

Opinion

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Dream house might be a big mistake

SEE THAT DECK out there — the one attached to the back of your house, or maybe it's your neighbor's house that majestically displays America's newest status symbol.

Maybe you've just admired it from afar — attached to the back of a big house being built in a new subdivision. That deck ought to make you think about the future. Not yours, but your children's, anyway. It's a symbol your children could come to regret.

While you may be a pioneer of the crabgrass frontier, your children and grandchildren will be the generations that must live with your decisions — good and bad.

THEY WILL be the ones who know the suburbs as older communities, struggling with all the problems with which aging suburbs cope — decay, congestion and outmoded buildings.

Suburban America's building of choice, the home, could be very outmoded in the future. In fact, it could be outmoded right now.

Kenneth Jackson recently penned a study of suburban America that should be read by those who care about the future of their community, or at least the future of their kids.

"The structures outlast the people who put them there," he notes, "and impose constraints on those who have to adapt later to their own use."

Already restrictions abound. In a large sense, the way we live is cutting us off from the rest of the world, when what we really need to do is stay more in touch.

While commerce has become international, we are building subdivisions with walls. While the future of cheap energy remains tentative at best, we strive to build our subdivisions farther and farther away from central commercial areas.



crackerbarrel debate

Steve Barnaby

AND WHILE neighbors must learn to work together to meet the needs of our aging suburbs, we have cut ourselves off from those very people.

Streets from one subdivision to another are blockaded. Subdivisions are built without sidewalks.

"There are few places as desolate and lonely as a suburban street on a hot afternoon," wrote Jackson.

And he's right.

We have retreated to our homes which, because of modern technology, have become feudal domains — isolated from the rest of the world, even our neighbors' world.

Before decks were called decks, they were known as porches. And they were built on the front of the house. Today the front of the house very well could be and often is the entrance to the garage — a frightening similarity to the drawbridge across the moat.

A porch was built to communicate. The deck is built to isolate. It is our window on just one thing — our own little world.

Sure it's fun having a deck attached to a 3,500-square-foot home regaled with whirlpool, sauna, central air and three-car garage.

But by living this way we have endangered our sense of community, the attribute that enables us to communicate with each other and the rest of the world — an essential to survival.

Justice? It's just negotiating tactics

REMEMBER JESSE PITTS? Now retired from Oakland University, he was one of the world's few known conservative sociologists. I always found him a tell-it-like-it-is kind of guy who used plain, blunt English where others used bureaucratic abstractions.

In the late '70s he taught a Courses by Newspaper program on crime through our news columns in which he accompanied nationally produced articles with his own pungent comments.

Pitts debunked the notion that ours is a system of trial by jury. It's a system of negotiation by lawyers, he said, because 95 percent of all cases are settled out of court.

WHAT BROUGHT Professor Pitts to mind was an article in the Dec. 1 Michigan Lawyers Weekly by H. Lee Hetherington, visiting professor at Catholic University of America Law School in Washington, D.C. It's solid negotiation technique.

Lawyers have four "levers" they can use in every negotiation, Hetherington wrote:

1. Uncertainty. The other party's fear of the unknown will make him want to settle, so "you should inject as much uncertainty as possible into any negotiation," he advised.

"For example, you can feign uncertainty in your ability to carry out an opponent's request for information: 'If I have to ask my client for more information, he might just say forget the whole deal.'"

"His cynical view is that the judicial system is 'the last resort for failed negotiations.' If clients have uncertainty, the most uncertain thing in the world is a deliberating jury. So uncertainty is a great tool in negotiating."

2. Timing. "Deadlines motivate people to take action. Successful negotia-



Tim Richard

tors consistently take advantage of existing deadlines — or create new deadlines. . . . Concessions once thought to be out of the question suddenly become workable alternatives."

3. Opportunity. Look for things of value to the opponent that are of little value to you, and offer them. Stress the value of the offered inducement.

4. Sanction. Simplest example is the threat: "If you don't, we'll . . . strike, sue, sell to someone else." You must select a sanction that will move the other party and communicate it."

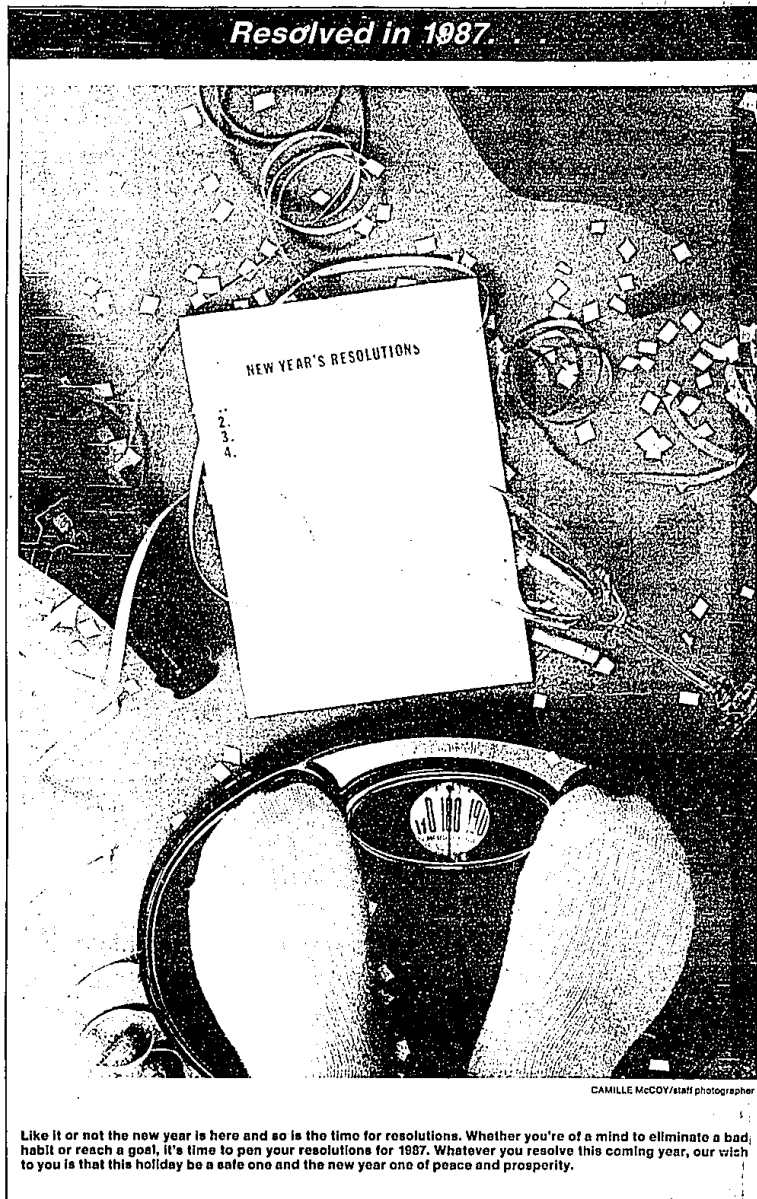
Communication can be an ultimatum or "news leaks, planted information or veiled references in correspondence."

I BRING UP this tender subject because the Michigan Legislature is still wrestling with the problem of tort reform — the lawsuit craze that is distorting our economy, draining our road funds and forcing cancellation of cities' liability policies.

Our legal system doesn't necessarily produce justice. Much of the result is a matter of loose rules and negotiation technique.

We pay for it — in our own insurance premiums, in the taxes we pay to road authorities and government, in the health insurance we work for to cover hospital costs.

Keep that jaundiced view in mind the next time a propagandist from the Michigan Trial Lawyers Association gives you the line, "Let the jury decide."



Like it or not the new year is here and so is the time for resolutions. Whether you're of a mind to eliminate a bad habit or reach a goal, it's time to pen your resolutions for 1987. Whatever you resolve this coming year, our wish to you is that this holiday be a safe one and the new year one of peace and prosperity.

CAMILLE MCCOY/staff photographer

Risks are everywhere

USED TO BE you could pretty much stay out of trouble if you watched your step, stayed out of the wrong side of town, kept your tongue in check, and minded your own business.

But more and more you read and hear about incidents where motorists are randomly stopped and robbed, occupied homes are broken into and their occupants terrorized, and shoppers are robbed at gunpoint.

It's gotten to the point where some people are getting defensive about the publicity.

Two public officials recently told me that they thought their community got a bad rap when it came to crime news. People, they said, got the impression that there was a lot of crime in their streets and shopping malls when, in fact, the percentage of criminal offenses was not out of line with neighboring towns.

"Your chances of being robbed are just as great in downtown Birmingham as in our city, but that's not the perception," they argued.

I agreed that was the perception, but I wasn't sure I bought the rest of their argument.

But then, in an eight-day period, there were two armed robberies in downtown Birmingham. In one case, the thief took a fur coat off a young woman's back.



Rich Perlberg

So their point may be well taken, but it still bothers me. As does the mall spokesperson quoted recently in the wake of a series of assaults on shoppers at Eastland Mall.

"Risks are everywhere today," she said. "I don't think they are greater or less (at shopping malls) than being in the center of a city."

SHE'S PROBABLY right, but does that mean we have to accept such risks as a part of everyday life?

Simple question. No simple answer.

I'll be the first to admit that I wince when I hear L.W.-and-order types get excited about capital punishment, harsher sentencing and less coddling of criminals. I think their arguments are essentially emotional, simplistic and shortsighted.

But I also tire of bleeding hearts who say social ills are the cause of all crime. There may be some truth in some of their arguments, but that neither legitimizes crime nor makes life any easier for victims.

I lose most patience with those who actively encourage crime. If cars are stolen right and left because they can be resold in whole or in parts, that's only because someone is willing to buy them.

If drugs are behind thefts and shootings, then how can drug abuse be called a victimless crime? And how can affluent, suburban cocaine users call their habit recreational drug use?

If the infiltration of drugs from other countries is a national epidemic, then why can banks, in violation of the law, deal in large cash transactions with hardly more than wrist-slappings when they are caught?

THIS IS aimless blathering, I realize. But I think we keep sticking our heads in the sand until somebody sticks us up. We move out of the city because it is dangerous, but crime eventually follows us. You can run, Joe Louis said, but you cannot hide.

There are, of course, no easy solutions. But one step in the right direction is realizing that we are all in the same community. We can't be secure in our home or our neighborhood and pretend that crime happens somewhere else.

Today's problems in a crime-ridden part of the city are tomorrow's worries in suburbia. But if we wait until tomorrow, as we have in the past, it will be a long time before the day when crime takes a holiday.