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The Rise and Fall of Smart Growth: An Exploration of the Appearance of Smart Growth and Related Terms in Google Searches, APA Conference Programs, and Selected Newspapers

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THE RISE AND FALL OF SMART GROWTH
AN EXPLORATION OF THE APPEARANCE OF SMART GROWTH AND RELATED
TERMS IN GOOGLE SEARCHES, APA CONFERENCE PROGRAMS, AND
SELECTED NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

Smart growth was conceived in the mid to late 1990s as a fresh approach to urban development that was neither for nor against growth but sought to change its form and location as an antidote to urban sprawl. The prescription was supported by a broad network of organizations and promoted extensively nationwide. Toward that end, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency launched the Smart Growth Network that includes many of the nation's premier planning, development, environmental, and local government organizations. Today, many would argue that smart growth has become the predominant planning paradigm in the United States.

It has now been nearly 30 years since the seeds of smart growth were first planted. In this paper, we seek to explore how prevalent the term smart growth has been in discussions among the general public, the planning profession, and the print media over time. More specifically, we explore the frequency with which the term smart growth, and related terms, were used in various venues and publications over time. The exploration was based on analyses of Google searches, the programs of the annual meetings of the American Planning Association, and the newspapers of major metropolitan areas in the United States. The exercise involved searches for the term, smart growth as well as terms that represent the principles of smart growth, such as mixed use, redevelopment, walkability, land preservation and others. It is important to note that our queries allow us to search for the appearance of terms but not the context or placement of the term in the source document.

In general, we find that the appearance of the term smart growth rose rapidly in google searches, APA conference programs, and in major newspapers until the early 2000s but then seem to fall slowly but steadily until it barely appears at all. The appearance of terms that represent smart growth principles had a mixed pattern of use that varied across media and by term. In contrast, the appearance of the term gentrification has risen markedly in all three venues.

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INTRODUCTION

We proceed as follows. First, we briefly review the history of smart growth, describing a few major milestones, its fundamental principles, and its rapid ascendance as a planning paradigm. We then describe our methods and why we chose the media and terms we used for our analysis. Next, we discuss our results focusing on a few selected terms. Finally, we discuss the implications of our analysis and what they imply about the future of smart growth.

WHAT IS SMART GROWTH?

In the late 1980s, tolerance for urban sprawl had reached unsustainable levels in many parts of the country. Managing urban growth had evolved from something practiced by a few municipalities to a widespread topic of interest among planning practitioners and researchers. Oregon's pioneering state land use program was just coming into its own and catching the attention of state policymakers across the nation looking for an appropriate role for state governments to play. At the same time, discussions were beginning at the federal level about how to integrate land use planning and management into transportation funding allocation.

Then in 1991, at a conference in central California, a group of architects, planners, and policy advocates pronounced the Ahwahnee principles, articulating what would evolve into principles of smart growth. These 10 principles, now widely known, propose a development pattern that is compact with mixed uses, a sense of place, and a range of transportation and housing options. Smart growth development is dotted with public open spaces and surrounded by farms, forests, and natural resources. Proponents of these growth patterns claimed they would have widespread benefits, including less time spent in cars, improved physical health, more affordable housing in high quality neighborhoods, and cleaner air, water, and global atmosphere. A network of influential organizations and the Clinton-Gore administration quickly spread the gospel, and by the late 1990s smart growth had arguably become the dominant planning paradigm in the United States. Key events in the ascendance of smart growth include the publication by the American Planning Association of *Growing Smart* in 1997 and Maryland Governor Paris Glendening's signing of the Maryland Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation Act in the same year.¹

The 10 smart growth principles are familiar to students of planning. Some principles reflect pre-1990s growth management and concepts, while others were novel at the time. As listed by the Smart Growth Network, the 10 principles of smart growth are:²

1. Mix land uses
2. Take advantage of compact building design
3. Create a wide range of housing opportunities and choices
4. Create walkable neighborhoods
5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
7. Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities

¹ For a history of smart growth, see Knaap (2005) and Landis (2021).

² <https://smartgrowth.org/smart-growth-principles/>

8. Provide a variety of transportation choices
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective
10. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions

DATA AND METHODS

To explore the saliency of smart growth over the years we examined how frequently the term smart growth and some of its principles appeared as topics of interest among the general population, the planning profession, and the print media. We did so by conducting a word search of documents to reveal how much people are “talking” about any given topic. Again, it is important to note our approach allows us to measure the appearance of the term, not how or in what context the term is used. More specifically, we track the term smart growth as well as complementary terms in three sources.

First, we examine an aggregator source—Google searches. Google Trends allows users to search aggregated data of word searches. Google search term results are scaled on a range of 0 to 100 based on a topic’s proportion to all searches on all topics and are available from 2004 to the present.³ Second, we explore the use of selected terms in the programs of the national conference of the American Planning Association (APA) between 2002 and 2020 (the years for which data are available). Each year the APA annual conference draws thousands of professional planners to various sessions over a four-day period. APA conference agendas are developed around a theme and the host city, but also reflect the topic presentations proposed by members. The American Planning Association (APA) is the nation’s premier association of planners in the United States. The conference program, therefore, provides information about the topics of interest to professional planners.

Third, we explore the use of the same selected terms in major metropolitan newspapers, the *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Oregonian*, ranging roughly from 1980 to 2020. These newspapers were selected because they represent the two papers with the largest circulation in the United States (the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*) and a newspaper that serves the state most prominent in the promotion of smart growth (The *Baltimore Sun*) and the newspaper that serves a region with a national reputation for leadership in land use planning that predated smart growth (the *Oregonian*).

In addition to the term smart growth, we searched for terms that represent smart growth principles, such as mixed use, redevelopment, walkable, and land preservation. For comparison, we also searched for the term, gentrification, which does not represent a principle of smart growth but has grown in salience in recent years.⁴ We include our findings on this term largely to serve as a benchmark and indicator of countervailing trends.

This approach is admittedly broad brush. Media mentions and searches can reflect prevalence, which has some weight, but can’t reflect the motivations of the writer or reader. Some terms might track with particular projects or issues that are controversial and garnered a lot of

³ <https://support.google.com/trends/answer/4365533?hl=en>

⁴ In addition to these terms, we conducted searches for other terms, such as infill, affordable housing, compact development, multimodal, sustainable development, and new urbanism. We do not report the results for these terms, however, because the number of appearances were too small to analyze, they appeared for reasons that was not related to urban growth and development, or there was no discernable pattern of appearance over time.

interest. Our searches in these three venues also don't reflect other outlets—blogs, professional websites, advocacy groups, state and federal agencies—professional and popular, where these subjects are the main topics of discussion. Along the same lines, our research may not reflect how these topics, because of visible and accessible technology, transportation innovations, climate change, and a generation seeking to establish households, have become general topics of conversation.

FINDINGS

For many of the terms there is no apparent pattern of use over time. For other terms, the number of appearances is so small that the results seem more random than revealing. We also focus mostly on trends, as it is difficult to be sure that the terms are used in a planning context, and it is difficult to compare the number of times a term is searched by anyone on the planet with the number of times a term appears in a limited set of newspapers or on the program of a single professional conference. Still, we believe the results offer some interesting information and insights.

Google Searches

An exploration of Google searches produced several interesting results. (See figures 1-5). First, Google searches for the term smart growth between 2004 and 2020 (the period for which searches are possible) peaked in 2004 and declined steadily ever since. Searches for the term “smart growth” in 2004 outpaced searches for terms that represent smart growth principles, such as “mixed use,” “land preservation,” and “walkable.” Over time, however, as searches for the term “smart growth” declined, searches for some terms that reflect principles increased and in the case of “mixed use,” and “walkable,” grew to exceed searches for the term “smart growth,” for the term “mixed use,” exceptionally so. Other terms that reflect smart growth principles, however, such as “land preservation,” and “redevelopment” declined precipitously as well. Searches for the term, “gentrification,” however, climbed significantly. Perhaps not surprisingly, searches for the term smart growth were most common in Maryland and Washington, DC.

Google search of "Smart Growth" (ranked)

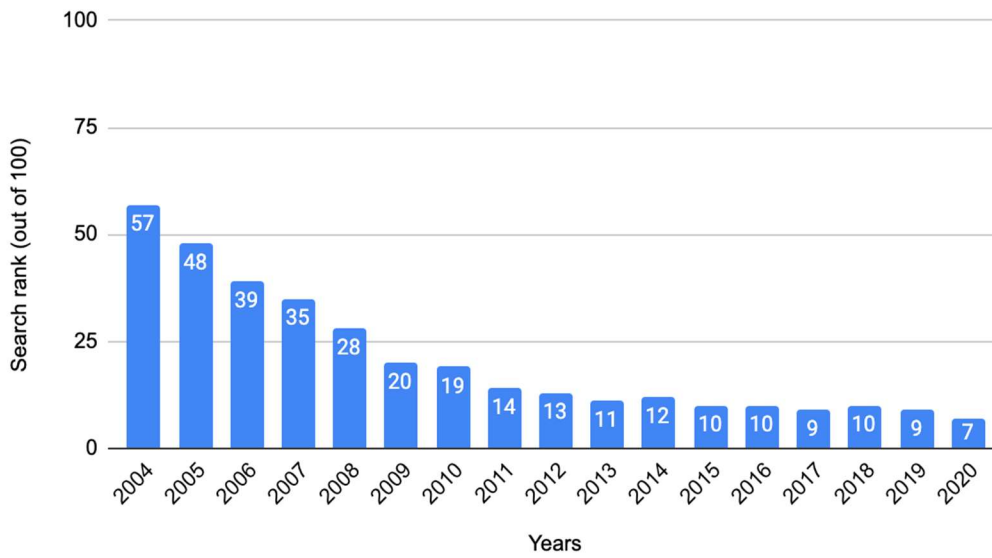


Figure 1
Google Searches for “smart growth”

Google search of "Mixed Use" (ranked)

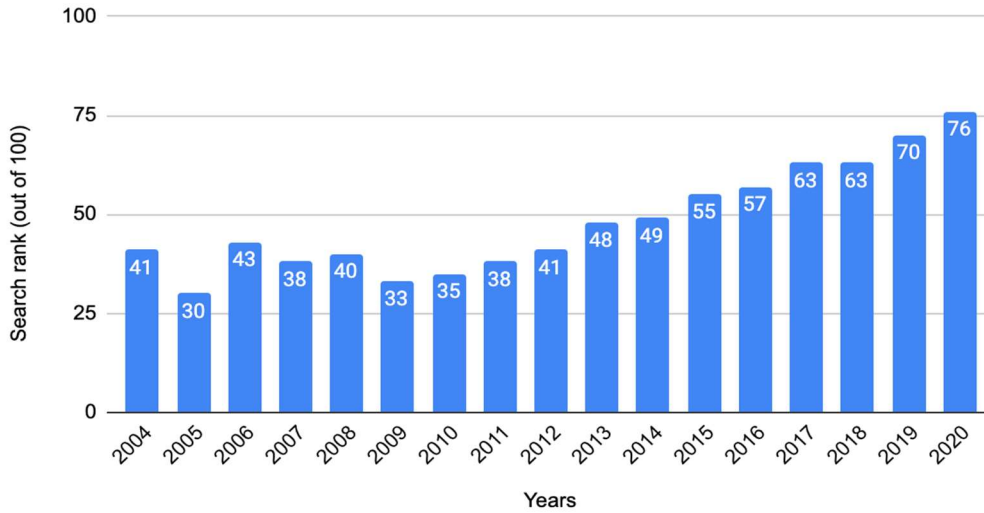


Figure 2
Google Searches for “mixed-use”

Google search of "Redevelopment" (ranked)

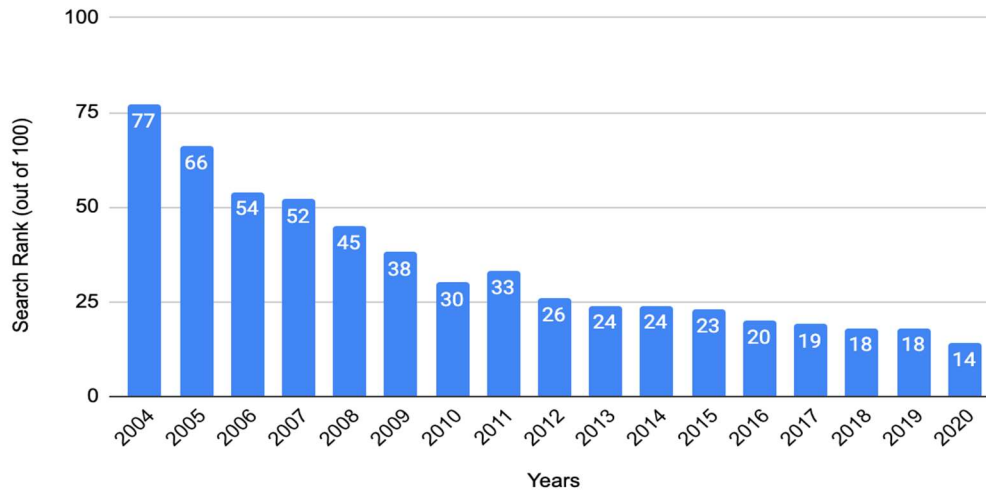


Figure 3
Google searches for "redevelopment"

Google search of "Walkable" (ranked)

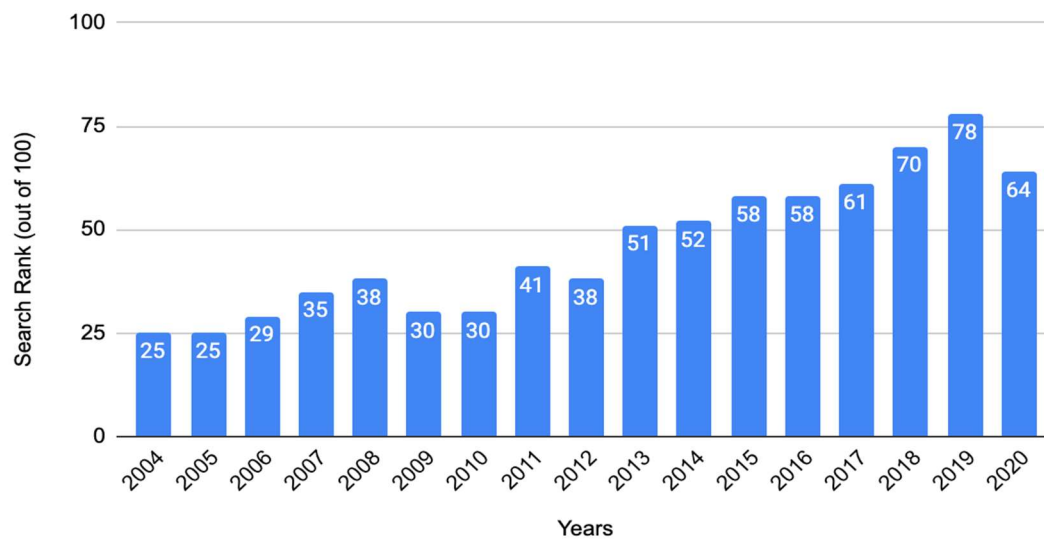


Figure 4
Google searches for "walkable"



Figure 5
Google searches for “land preservation”

APA National Conference Programs

Similar to the pattern in Google search terms, the prevalence of the term smart growth in the programs of the annual meeting of the American Planning Association between 2002 and 2020 also peaked in 2004 and declined steadily afterward. (See figures 6-11.) Again, appearances of the term “smart growth” in 2004 generally outpaced terms that represent smart growth principles, such as mixed use, land preservation, redevelopment, and walkability. As the appearance of the term smart growth declined, the appearance of some terms that reflect smart growth principles, such as redevelopment and land preservation also declined. The appearance of the term walkability vacillated but did not steadily decline. The appearance of the term, gentrification, generally rose.

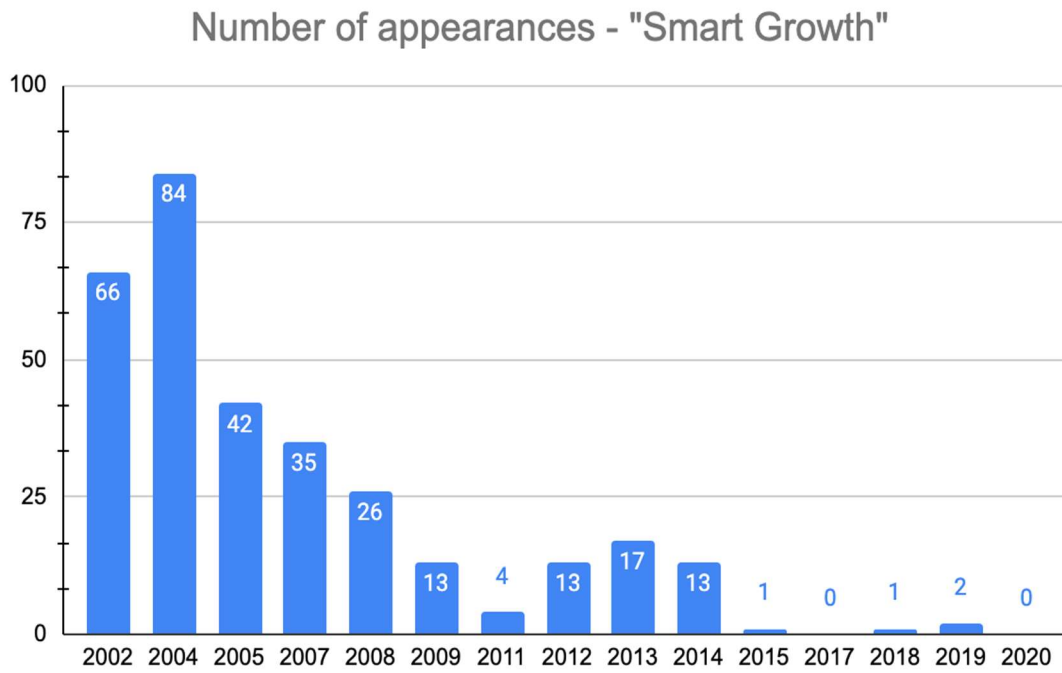


Figure 6
APA searches for "smart growth"

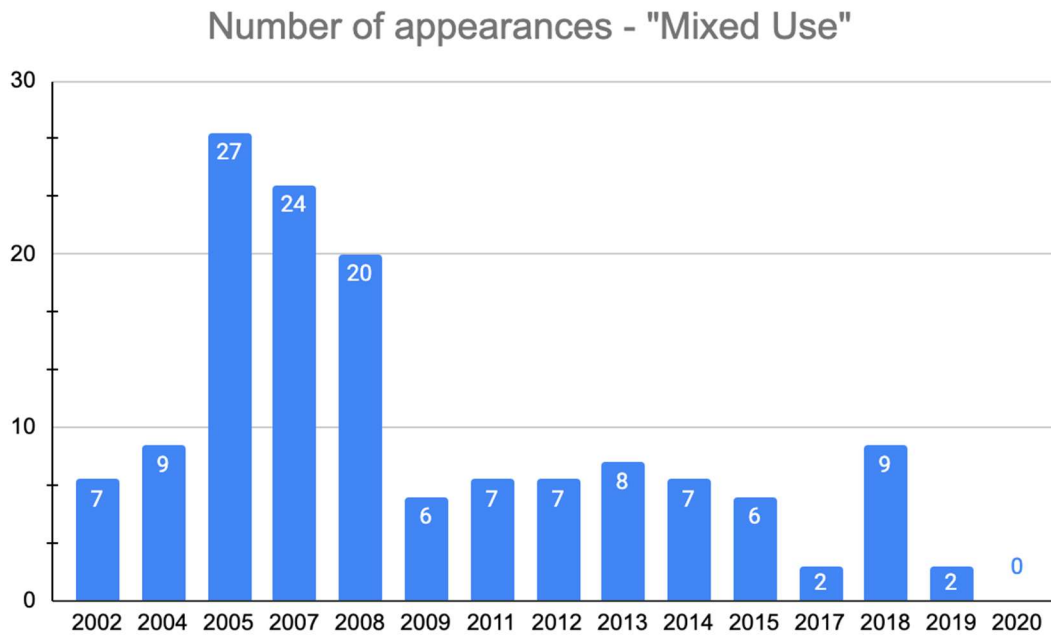


Figure 7
APA searches for "mixed use"

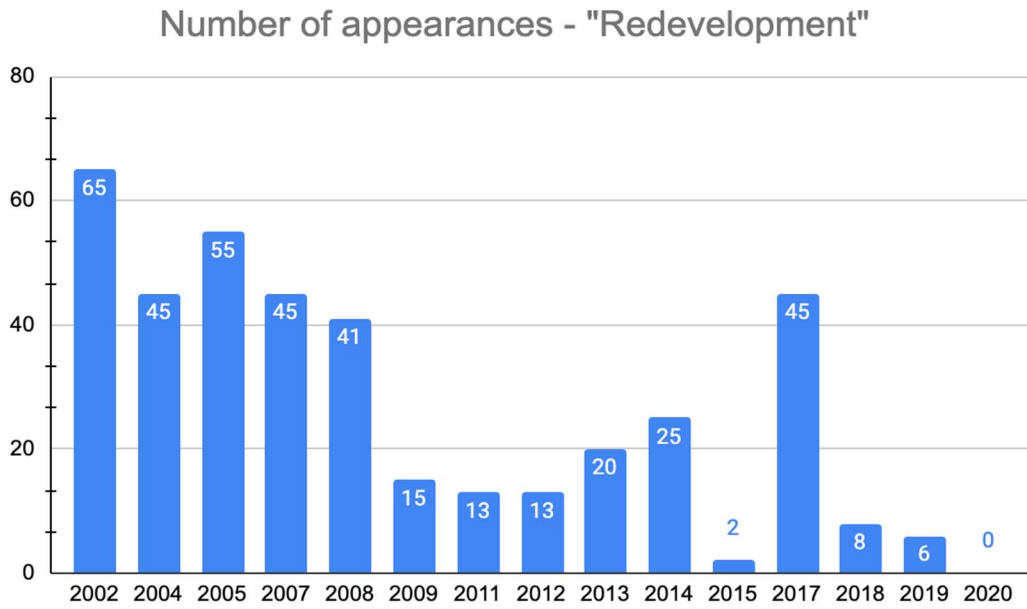


Figure 8
APA searches for "redevelopment"

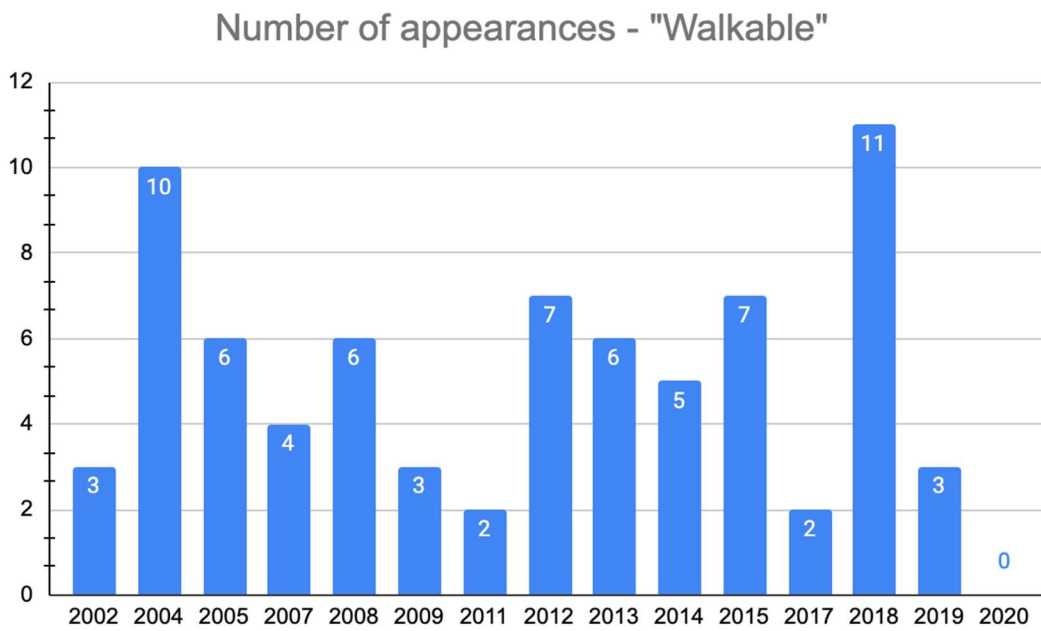


Figure 9
APA searches for "walkable"

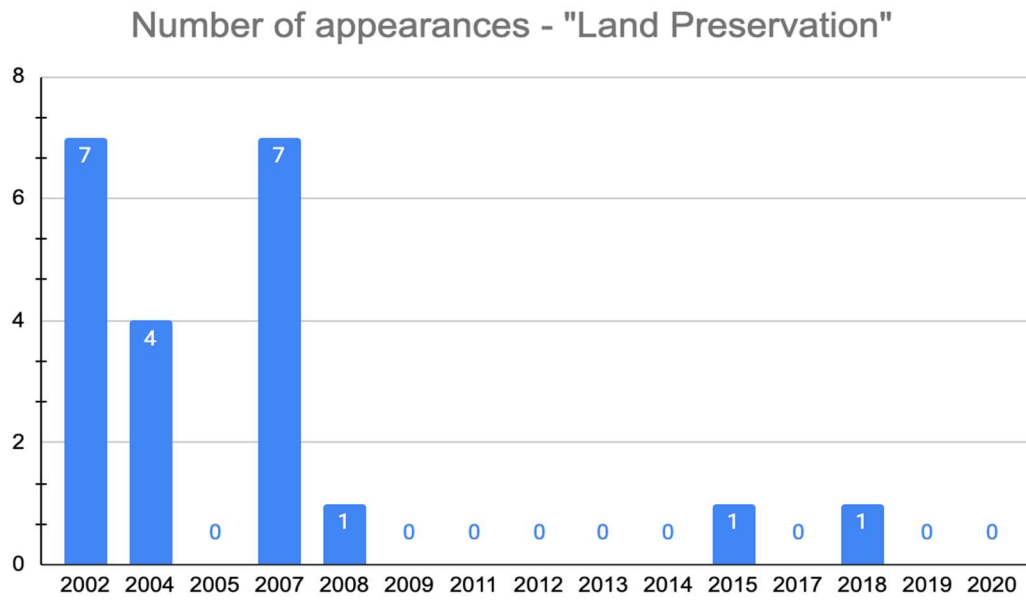


Figure 10
APA searches for "land preservation"

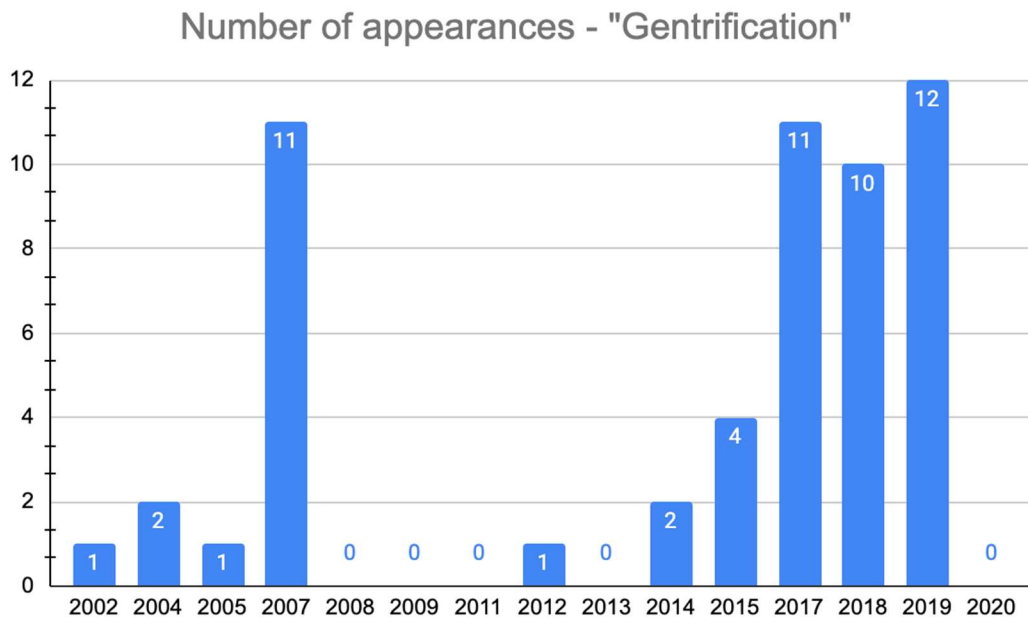


Figure 11
APA searches for "gentrification"

Major Metropolitan Newspapers

Our search for the appearance of smart growth and related terms in four newspapers: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Portland Oregonian* also produced interesting results. (See figures 12-17.) The term smart growth appeared most often in the *Washington Post* where it peaked in 2002 at about 260 times and fell steadily thereafter. The term appeared least often in the *Oregonian*. Terms that represent smart growth principles—such as redevelopment, walkability, and redevelopment generally appeared more frequently, in some cases substantially more, but had a more complex pattern of use: first rising until around 2010 and falling since. Only the appearance of the term, gentrification, rose more recently.

Number of articles mentioning "Smart Growth"

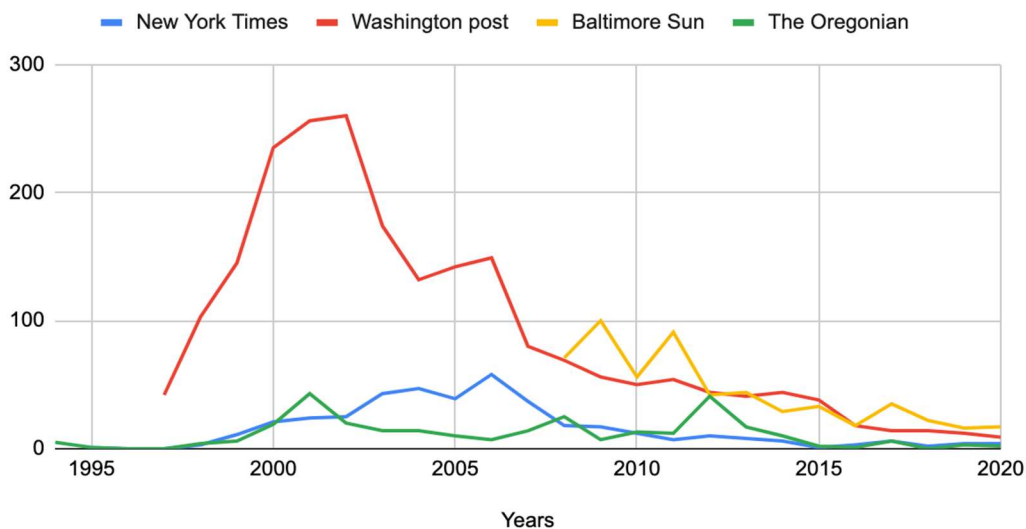


Figure 12
Newspaper searches for “smart growth”

Number of articles mentioning "Mixed Use"

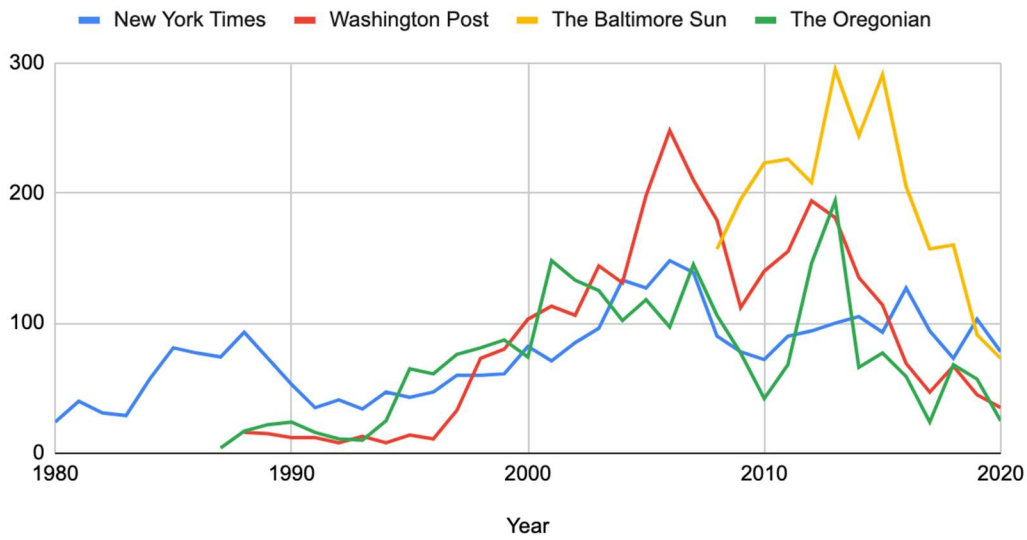


Figure 13
Newspaper searches for "mixed use"

Number of articles mentioning "Redevelopment"

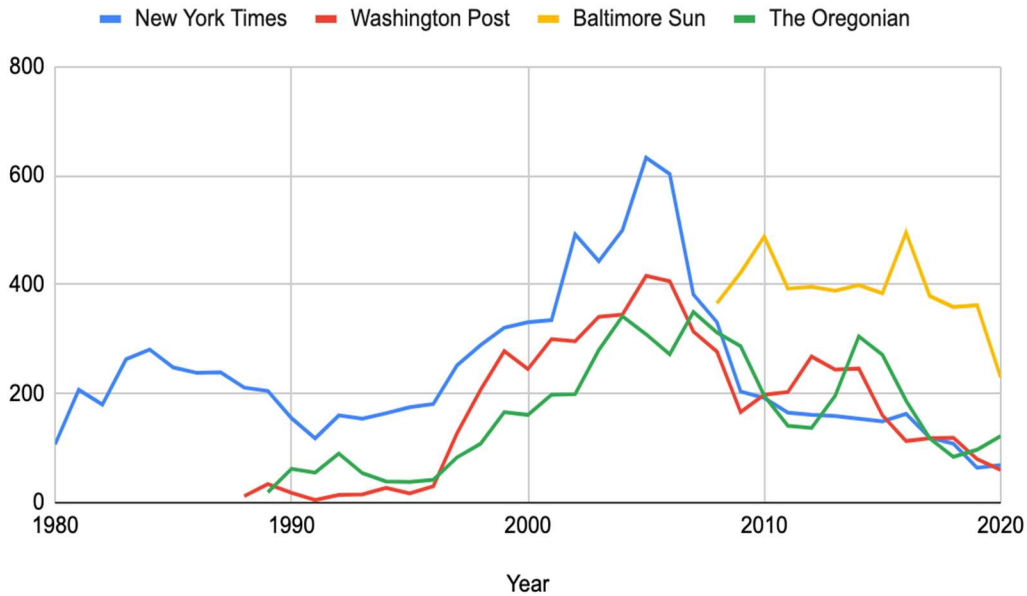


Figure 14
Newspaper searches for "redevelopment"

Number of articles mentioning "Land Preservation"

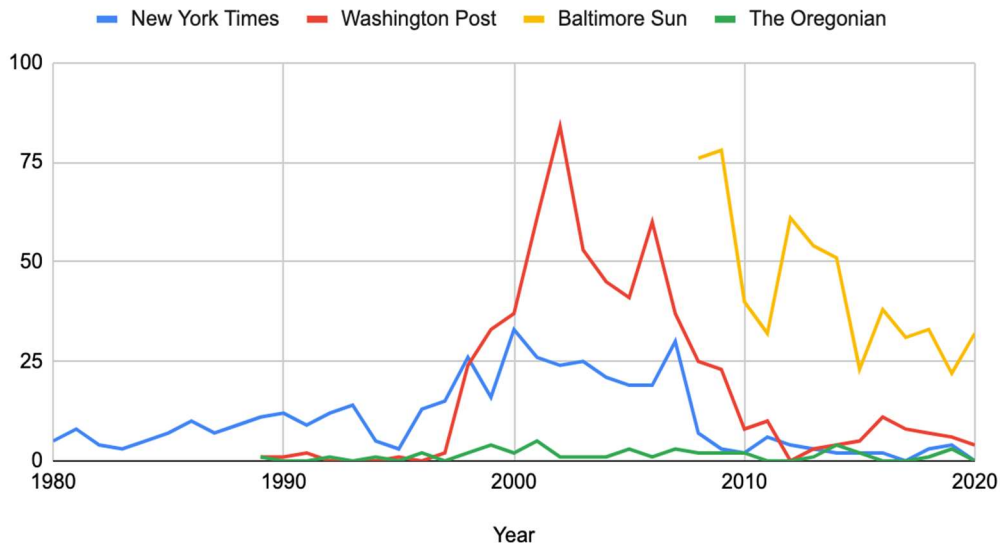


Figure 15
Newspaper searches for "land preservation"

Number of articles mentioning "Walkable"

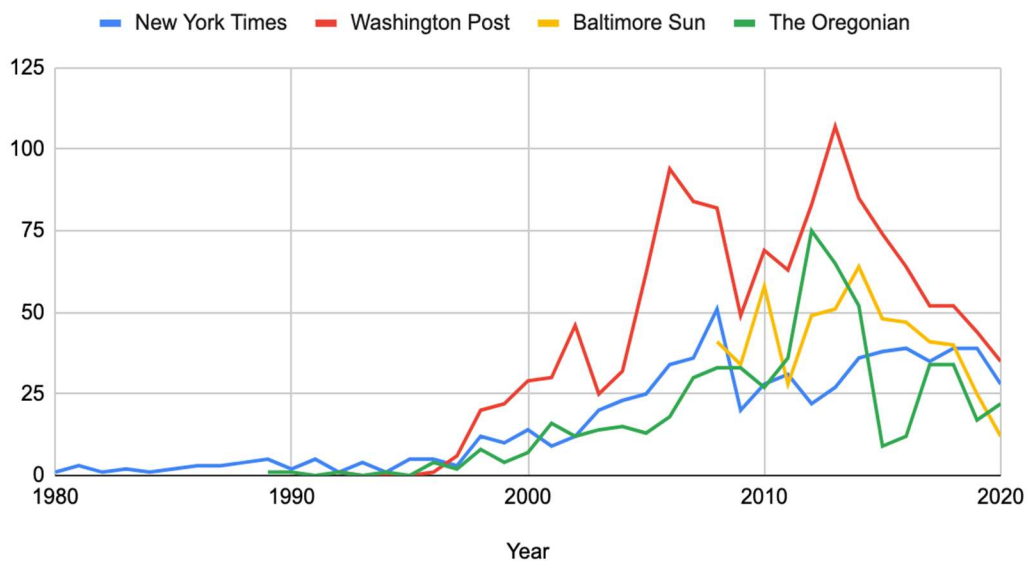


Figure 16
Newspaper searches for "walkable"

Number of articles mentioning "Gentrification"

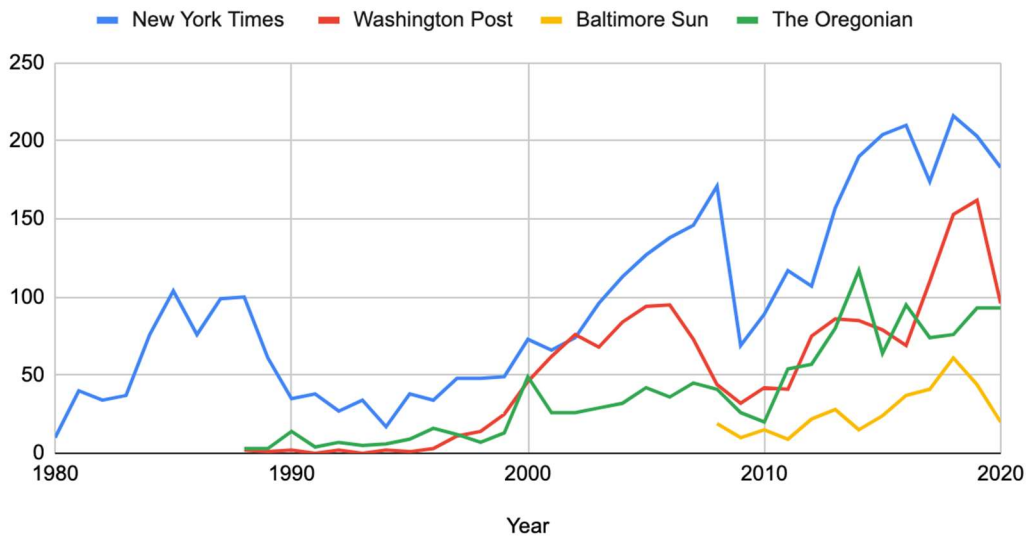


Figure 17
Newspaper searches for “gentrification”

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In sum, our analysis of the use of the term smart growth and related terms suggests that public and professional interest in information about smart growth peaked in the early to mid-1990s and has declined steadily over time. The pattern of interest in terms that reflect smart growth principles was more mixed. Interest in the terms land preservation, redevelopment, tended to fall, while the appearance of other terms, such as mixed use and walkable, rose in Google searches but not in APA conference programs.

The implications of these findings are not unambiguous, but they seem to suggest that popular and professional interest in the term smart growth has waned while interest in the terms that reflect principles of smart growth have varied over the last 20 years. In the case of Google searches by the general public, program session titles at national APA conferences, it could well be that the general public and professional planners have become so familiar with the term and the concepts it connotes, that there is no reason to seek further information. Smart growth remains a concept that guides their thinking and professional practice, but there is no need for a google search or attend a conference session to learn more. In the case of the popular press, it is more likely the case that the issues once addressed under the banner of smart growth are now described using other terms, such as urban resilience or sustainable development. This suggests the term is no longer the contemporary term of art but that the issues remain widely discussed and reported. It is also possible that no one cares about these issues anymore, though that seems far less likely.

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