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Whose Urbanism?

Planner Alex Krieger places some cautionary sign-posts on the road to the New Urbanism

In September, the leaders of the Congress for the New Urbanism invited a panel of critics and academicians to a closed debate held in Seaside, Florida. Having captured the public's imagination, made allies in the press, and (nearly) won over such mainstream organizations as the Urban Land Institute and HUD, the founders (as they refer to each other) have turned their attention upon the design academy. It appears that the students and faculty of schools of architecture have been slow to adopt the logic-or inevitability, as supporters imply-of the New Urbanism. And so, led by revered historian Colin Rowe, a group of educators-some disbelievers and others cautiously sympathetic-embarked to Seaside to learn about and offer perspective on the New Urbanism movement. (A second, public debate will be held next March at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design.)

The founders are acutely aware of the reservations being raised about the New Urbanism. As in any gathering of people who believe that they have uncovered a truth and intend to get their audience to agree, a combination of hyperbole and insecurity surfaced at the debate. Considerable effort was used up front to blunt the expected critiques; that New Urbanism is, in application, a form of new suburbanism, that its primary appeal is through nostalgia, that it advances a rear-guard architectural aesthetic, and that there is nothing new' or even urban' about it. Such criticisms were broached throughout the weekend-long conference, as in this author's address to the assembled founders and educators, an edited version of which follows.

The New Urbanism movement is impressive, powerful, growing, and great, but perhaps not quite as great as you, its founders, claim it to be. Lighten up. Enough self-congratulatory testimonials. You are practically the establishment now. One of the few things still missing is some humility, or, barring that, a bit less hyperbole, and barring that, at least a sense of humor.

In reading the Charter, I find little with which to disagree. Indeed, I find little with which anyone could disagree. The self-defeating cycle of American urbanization-persistent disinvestment in older urban areas in combination with ever expanding rings of new development has long been condemned. Environmental degradation, wasteful consumption of resources, automobile dependency, economic and racial segregation, social alienation, redundancy, obsolescence, abandonment, homogeneity, and ugliness have been cited since the earliest consciousness of sprawl. Among your notable achievements is crafting a text that contains what most the planning community believe and making those beliefs appear proprietary to the movement. That is impressive!

Even more impressive-and more disturbing-is the taking possession of the entirety of the term "urbanism," risking diminishment of its meanings. My goal is not to argue against the New Urbanism, but to extract back some of the meanings of this glorious and complex condition called urbanism. I have learned from Andres Duany that the New Urbanism means "the best of everything," making it a bit awkward to position oneself in opposition to it.

You-and we all-are for investing in central cities. You-and we all-are for limiting placeless sprawl. You-and we all-are for minimizing racial and economic segregation. You-and we all-are for avoiding environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural land and wilderness. Does anyone not want to avoid the erosion of society's built heritage?

Every one of your broad aims is dead on. History, however, rarely evaluates a movement on the basis of its stated aims. The success of the New Urbanism will eventually be measured by comparing its achievements against its claims. And this is where you are setting the

rest of us up for disappointment. To date you have helped produced:

- More subdivisions (albeit innovative ones) than towns;
- An increased reliance on private management of communities, not innovative forms of elected local governance;
- Densities too low to support much mixed use, much less to support public transportation;
- Relatively homogenous demographic enclaves, not "rainbow coalitions;"
- A new, attractive, and desirable form of planned unit development, not yet substantial infill.
- Marketing strategies better suited to real estate entrepreneurs than public officials;
- A new wave of form-follows-function determinism (oddly modern for such ardent critics of Modernism), implying that community can be assured through design;
- A perpetuation of the myth of being able to create and sustain urban environments amidst pastoral settings;
- Carefully edited, rose-colored evocations of a golden age of small-town urbanism and innocence, from which a century ago many Americans fled not to the suburbs but to the city.

Yet such evocations provide a new (if unintended) legitimization of low-density, peripherally-located, home-dominated real estate development. You are also perpetuating a rather middle-class notion of "the good life," just at the moment when genuine alternatives may be advanceable. This is what leaves you open to the criticism that the appeal of your towns is a "yuppie flight" phenomenon. For some it has always been easier to retreat than to repair.

Then there is the matter of the vaguely Orwellian New Urbanism "New Speak'" in which subdivisions become towns. Low density is presented as an antidote to sprawl, owners of real estate morph into town fathers, homeowners associations supplant local governments, zoning is terrible but codes are good. And one encounters comments such as this one, from founder Andres Duany: "We New Urbanists are allergic to nostalgia." So maybe I'm wrong to suggest that there is a lack of humor within the movement. Nostalgia, as all of you very well understand, is one of the most potent tools of the New Urbanism; referred to by Duany as a "weapon" of the New Urbanism on other occasions.

You have found a means of distilling the image of the American Dream from the consequences of the dream. Some of you have practically blamed the loss of community on flat roofs and horizontally-proportioned windows. Some of the places you have designed may express certain repressed longings for town life, but, in fact, are a carefully edited, sanitized version that avoids the messier attributes of town life with which Americans seem disenchanted. Here is a rare moment when your large ambitions must be higher still. Can you rise beyond making new developments look like towns? Can you separate out the search for the "image of community" from the desire for community itself?

If all of this sounds harsh and unfair, reflect back on your own claims. By claiming too much (far more than is fathomable), you draw much of the criticism which then appears to you as hostile to what are noble aims.

On the other hand, we must be ever grateful to you for returning Americans to a public deliberation about the essentials of communal life, while exposing the soft underbelly of

suburban complacency. Most Americans experiencing suburban lifestyles, or anticipating one, seemed content and oblivious to any long term shortcomings of their settlement choices. It has been your gift to expose this complacency. You have been most persuasive in establishing that conventional suburban development can make it harder, not easier, to foster community—a cherished American goal and oft-given reason for decamping from the city in the first place, in search of community.

But here is the potential downside. Providing a better alternative to suburbia, armed with urban pretensions and the rhetoric of pride-of-place civics, may not alone lead to a reduction in sprawl. Sprawl does not happen, like a flash flood, all at once. It accumulates drop by drop. You must consider (noble intentions notwithstanding) whether your town-like drops of development are contributing to the gathering storm.

Nearly every generation since the landing of the Puritans has witnessed a hawking of a better way to subdivide land and make new, better, communities. This has been one of the root causes of sprawl, practically part of an American DNA. One of the obstacles to controlling sprawl is the American penchant to overbuild (uncritically) in response to an innovation in land-use and then, as quickly, to abandon the results for a still-better idea.

As horrible a problem as sprawl is, the most difficult challenge facing American urbanism may not be coming up with a better way to subdivide land, but to rescue, re-invigorate, reform, resettle, learn once again to love places already made. This nation has generally taken the easier path vis-à-vis urbanization. It has, since Colonial times (not only since the rise of the automobile), attempted to solve urban problems by starting over—a very unurban response. I worry that New Urbanists fall victim to this dubious American tradition. In your eagerness to overcome the many shortcomings of American urbanization you sell a better idea, and thus contribute to a different consequence-creating redundant settlements. Minimizing redundancy is the first step towards sustainability and good urbanism.

Some nut on a recent "Nightline" review of the New Urbanism argued that the movement must be the city's revenge on the suburb. Its intent, he said, was to make the suburb as congested, polluted, and crime-ridden as the city. My own worry is the opposite. I do not want the New Urbanism to be the suburbs' revenge upon the city—just at a point when American cities are trying to make one of their infrequent, halting, vulnerable comebacks.

At the close of the twentieth century, America is witnessing an urban revival. The centers of many cities, long maligned or ignored, are partially the focus of attention again. There is the evidence of increased economic investment, job growth, the expansion of cultural facilities, innovations in retailing, growth of urban tourism, the development of new sports, convention, and entertainment complexes, and some demand for housing—the last a harbinger, perhaps, of a modest inflow of population following decades of outward migration. A recent *Boston Globe* article actually referred to the "cachet" of a city zip code.

Public opinion is changing and the role of New Urbanism has been invaluable. There are, regularly, good stories about cities in the popular press. This is remarkable given several generations of the portrayal of the American city—and especially of the inner city—in terms of crisis, demise, pathology, blight, alienation, and ongoing disinvestment. Indeed, for most of this century our mature cities have been treated like a chronically ill or frail patient—at best in need of life support systems, at worst beyond hope, evoking a Dickensian city of perpetual despair. Sentiments—and national policy—seemed to lie not in the periodic efforts at renewal, but in support of Henry Ford's memorable old phrase: "We shall solve the problems of the city by leaving the city."

Despite this legacy, or perhaps because even deep-seated cultural attitudes are subject to reconsideration, there appear to be a broad set of economic, social, and cultural forces now, again, aligned on behalf urban life. These include: the exposing of the disadvantages of sprawl; the sheer boredom with suburbia expressed by the now-adult children of the baby boomers,

whose parents' aspirations lay in the suburb; the saturation of some suburban real estate markets and the uncovering of the untapped markets (and disposable income) among urban dwellers, including those in "disadvantaged" neighborhoods; the reappearance of expressed ethnicity (in some neighborhoods of L.A. there is ardent street life!); the changing nature of employment opportunities-in the areas of high technology, services and management, new media, financial markets, bio medical research, international trade, hospitality and entertainment-many of which are attracted to urban locations; a savvy new generation of mayors willing to exploit the shift of the political center from nation to state to the local level; the changing nature of household demographics and the acknowledgment of more than one type of family structure or dwelling preference across longer lives; a better-educated population seeking diversity and stimulation; the rise of environmental consciousness and an ethic of conservation; the search for "community" and "place" as a reaction to both suburban alienation and a need to retard a new kind of isolation caused by the ubiquity of electronic communication.

Now I know that the New Urbanism has been responsible for all of these enlightenments, but New Urbanists may still be failing to see the full potential of such a generational cultural shift. This is my two (urban) ships passing in the night nightmare: the popularity of a new urbanism impeding the rebounding of some old urbanism-old not in appearance, but in location.

Since the majority of Americans currently live out on the periphery, it is the city that lies outside of their daily experience and which seems interesting again. A century and more ago the lures of the industrial city filled the imaginations of rural populations, as still occurs in much of the developing world. While I would not stretch the analogy too far, some sub-or-exurbanites may now respond to the city in an analogous way; it feels exotic to them. They may not need to migrate or starve as their rural predecessors had to do, but they look to the city for amusement, education, entertainment; to seek propinquity; to find novelty, encounter culture, or reconnect with history; and, yes, to take advantage still of broader career or social networks and even housing choices.

There is a broad societal recalibration underway. America, it seems, and yes, one dares hope, may at the turn of this century be ready for a less singular model of the "good life," at least as that life is situated in settings advertised as desirable. Jump onto this larger bandwagon. But do not at this propitious moment constrict the possibilities of what constitutes urbanism.

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