

The New Urbanism: The Dangers so Far

The "New Urbanism" is probably the most widely-discussed innovation in planning in the United States today, and its influence is spreading in many parts of the world, from Brazil to Turkey, with impacts from Beijing to South Africa. A Congress for a New Urbanism has been founded to promulgate its precepts, and its advocates often seem like missionaries for a new gospel. Over 200 projects linked to its approach have been completed or are under way in the United States, and many more are on the drawing boards. [1] Seaside, Florida, is probably its best-known example. National home builders associations, mayors, and most recently the Department of Housing and Urban Development itself, have bought into or at least are formally espousing the ideas of the New Urbanism. But it raises a number of serious questions that call out for exploration and evaluation. Rather than trying to present a balanced account and evaluation here, let me rather simply list the problems that I see involved with the approach, leaving it to advocates and further experience to round out the picture and help arrive at a conclusion.

In the first place, what is "the New Urbanism?" Sometimes known as "neo-traditional" or simply "traditional neighborhood development," it is in essence not something that is "new" (nor, I will argue below, is it "urban") but rather a systematic assembly of a variety of planning and architectural tools that have been known and used for many years. They include an emphasis on pedestrian friendly neighborhoods with smaller single-family lots than the conventional large lots of many suburbs, giving residential densities of tree-lined streets and houses with front porches, central location of key community facilities such as schools and churches to make a "real town center," all geared to recreating, through physical means, a "traditional sense of community" for the residents. Separately, each of these design and planning features have been in use for a



"Tradition" and "Community" at Lakelands Gaithersburg, MD (Source: Lakelands)

long time. What is new and unique about the new urbanism is its packaging of these tools in a single ideologically-undergirded whole, [2] and the almost evangelical zeal with which that ideology is promoted, beginning with the formal creation of a Congress for the New Urbanism in 1993 and their adoption of a formal Charter in 1996. [3]

And that ideology raises the first serious question about the New Urbanism. For it purports to harken back to a form of "community" that in fact very rarely existed in the past: the small-town America of nostalgic recollection (and of much of Disney World), the ideal of middle America promulgated in the promotions for single family homeownership, the democracy of town meetings in colonial New England, the stable, family-oriented, homogeneous community of a rural country. [4] It is false historically; it evokes a past that never existed in the form in which the New Urbanism pictures it, and certainly not one that existed in an urban setting. It is more the image of community, than community, that is recaptured. [5] The New Urbanist developments built thus far mirror the small town image, and explicitly and extensively try to build historical continuity into new developments to buttress the image, even when the reality hardly justifies it:

"Tree lined streets usher you into Avalon Park. Here residents can step back in time to embrace the traditions of small town America coupled with the conveniences of modern technology and planning.

Lakelands is nothing less than the celebrated revitalization of the American town [...] Endangered by suburban sprawl and 'cul-de-sac' subdivision, the genuine American neighborhood which everyone fondly recalls and long for has made a remarkable resurgence at Lakelands.

They had It Right The First Time: Thoughts on Recovering the American Dream" [6].

Further, that sentimental, idealized image of the past of the small town contains a strongly anti-democratic, certainly anti-urban, content. For it is an image of a homogeneous small town: homogeneous by race, by income, by family composition. Here was none of the diversity associated with urban life, no mix of races, no very poor, no very rich, few singles, none with discordant sexual preferences. At the extreme, witches were burnt at the stake, dissenters expelled from the community.

The fully completed New Urbanist developments are in fact homogeneous, and at a fairly high income level. Where an attempt is made to include some housing affordable to lower income families, Duany and Plater-Zyberk, gurus of the New Urbanism, suggest the 10% is the "right ratio for achieving a mix without diminishing the value of surrounding properties." [7]

Putting this all together, we hardly get a picture of New Urbanism; it is rather, as Vincent Scully has said, a new suburbanism. These are separated and enclosed communities, not in central cities

but well outside them, having none of the dirt and grime, the poverty and the unemployment, the mix on the streets or in the public schools, the congestion and the culture, the disorder and the surprises of the city. These are suburbs, well planned indeed, down to small details, generally with restrictions on changes from that plan, geared to be stable, solid, predictable, excluding surprises, escaping change. [8] The rhetoric of the new urbanism condemns "the suburb," but what it offers instead is a small-town version of the suburb, with walking perhaps facilitated over the inevitable auto orientation of the traditional suburb, but hardly making the suburb urban in any conventional sense of the word.

Excluding not only surprises but also predictable events, predictable segments of the community. Those New Urbanist developments built in the United States are overwhelmingly white; poor blacks certainly do not find their way in, nor would they be welcome. In fact, one of the main reasons people move to such suburbs is precisely to escape from the proximity of poor blacks. In the United States, race is a major determinant of residential location, everywhere. Here, it operates to protect a white community from contact with blacks.

The effect of all this on the central city thus reveals perhaps the most serious negative aspect of the New Urbanism. For it in fact supports segregation, and with it flight from the central city, the whole donut pattern of black center, white ring. The evidence is compelling that suburbanization is as much escape from the central city, at least in the United States invariably coupled with escape from race and poor people; by making that escape easier, the New Urbanism increases the concentration of poor and minorities in the center and their exclusion in the suburbs, the sprawl over the country-side with its environmental as well as social harms. The proponents of the New Urbanism by and large may not desire this as a result, in fact condemn it, but it is the logical outcome of what they do. As Andres Duany, one of the founders, says, "byaking suburbs with many of the attri-

butes of towns, we are making it palatable for some people who abhor the idea of living in suburbs to live out on the periphery." [9]

Some of those most active in the Congress for the New Urbanism have been involved in some work that they believe gives the lie to the impression that the New Urbanism is anti-central city. Specifically, new urbanist ideas have been adopted in several renovations of public housing projects, most notably at Cabrini Green in Chicago. [10] What that has meant is introducing low-rise units in the midst of high-rise housing estates, demolishing some of the high-rises, and creating new landscaping and circulation patterns. But such measures really do not address the underlying problems of public housing, or more generally the housing of low-income households; they rather aggravate them, for in most cases the move to low density housing at the expense of higher density means a net reduction in the number of units available to those of low income. The intentions are good, but key issues: occupancy rules, costs per unit, accessibility to jobs, the location of services, are submerged in the attractive design presentations.

The relationship to sprawl similarly contradicts one of the stated goals of the New Urbanism. It is a paradox, that by densifying the suburbs, as the New Urbanism does, it reduces sprawl at the edges of the suburb, but by making suburbs more attractive, it increases the growth of suburbs at the edges of the central city or beyond. Thus it decreases sprawl at one scale, but increases it at another.

Finally, returning to the rhetoric of the New Urbanism, there is the old problem of environmental determinism: "that the shaping of spatial order can be the foundation for a new moral and aesthetic order." [11] Spokespersons for the Congress for the New Urbanism are sophisticated and articulate, and explicitly disavow the belief that shaping the built environment by itself will bring about community, but their less polished pronouncements suggest otherwise:

"Simply put, we wish to improve the world with design, plain old good design, that is. We believe that the phy-



Building an image of small-town America at Northwest Landing, DuPont, WA, Designed by Peter Calthorpe

sical structure of our environment can be managed and that controlling it is the key to solving numerous problems confronting government today – traffic congestion, pollution, financial depletion, social isolation, and, yes, even crime. We believe that design can solve a host of problems and that the design of the physical environment does influence behavior." [12]

In practice, New Urbanist projects all have the creation of community through architecture and design as one of their lead themes in advertising and promotion.

Despite the often progressive rhetoric, then, what the New Urbanism has in fact produced thus far is a series of insulated, homogeneously middle and upper middle class communities, exclusionary in practice and gated in concept if not in fact walled, appealing to a nostalgia for a past never experienced, reflecting a fear of the urban rather than a new urbanism. It is not, thus far, an achievement to be proud of.

Notes

- [1] Steuteville, Robert. 1998. "Year of Growth for New Urbanism," *New Urban News*, September/October. I owe the reference, as well as several others below, and stimulating discussion, to Stephen King, and his Master's Thesis at Columbia University, "The Uses of History and Memory in the New Urbanism", 1999.
- [2] That whole is reflected in the formulation of a model Traditional Neighborhood Development ordinance; see *Architectural Graphic Standards*, 9th edition, New York: J. Wiley and sons, 1996, at 79–80 and 91–92.
- [3] "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 are committed to reestablishing a relationship between the art of building and the making of community, through citizen-based participatory planning and design." Charter of the New Urbanism, Congress for the New Urbanism, ratified May 1996.
- [4] Stephen King quotes some typical advertisements for neo-traditional developments: "Many families long for a return to a simple, healthier way of life, where family joys are everyday events and the friendship of neighbors is comforting and essential. Hidden Springs, where your family can take root and thrive, offers the experiences and places that are the foundations for a small-town way of living."
- [5] The phrase again is Vincent Scully's, in "The Architecture of Community," in Katz, 1994. *The New Urbanism*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- [6] All three quoted by Stephen King. Avalon Park is near Orlando, Florida, home of Disney World; Lakelands is in Gaithersburg, Maryland. The last quotation is from a description of Newport in South Carolina.
- [7] Duany, Andres, and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. 1991. "The second coming of the American small town." *Plan Canada*, 33, p. 9; quoted in Audirac, p. 64.
- [8] See Philip Langdon. 1994. *A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb*.
- [9] Andres Duany. 1997. "Urban or Suburban?" *Harvard Design Magazine*, Winter/Spring, p. 58.
- [10] See the series of articles in *Architectural Record* by Blair Kamin, 1997.
- [11] David Harvey, 1997. "The New Urbanism and the Communitarian Trap," paper prepared for Conference on Exploring (New) Urbanism, Harvard Design School, March.
- [12] Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. 1993. "Five Qualities for Good Design," *ANY*, No. 1, July/August, p. 12.