



“Charter of the New Urbanism”

Congress for the New Urbanism (1993)

Editors’ Introduction



The sustainability principles espoused by the Brundtland Commission (p. 351) helped to give weight and authority to urban environmentalist organizations worldwide, none more so than an innovative planning and design movement called the New Urbanism. The Chicago-based Congress for a New Urbanism was officially established in 1993, but the immediate origin of the movement was a meeting at the Awahnee Hotel in Yosemite Valley, California, in 1991. There, an extraordinary collective of visionary architects and designers – among them, Peter Calthorpe, Andrés Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Michael Corbett, Stafanos Polyzoides, Daniel Solomon, and Elizabeth Moule – met with a number of California policy makers to promulgate the Awahnee Principles for future urban development along ecologically sound lines. Many of those Principles became elements of the Charter of the New Urbanism. The movement made swift gains throughout the 1990s – becoming a favored model of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development during the Clinton Administration – and New Urbanist projects were built throughout the United States and Canada. In 2003, an allied Council for European Urbanism was established in the UK, actively encouraged by HRH the Prince of Wales, and the New Urbanism spread worldwide with projects in France, Portugal, Sweden, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and China.

The heart of the Charter of the New Urbanism consists of twenty-seven principles – nine in each of three broad categories – preceded by a kind of preamble that establishes the visionary, almost utopian, goals of the movement. The preamble begins by asserting that all of the present-day urban ills – inner-city decay, suburban sprawl, the deterioration of agricultural and wilderness lands, even race- and class-based segregation – are parts of “one interrelated community-building challenge.” It goes on to call for the “restoration of existing urban centers” and the transformation of “sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts.” New Urbanism recognizes “that physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems,” but it insists that “a coherent and supportive physical framework” is a necessary, if not sufficient, precondition for urban progress and that such progress must be achieved “through citizen-based participatory planning and design.”

The twenty-seven principles of the Charter address contemporary urban planning issues at a much finer level of detail, beginning with an examination of cities and towns at the metropolitan scale. “The metropolitan region,” it states, is defined by natural topography and represents “a fundamental economic unit of the contemporary world.” These metropolitan-scale principles go on to call for urban growth boundaries that do not “blur or eradicate the edges of the metropolis,” intensive “infill development” within existing cities, region-wide revenue sharing, and a wide range of transportation options that “maximize access and mobility . . . while reducing dependence upon the automobile.” The next set of principles examines the needs of “the neighborhood, the district, and the corridor.” The Charter calls for neighborhoods that are “compact, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed-use” so that “many activities of daily living” can be within walking distance. In addition, neighborhoods should contain local shopping districts (not distant malls), parks, and community schools. Finally, another nine principles look at “the block, the street, and the building,” calling for an architecture that “transcends style,” that grows from “local climate, topography, history, and building practice,” and that creates environments characterized by safety, accessibility, and openness.

The New Urbanism is not without its critics. Some have dismissed it as a “New Suburbanism” that addresses the issues of the young middle-class – double-income, no kids families called DINKs – but that has no relevance for inner-city neighborhoods. Others feel that the “new traditionalism” tendencies of many New Urbanist developments feel artificial and too carefully, too strictly planned, and one critic claimed that the emphasis on openness and accessibility leads to “crime-friendly neighborhoods.” But for all this, the New Urbanism has proven to be a long-lived and ever-evolving movement. Unlike most of the twentieth-century planning movements, the New Urbanism is not tied to the ambitions and pretensions of a single individual. Rather like the Garden City movement that Ebenezer Howard pioneered but did not monopolize, the New Urbanism has attracted a large number of practitioners, and the movement has various wings and branches that continually question and inform the movement’s mainstream. For example, although the Charter of the New Urbanism calls for a reasonable mix of transit options, including the private automobile, one somewhat alarmist video documentary is titled *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream* (2004). Yet another video, *New Urban Cowboy: Toward a New Pedestrianism* (2008), appears to be a publicity vehicle for the producer’s campaign for the Florida governorship! For a more sober critique, see David Harvey, “The New Urbanism and the Communitarian Trap,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, 1 (1997), pp. 68–69.

The literature on the New Urbanism is as rich and varied as the movement itself. Peter Katz, *The New Urbanism: Towards an Architecture of Community* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), and Doug Kelbaugh, *Common Place: Toward Neighborhood and Regional Design* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997) provide overviews of designs by Calthorpe and other New Urbanists. Kenneth B. Hall and Gerald A. Porterfield, *Community by Design: New Urbanism for Suburbs and Small Communities* (New York: McGraw-Hill Professional, 2001), and E. Talen, *New Urbanism and American Planning: The Conflict of Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2005) offer detailed analyses of the New Urbanist movement. The 69-page *New Urbanism: Peter Calthorpe versus Lars Lerup: Michigan Debates on Urbanism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005) is a lively and scintillating exchange of views with an afterword by editor Robert Fishman. See also James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) and, *Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) for a popular account of Calthorpe and other New Urbanists’ work. Also of interest are John Dutton, *New American Urbanism: Re-forming the Suburban Metropolis* (Milan: Skira, 2001), Todd W. Bressi (ed.), *The Seaside Debates: A Critique of the New Urbanism* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002), and Gabriele Tagliaventi, *New Urbanism* (Florence: Alinea, 2002). An excellent place to begin any research on the New Urbanist movement is Michael Leccese and Kathleen McCormick (eds) *Charter of the New Urbanism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999).



THE CONGRESS FOR THE NEW URBANISM views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society’s built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge.

WE STAND for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhood and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy.

WE RECOGNIZE that physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability,

and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.

WE ADVOCATE the restructuring of public policy and development practices to support the following principles: neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice.

WE REPRESENT a broad-based citizenry, composed of public and private sector leaders, community activists, and multidisciplinary professionals. We are committed to reestablishing the relationship between

the art of building and the making of community, through citizen-based participatory planning and design.

WE DEDICATE ourselves to reclaiming our homes, blocks, streets, parks, neighborhoods, districts, towns, cities, regions, and environment.

We assert the following principles to guide public policy, development practice, urban planning, and design:

The region: Metropolis, city, and town

1. Metropolitan regions are finite places with geographic boundaries derived from topography, watersheds, coastlines, farmlands, regional parks, and river basins. The metropolis is made of multiple centers that are cities, towns, and villages, each with its own identifiable center and edges.
2. The metropolitan region is a fundamental economic unit of the contemporary world. Governmental cooperation, public policy, physical planning, and economic strategies must reflect this new reality.
3. The metropolis has a necessary and fragile relationship to its agrarian hinterland and natural landscapes. The relationship is environmental, economic, and cultural. Farmland and nature are as important to the metropolis as the garden is to the house.
4. Development patterns should not blur or eradicate the edges of the metropolis. Infill development within existing urban areas conserves environmental resources, economic investment, and social fabric, while reclaiming marginal and abandoned areas. Metropolitan regions should develop strategies to encourage such infill development over peripheral expansion.
5. Where appropriate, new development contiguous to urban boundaries should be organized as neighborhoods and districts, and be integrated with the existing urban pattern. Noncontiguous development should be organized as towns and villages with their own urban edges, and planned for a jobs/housing balance, not as bedroom suburbs.
6. The development and redevelopment of towns and cities should respect historical patterns, precedents and boundaries.
7. Cities and towns should bring into proximity a broad spectrum of public and private uses to support a regional economy that benefits people of all incomes. Affordable housing should be distributed

throughout the region to match job opportunities and to avoid concentrations of poverty.

8. The physical organization of the region should be supported by a framework of transportation alternatives. Transit, pedestrian, and bicycle systems should maximize access and mobility throughout the region while reducing dependence upon the automobile.
9. Revenues and resources can be shared more cooperatively among the municipalities and centers within regions to avoid destructive competition for tax base and to promote rational coordination of transportation, recreation, public services, housing, and community institutions.

The neighborhood, the district, and the corridor

1. The neighborhood, the district, and the corridor are the essential elements of development and redevelopment in the metropolis. They form identifiable areas that encourage citizens to take responsibility for their maintenance and evolution.
2. Neighborhoods should be compact, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed-use. Districts generally emphasize a special single use, and should follow the principles of neighborhood design when possible. Corridors are regional connectors of neighborhoods and districts; they range from boulevards and rail lines to rivers and parkways.
3. Many activities of daily living should occur within walking distance, allowing independence to those who do not drive, especially the elderly and the young. Interconnected networks of streets should be designed to encourage walking, reduce the number and length of automobile trips, and conserve energy.
4. Within neighborhoods, a broad range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.
5. Transit corridors, when properly planned and coordinated, can help organize metropolitan structure and revitalize urban centers. In contrast, highway corridors should not displace investment from existing centers.
6. Appropriate building densities and land uses should be within walking distance of transit stops, permitting public transit to become a viable alternative to the automobile.

7. Concentrations of civic, institutional, and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes. Schools should be sized and located to enable children to walk or bicycle to them.
8. The economic health and harmonious evolution of neighborhoods, districts, and corridors can be improved through graphic urban design codes that serve as predictable guides for change.
9. A range of parks, from tot-lots and village greens to ball fields and community gardens, should be distributed within neighborhoods. Conservation areas and open lands should be used to define and connect different neighborhoods and districts.
4. In the contemporary metropolis, development must adequately accommodate automobiles. It should do so in ways that respect the pedestrian and the form of public space.
5. Streets and squares should be safe, comfortable, and interesting to the pedestrian. Properly configured, they encourage walking and enable neighbors to know each other and protect their communities.
6. Architecture and landscape design should grow from local climate, topography, history, and building practice.
7. Civic buildings and public gathering places require important sites to reinforce community identity and the culture of democracy. They deserve distinctive form, because their role is different from that of other buildings and places that constitute the fabric of the city.

The block, the street, and the building

1. A primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use.
2. Individual architectural projects should be seamlessly linked to their surroundings. This issue transcends style.
3. The revitalization of urban places depends on safety and security. The design of streets and buildings should reinforce safe environments, but not at the expense of accessibility and openness.
8. All buildings should provide their inhabitants with a clear sense of location, weather and time. Natural methods of heating and cooling can be more resource-efficient than mechanical systems.
9. Preservation and renewal of historic buildings, districts, and landscapes affirm the continuity and evolution of urban society.