative energy for all 1,900 homes. A "five-minute living" layout makes it easy to walk to the daily farmer's markets in the town center, and a local business incubator encourages residents to cut down on car commutes. In addition to aiming for zero carbon and zero waste, the project's developer, Codding Enterprises, asked architects to avoid designing homes with a homogeneous, cookie-cutter look.

B. Best International: New Songdo City, South Korea
New Songdo City exemplifies the seemingly instantaneous growth of many Asian metropolises. Set for completion in 2014, the city will house 65,000 residents and 300,000 workers.

The 1,500-acre "international business district" is designed for easy access by foot, bike, or public transit (including free shared bicycles and 10,000 electric Smart Cars). The U.S. Green Building Council selected New Songdo as a pilot project aimed at becoming the world's first certified LEED Neighborhood Development.

As a so-called "ubiquitous city," New Songdo's infrastructure fully integrates technology, with built-in computers and smart keys for all homes. Despite the futuristic feel, the development was inspired by classic cities, says master plan architect, James von Klemperer of Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates: "The boulevards of Paris, the row houses of Boston, New York's Central Park, and the shopping streets of Seoul all provided material for us."

THE FUTURE

Margaret Crawford, professor of urban design and planning theory, Harvard Graduate School of Design: In Asia, entire cities are built from the ground up in the blink of an eye. "The scale and rapidity of construction is impressive," Margaret Crawford says. "But I don't see the innovation. They're mostly following American models." Despite attempts to guide it, urbanization responds to a variety of factors beyond the control of planners. In the Pearl River Delta, for example, the organic growth of desakotas—settlements established around factories and agriculture—results in a unique kind of urbanized countryside. "Desakotas are one model of how things happen as a result of investment rather than planning," Crawford says. "Planners run afterward to guide the process, but development is produced by mostly economic factors."

Nancy Levinson, director of Arizona State University's Phoenix Urban Research Lab: Just a few decades ago, U.S. cities were regarded as hub-and-spoke configurations, with a center city surrounded by suburbs and an orderly commuting pattern to and from downtown. But cheap oil and rapid development led to multinucleated metropolises like Los Angeles, where a car-free life is nearly impossible and commuters travel in all directions, clogging freeways and smogging the air. Nancy Levinson believes that resource depletion necessitates a shift in urban-planning priorities. As gas prices rise, cities must help citizens consume less by design. "Many argue that the era of cheap oil is over. This needs to be a major factor in urban design," says Levinson. "In Phoenix, we haven't exploited the sun for energy as much as we could. There's a great deal we can do to reduce heating or cooling loads by considering building orientation, materials, landscaping, and form."

❸ After the 2007 collapse of a major bridge in Minneapolis, transportation officials revealed that nearly 14 percent of bridges in the U.S. are deemed "functionally obsolete."

❹ Manhattan's street grid was first proposed in the Commissioners' Plan of 1811. The design called for 12 widely spaced avenues running approximately parallel to the Hudson River, cut by 155 narrower cross streets set 200 feet apart. The plan, which laid a regular grid across irregular topography, is now a famous example for planners.