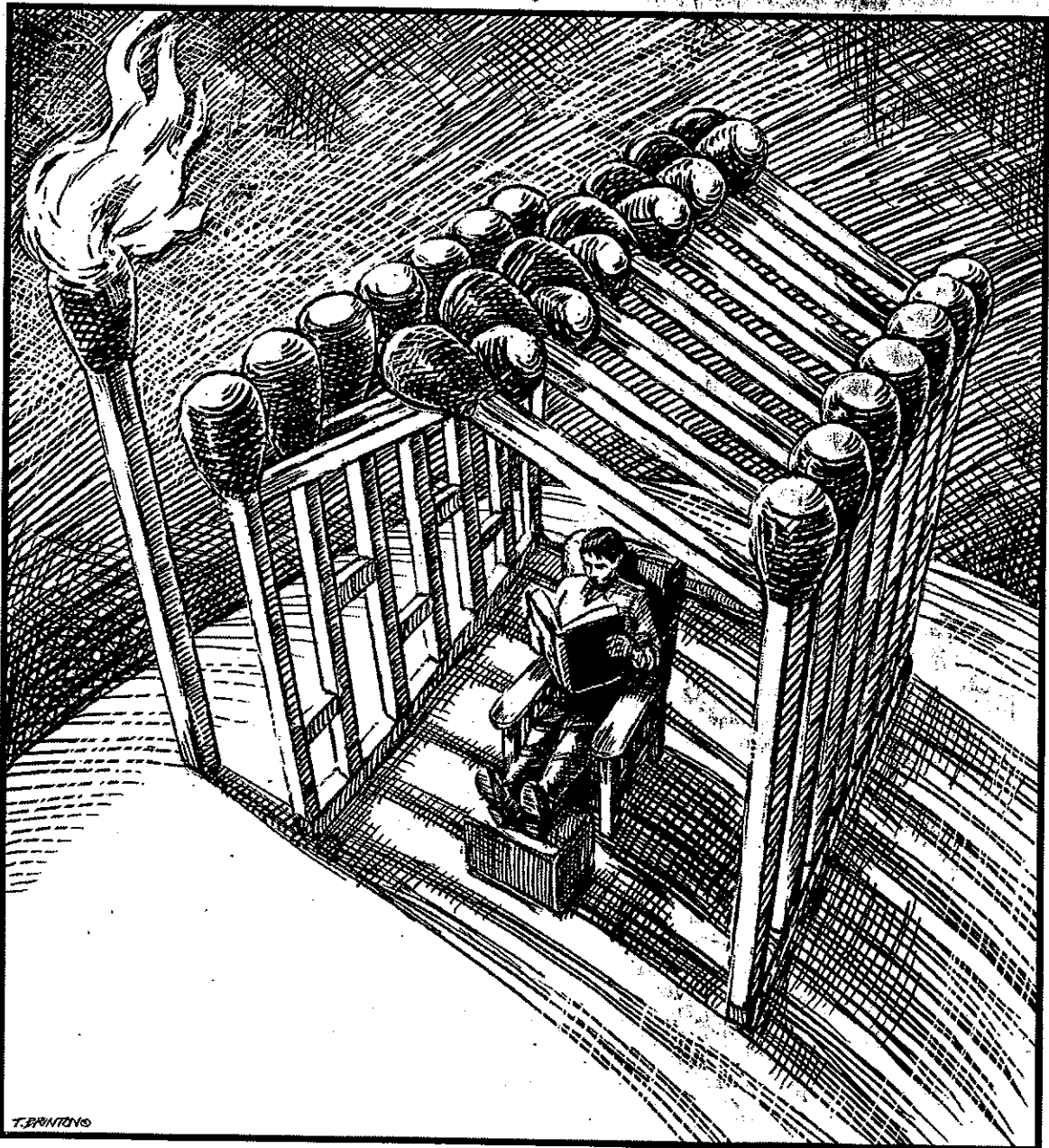


# OPINION

## FIRESTORMS: THE AFTERMATH

# Rebuilding San Diego: Fires, suburbs and the public interest



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Natural disasters challenge us to rethink our lifestyles. They remind us of the boundless power of the earth, the heavens, the wind and rain. They renew our connection to the ecological cycles of this planet.

We live mostly cocooned from nature. Our automobiles cushion us from the spaces we pass through as we zoom from one part of the region to another. Our homes block out nature. Inside them we make a beeline for our machines — television, DVD, Palm Pilot, MP3 player, computer — and blast off into channel surfing, cyberspace utopia. The natural world outside disappears. We take it for granted.

Reactions of many San Diegans to the October firestorm exposes some of the contradictions in what writer Mike Davis has called "stupid urbanization that conspired to create the ingredients for one of the most perfect firestorms in California history."

Election data will show that most residents of Scripps Ranch voted for the recall of the governor, and (again quoting Davis) "against the oppression of an out-of-control public sector." The biggest supporters of Proposition 13 and every other attempt to downsize government have been upper middle class suburbanites in Southern California. And yet, on the day the Crest fire roared down the canyons toward the bastions of suburban sprawl in east and north county, these same citizens were screaming for more helicopters, more firefighting planes, more fire engines. Suddenly, it was trendy to have more government.

In Alpine, during the second day of the fires, a woman calls a local radio talk show screaming that "it is criminal" that her electricity is out and her water pressure is low. This same woman also wants less government intervention and less taxes. But she expects that firefighters and utility workers will be there immediately when she needs them.

Talk about having it both ways. With huge budget deficits driven by 25 years of voting out new taxes, how can anyone expect California to provide the colossal fire protection it now appears will be needed to protect millions of inland residents from the inevitable Santa Ana fires that come each fall?

One irate resident near Ramona told this newspaper "Screw the tree huggers. They're a bunch of city people telling us what we can do with the land we pay taxes on."

Memo to this gentleman: read a history book. Paying taxes does not actually give you the right to do anything you want with your property. If you look at the last century of decision-making in land use, environmental and property law in this country, you will see that the courts have sought to provide a balance between the private property rights of individuals and the rights of the public interest. "Public interest" is loosely defined as the larger health and welfare of the mass of people who live in a region.

If a landowner wants to build a nuclear power plant on his/her land, state and local governments today might consider the "public interest" — public health dangers from radiation damage to residents — to be a greater concern

than the private right to profit from the plant.

A more innocent example: if the value of a historic landmark to the larger population of people living in a region is greater than the profit a property owner could reap by turning that landmark into a resort, the property will be preserved in its original form.

The legal debates over the public interest are often quite complex; this is why the process of land and environmental regulation often takes decades to evolve. One of the main causes of cancer in the United States is unchecked contamination of soils, air, food in our culture. Millions of people have died over the last five decades because we did not have laws in place that regulated waste disposal, air pollution or water contamination. It took that long for the public interest to be redefined across the land. Today, we are healthier because we have an environmental legal infrastructure in place to prevent these destructive

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sources of contamination.

The private right to build at the outer edges of cities, in the backcountry and in exurban spaces is not constitutionally guaranteed in all regions of America. For example, on the East Coast or in the South and Midwest, the federal government restricts urban development in floodplains, because it would not be in the public interest to endanger the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in river valleys during massive winter rains.

It is reasonable to argue, therefore, that the arid hills and canyons of Southern California's backcountry may represent a fire-danger zone and should not be developed with sprawling cul-de-sac suburbs. Very simply, this kind of development impedes small-scale burning of brush and chaparral, as homeowners resist the pollution of controlled burns, and public officials worry about the costs of liability.

To put this in land use and property law terms, the danger of massive fires may be a greater threat to the public interest than the private right to blanket the backcountry with more Scripps Ranches or San Diego Country Estates.

This simple notion of public interest has been forgotten in the recent debates in the aftermath of the worst fire disaster in San Diego and California history. One would think that the loss of more than 2,400 homes and 375,000 acres of natural landscape in San Diego County would cause people to reconsider the mistakes of East Coast-style suburban densities in a fire-prone, semi-arid place like Southern California.

But many observers are quick to defend their suburban lifestyle, with little thought to the larger public interest it may threaten. They express outrage at the idea of building at higher densities in existing towns, both back in the urbanized core, as well as in the tradi-

tional centers in the rural county.

In the words of our "tree hugger" critic from Ramona: "There are people like me who don't like city life. I say leave people alone, let them live their life without government intervention."

It's one thing to reject city life and go live in the wilderness of Alaska. It's another to live in Ramona, a place that falls solidly inside the urbanized region of San Diego. One of the fallacies of exurban residents is that they want to enjoy the benefits of proximity to the city without taking responsibility for being part of its social area of influence. They want to exist apart from the public interest.

The Ramona resident's response: "We have to live somewhere, and I'm not going to live like a bunch of animals in the high-rises downtown."

Welcome to the anti-urbanism of the 21st century American suburb.

There are alternatives to building land-devouring, unsustainable places like San Diego Country Estates. The term "sustainable" as used here means that the land not only sustains its immediate occupants, but functions well in the regional cycle of environmental and housing needs.

Suburbanites are quick to trash concepts like "smart growth" or "City of Villages" without exploring the variety of development models they embody.

Writers have long lamented the suburban obsession with the self and its contribution to depression, social problems and dwindling civility in America. Gated subdivisions and estate living run counter to spirit of the public interest. Their residents want to escape from the perceived ills of the city ("the bunch of animals living in downtown high rises") without accepting that they are just reinventing a different version of city living. It is just one model, and it may not be the best solution for all situations.

America is based on democracy and choice. If the only living alternatives we offer are either high-density high-rises or low-density suburbs, we are in big trouble. But, in fact, there is a huge untapped range of possibilities that lies in between these extremes — moderate density, diversified mixed-use "villages" composed of varied townhouse configurations, and small single-family attached homes, with open space, canyons and a real town center to walk to. Examples include the Uptown District in Hillcrest, sections of Mission Valley and the Otay Lakes development in South County.

Creating nodes of well-designed, slightly higher density homes around existing rural centers also makes sense. It provides affordable housing and preserves more open space and fire-prone backcountry, which can be left to nature and more easily controlled with regulated burns. It also creates more sustainable concentrations of humanity that can be linked with alternative transit.

This scenario may be San Diego's best bet for the rest of this century.

In medicine, we now know that the best way to fight cancer is not merely by throwing money at treatment options once people get the disease. We know that we fight cancer by changing our lifestyle — stop smoking, cut down on carcinogenic foods, stop polluting our drinking water and our air.

Firestorms are like cancer. Are we going to be content to build up massive armies of fire trucks and tanker planes waiting for the next fire to come? Or are we going to rethink the way we build our city in the places where it touches the dry rural natural landscape that is prone to fires?