

# The Urban Imaginary and American Infill: Intercultural Place-Making<sup>1</sup>

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This essay focuses on efforts to regenerate and reinvigorate dead and dying spaces in the American urban fabric. It focuses on my home city of Denver, Colorado. Denver is an excellent city to study because it has a well-deserved reputation for pioneering New Urbanist approaches to regenerating urban and suburban spaces. New Urbanism is, for many scholars and casual observers, the dominant discourse for planning urban regeneration in the United States<sup>2</sup>. This essay looks at some examples of New Urbanist “infill” projects in Denver’s urban core and suburban edge with an eye toward identifying what is missing from the American urban design discourse. These critical eyes are, in fact, those of University of Denver and international exchange students who participated in the Atlantis Project by taking my required course “Culture and The City”<sup>3</sup>. The short answer these students provide to the question “What is missing in Denver’s regeneration planning?” is *intercultural sensibility*. Cultivating such sensibility should be a major planning goal as we move forward.

<sup>1</sup> I am gratified to have contributed to the conference and volume honoring Giovanna Franci’s vision and energy in helping create the *Laboratorio di ricerca sulle città* at the University of Bologna. Giovanna was certainly a driving force behind the Atlantis Project (<http://portfolio.du.edu/atlant>), a joint investigation of city life linking the University of Bologna, University of Nottingham, Portland State University and the University of Denver. Sponsored by the European Union and US Department of Education, the Atlantis Project supported curriculum development and student and faculty exchanges on the topic of “Global Citizens/Citizenship: Social and Natural Transformations of Urban Areas in Europe and the United States”. This project, in turn, stimulated my interest in *intercultural* place-making. And that has opened up a whole new world of late-career teaching and writing activity.

<sup>2</sup> Congress for the New Urbanism, *Charter of the New Urbanism*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> <http://portfolio.du.edu/200970ANTH35003968>.

## URBAN IMAGINARY AND THE INTERCULTURAL CITY

I use the term “urban imaginary” in Edward Soja’s sense: “The urban imaginary [...] refers to our mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces, and communities in which we live”<sup>4</sup>. The ideas about intercultural place-making discussed here have also been heavily influenced by the work of Phil Wood and Charles Landry<sup>5</sup>, and the Council of Europe’s Intercultural Cities project<sup>6</sup>. The intercultural city:

- a) Welcomes diversity (ethnic, linguistic, religious).
- b) Views diversity as an opportunity, not a problem.
- c) Adapts its services, institutions and governance structures to the needs of diverse populations.
- d) Is proactive in taking actions and creating policies that encourage social mixing, interaction, and investment.

As defined by Wood and Landry the Intercultural City is akin to Leonie Sandercock’s notion of Cosmopolis: “a city in which there is genuine acceptance of, connection with, and respect for the cultural Other, and the possibility of working together on matters of common destiny, the possibility of a togetherness in difference”<sup>7</sup>. The Intercultural Cities project is especially interested in the relationship between culture and built environment, especially public space. For this project:

Public spaces and facilities are important for several reasons. They are places which most citizens are obliged to use from time to time, therefore creating the possibility for chance encounters between strangers. They may also reinforce cross-cultural solidarity, for example in cases of aroused public interest around the proposed development or closure of a facility. Well-managed, animated spaces can become beacons of the

<sup>4</sup> Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000, p. 324.

<sup>5</sup> Phil Wood and Charles Landry, *The Intercultural City*, London: Earthscan, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> *Intercultural Cities: Towards a Model for Intercultural Integration*, ed. Phil Wood, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Leonie Sandercock, *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London: Continuum, 2003, p. 2.

city's intercultural intentions. Conversely, badly-managed spaces can become places of suspicion and fear of the stranger<sup>8</sup>.

The following Questions and Actions regarding the relationship between culture and built space emerge:

#### Questions:

- Do the city's main public spaces and institutions reflect its diversity or are they monocultural?
- How do different groups behave in the city's public places: do they seek or avoid interaction? Is the atmosphere positive, indifferent, or tense?
- What is the status of the public realm in the city? Is it protected, safe and well maintained, is it becoming privatized, is it deteriorating or unsafe?
- Are the city planning and built environment professionals trained in intercultural competence?
- Is social interaction considered a priority in planning guidance for new public spaces?

#### Actions:

- Identify a number of key public spaces (formal and informal) and invest in discrete redesign, animation and maintenance to raise levels of usage and interaction by all ethnic groups;
- Develop a better understanding of how different groups use space and incorporate that into planning and design guidelines.
- Ensure planners, architects, construction managers and similar professions within the city council receive good training in cultural competence.

I have brought these various intellectual influences together in my own weblog project called *Intercultural Urbanism*<sup>9</sup>. The blog explores the territory where culture, public policy, urban design, and built environment intersect. It is informed by an interdisciplinary and international perspective that integrates anthropology with archaeology, history, geography, sociology, ecology, evolutionary science, art, architecture, literature, communication, business, and other fields.

<sup>8</sup> *Intercultural Cities: Towards a Model for Intercultural Integration*, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.interculturalurbanism.com>.

Developing intercultural urbanism will be increasingly important for American cities in the years ahead. All demographic projections predict that the United States will be a “majority minority” country by 2040, with 54% of the population comprised of Hispanic, African-American, Asian, and American Indian ethnicities. The increasing ethnic diversity of American society will be especially evident in the country’s urban centers.

### **PRACTICING NEW URBANISM IN DENVER: THREE REGENERATION SCHEMES**

As noted above, Denver is nationally known for implementing New Urbanist approaches to imagining, and regenerating, the city. New Urbanism advocates 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 pedestrian and public transit as well as cars, that is, dedicated to “smart growth”;
- 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<sup>10</sup>.

There are several important critiques of New Urbanism<sup>11</sup>. Some of these suggest that New Urbanism is not so different from the organically evolved “old urbanism” that characterizes many European city centers. Latino scholars suggest, with some justification, that New Urbanism simply re-packages what David Diaz has called “Barrio Urbanism”<sup>12</sup>. For these and other urban scholars of color, however, New Urbanism produces white gentrification and homogenization rather than social and ethnic mixing.

Three regeneration schemes in Denver illustrate both the first principles and social outcomes of New Urbanism. *Belmar*<sup>13</sup> is a New Urbanist town center that sits on the former site of a large indoor mall in suburban Lakewood that was called Villa Italia. At its opening Villa Italia was the largest subur-

<sup>10</sup> *Charter of the New Urbanism*, <http://www.cnu.org/charter>.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Kristen Day, “New Urbanism and the Challenges of Designing for Diversity”, *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, XXIII/1 (2003), pp. 83-95.

<sup>12</sup> David Diaz, *Barrio Urbanism: Chicanos, Planning, and American Cities*, New York: Routledge, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.belmarcolorado.com/>



1. Belmar Plaza<sup>14</sup>.

ban mall west of Chicago. In the 1990s business faltered and the mall fell into decay and disrepair. It was demolished in 2001 and replaced with a mixed-use (office, retail, residential), walkable town center anchored to a public plaza (fig. 1).

Belmar is celebrated as one of the most complete integrations of retail, employment, residential and civic/cultural uses in the country. Contemporary in design, Belmar incorporates a variety of green building and sustainable design elements. It has been comprehensively analyzed by Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson<sup>15</sup> who applaud the development for its combination of good construction, great connectivity, and diversity in building styles. These help create, in their view, a successful “sense of place.”

*Highlands’ Garden Village* (HGV)<sup>16</sup> is a mixed-use, public transit-oriented, “green” New Urbanist community built in 1999 on the former site of Elitch Gardens, Denver’s first Amusement Park. The community was master-plan-

<sup>14</sup> All photos taken by Dean Saitta.

<sup>15</sup> Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.highlandsgardenvillage.net/>





2. Highlands' Garden Village center, showing housing and the 1891 Theatre.

ned by Peter Calthorpe, one of the founders of the Congress for the New Urbanism<sup>17</sup>. HGV is the most compact and walkable of the three regeneration schemes discussed here. It is also the most exemplary in its use of the neo-traditional or “pitched roof and front porch” aesthetic that has proven very appealing to a broad swath of the American population. HGV incorporates interior curved streets with alley parking. It contains single family homes, townhouses, carriage houses, live-work lofts, and rental apartments. It has a co-housing piece – meaning multiple families living in town homes that share amenities such as yards, gardens, workshop areas, parking, and a club house – and also a senior housing piece. Perhaps due to the presence of senior housing, many of HGV’s businesses are health-related (doctors, dentists, etc.). HGV honors the site’s historic past by incorporating two structures from the old amusement park, the 1926 Carousel Pavilion and the 1891 Theatre. The former serves as a venue for various community events such as concerts and farmers’ markets, while the latter is intended to become a performing arts center should funding become available (fig. 2).

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.cnu.org/>



3. Stapleton's Crescent Flats housing and public green.

Finally, *Stapleton*<sup>18</sup> is a mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, green community built on the site of Denver's former international airport. Construction started in 2001 and continues today. Residences include single-family houses, row houses, condominiums, and rental apartments. Most notably, one third of the Stapleton site is dedicated to public parks and open space. Stapleton also displays a touch of what Spiro Kostof calls "The Grand Manner"<sup>19</sup>: a set of baroque planning principles that emphasize geometric order and formal vistas. This is exemplified by the Crescent Flats housing complex that flanks a retail street and opens onto a public green (fig. 3).

## EVALUATING DENVER'S NEW URBANISM

In fall 2011 my "Culture and The City" class – which included Atlantis exchange students from England and Italy as well as students from the Czech Republic and Liberia – was assigned the task of comparing and contrasting Belmar, HGV, and Stapleton. The guiding question was whether these regeneration projects achieve their aims and contribute to intercultural place-making. Background reading assignments included *The Charter of the New Urbanism*, an excerpt from Phil Wood and Charles Landry's *The Intercultural City*, Jeb Brugman's chapter on "Building Local Culture: Reclaiming the Streets

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.stapletondenver.com/>

<sup>19</sup> Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped*, London: Bullfinch, 1991.

of Gràcia District, Barcelona" in his book *Welcome to the Urban Revolution*<sup>20</sup>, and Mike Davis's chapter on "Fortress LA" in his *City of Quartz*<sup>21</sup>. I also invited students to engage a classic reading by Jane Jacobs<sup>22</sup>. I steered them to some concepts in this body of work that struck me as especially relevant. Foremost among these was Wood and Landry's notion of "cultural literacy" and how the "basic building blocks of the city" – street frontages, building heights, set-backs, public space, etc. – look different when viewed through "intercultural eyes". I wanted students to consider the extent to which New Urban projects exemplified the Barcelona urbanist's particular concept of *espai public* – defined as a distinctive "third territory of streets and squares where private interests and public uses are vitally interwoven"<sup>23</sup>. Mike Davis's book is a veritable cornucopia of useful and provocative concepts. I wanted students to attend to his notions of "spatial apartheid" and the "archisemiotics" of built form – the latter broadly understood as embracing the meanings conveyed by a project's architecture, advertising images associated with the project, and other features of the designed environment.

Student analyses made for very interesting reading. There was a strong convergence of opinion as regards the virtues of these projects. All students appreciated their commitments to "green" buildings and especially Belmar's investment in harvesting solar and wind power. Belmar's public square and restaurant patios – combined with the "Big Windows" of retail spaces that maximized the inter-visibility of private and public space – were identified as the best examples of *espai public* (fig. 4).

The community gardens at HGV drew a lot of favorable comment. European students in particular liked the way that HGV's winding roads and pathways broke up the older street grid. Americans and Europeans alike appreciated the effort made to preserve and re-purpose the historical structures at HGV.

Despite these virtues students were unsparing in their criticism. Belmar was often described as a "packaged" experience, with students using words like "commercial", "artificial", "inauthentic", and "branded" to make their case. Some likened Belmar to an "outdoor mall" and the kind of downtown that's more befitting an alpine ski resort than a Denver suburb that's looking to become more urbane. A British student remarked that Belmar's "High

<sup>20</sup> Jeb Brugmann, *Welcome to the Urban Revolution*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, New York: Vintage, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> Jane Jacobs, "Downtown is for People", *Fortune Magazine*, April, 1958.

<sup>23</sup> Brugmann, *Welcome to the Urban Revolution*, p. 231.





4. *Inter-visibility of shops and street at Belmar.*

Street” was curiously empty on a lovely Saturday afternoon in autumn. American and European students alike commented that, at the time of their weekend visits, there was more activity in Belmar’s “Big Box” department store parking lots than on its streets. Indeed, for all students the Big Box stores compromised the scale and intimacy of the Belmar development.

Students noted that investments in ethnic and cultural diversity at Belmar were lacking, aside from the annual Festival Italiano street party that honors the old Villa Italia mall. There is a sprinkling of ethnic restaurants but these are typically chain establishments. No one mentioned it, but Wood and Landry’s use of the term “cultural cross-dressing” to refer to these (superficial) indicators of interculturalism would have been appropriate. One student was struck by the police presence at Belmar, contrasting it with the “eyes on the street” that would be the most important security feature of Jane Jacobs’s “two-shift” city (i.e., one that’s open and active 24 hours a day). Several perceptive comments were made about the semiotics of built space at these developments. Retail advertising is typically targeted at white people, especially young, middle-class women. One student noted that the array of medical ser-

vices available at HGV (where dedicated housing for senior citizens is one component of the residential complex) signaled not only something about generational makeup but also the class and discretionary income of residents (e.g. a chiropractor's office). The "Neighborhood Watch" security signs at HGV did not escape notice.

A large number of students focused on the Charter for the New Urbanism's call for developments that seamlessly connect to their surroundings. Most students didn't see this design principle in practice. At Belmar the broad, six lane avenues that border the project to the north and west were seen to function as de facto "gates" separating it from the adjacent (and largely Hispanic) neighborhoods. HGV was seen to blend a little bit more into its context, but students still commented on how even here the project edges are a bit jarring. One European student who visited HGV, Belmar, and Stapleton commented that the trip to these places by public transport (from their flat at the university) took about three times as long as by car.

The other Charter ideal that drew comments was housing. Many students noted the diversity of housing options available at both Belmar and HGV. Affordability, however, was seen to be another matter. Some students provided comparative data suggesting that housing prices were likely prohibitive for people who weren't urban professionals, and questioned whether people working at retail businesses in these projects could also afford to live there (a key New Urbanist ambition). One student sought an answer by interviewing a (non-white) person working at a Belmar Information Desk. This woman had been a resident at one time, but now lives elsewhere. Interestingly, she reported that Belmar is being increasingly occupied by aging Baby Boomers and college-educated "Millennials" or "Generation Y" (aged about 20-34).

Student preferences for the development in which they'd most like to live were interesting and, to some extent, surprising. American student opinion was decidedly mixed, favoring Belmar by 58% to 42%. The case for Belmar centers on it being viewed as a livelier place, with access to a greater variety of activities and services. American students also preferred Belmar's modernist architectural aesthetic over the more traditional pitched roof and front porch aesthetic of HGV. Conversely, European students favored HGV over Belmar by a decisive 80% to 20%. Key to the European students' evaluation was HGV's location and surroundings. Although HGV has an older demographic, young Europeans liked the easier bus access to Denver's downtown, the project's fit with other parts of the still somewhat ethnically-diverse Highlands area, and the overall greater feel of community. Some liked the pastel colors and "folk" character of HGV architecture that reminded them of small towns in Europe. One liked HGV because the Carousel Pavilion re-

minded her of the gazebos to be found in many city centers in the Czech Republic. Apropos the “wider context” consideration, one British student very perceptively said of Belmar that “I don’t feel that the local area understands it well enough to welcome it properly” and that it lacks an identity (the subtle attempts to “brand” itself reported by Dunham-Jones and Williamson notwithstanding). My Hispanic student reluctantly threw in with Belmar. My Liberian student refused to make a choice, as he was put off by both alternatives.

The main lesson of this exercise is that Denver’s New Urbanism is decidedly mixed in its appeal to a diverse group of young adults. The European result suggests that New Urbanism is on the right track in terms of appealing to at least Western Anglo and Continental intercultural tastes and values. It also enjoys some success in meeting its goal of fostering community. However, attracting diversity is another matter altogether. Denver’s New Urban projects still signal – to Americans, Europeans, and ethnic “Others” alike – homogeneity and exclusivity. This gives one pause to wonder whether New Urbanism can really succeed in accomplishing, at the same time and within the same program, its diversity and community goals. Wood and Landry challenge architects and planners interested in intercultural city-building to either structure space so that different cultures might see and use it in a variety of ways, or create more open-ended spaces to which a broad variety of intercultural “Others” can adapt. Some students wish to challenge New Urbanism in the same way. Alternatively, one student questioned whether New Urbanism is capable of producing an intercultural city at all. As she put it, perhaps an intercultural city already exists in the urban fabric and just needs some poking and prodding – using other varieties of urbanism as a guide – to draw it out.

## NEW URBANISM ON THE DRAWING BOARD

One of my current interests is to chronicle another regeneration project at a major intersection in central Denver that was formerly occupied by the University of Colorado’s Health Sciences Center. The 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Colorado Boulevard site in central Denver is about the size of the HGV site. The site is at the nexus of several neighborhoods that contain ethnic and class diversity. I am currently studying the project’s planning documents and also engaging in a little “urban ethnography” by attending community meetings at which city planners, citizens, and site developers meet. The urban design standards and guidelines for 9<sup>th</sup> and Colorado reflect New Urbanist planning principles. The conceptual drawings feature pedestrian-oriented design and ground floor



5. Idea Store, Whitechapel, London.

“transparency” that allows a closer connection between the buildings and street. There is a significant effort to conceal parking lots from public view.

Concealed parking lots at 9<sup>th</sup> and Colorado will likely prevent development of the “informal economies” (e.g., food trucks) that are important to some “barrio” cultures. The planned public square – bordered on one edge by “high end” housing and on another edge by a parking structure – could end up looking like a tidy Grand Manner set piece rather than an active cosmopolitan hub. The site will have a “Big Box” retail store. I have suggested to the developer that he might consider some Big Box architecture that is more interesting than what we see at other Denver regeneration sites. For example, an exposed skeleton structure like Paris’s Centre Georges Pompidou would honor the site’s historic use as a hospital and also likely make for an interesting conversation piece. As Scott Doyon, an influential New Urbanist, perceptively suggests:

[Memorable visual events] make our communities more interesting, and interesting places engage people at a more intimate, emotional level. When we talk of making places more pedestrian friendly, we often focus on sidewalks, road geometries and diversity of destinations but it’s



less often that we also focus on delight – the visual candy that engages our senses as we travel from point A to point B<sup>24</sup>.

Alternatively, something like the Idea Store in Whitechapel, London – a building that delights the eye, intimately connects to its context, and also attracts an ethnically diverse user population – would also work (fig. 5)<sup>25</sup>.

Other suggestions for intercultural place-making at 9<sup>th</sup> and Colorado, and my ongoing analysis of the community meetings and debates about how regeneration of the site should proceed, are fully reported in an archive of posts on the *Intercultural Urbanism* blog<sup>26</sup>. What will happen at 9th and Colorado remains to be seen. But as we have learned from our study of other regeneration sites in Denver, it will take some considerable work and perhaps some significant change in contemporary urban design paradigms to make a neighborhood capable of attracting and retaining cultural diversity.

<sup>24</sup> Scott Doyon, “Get to Know the Awkwardly-Named “Terminated Vista””, blog post, 13 Apr 2012. <http://bettercities.net/news-opinion/blogs/scott-doyon/17854/get-know-awkwardly-named-terminated-vista>”.

<sup>25</sup> Rowan Moore, “The East End’s own Pompidou Centre; Architect David Adjaye has Designed a Bold, Beautiful Building for Whitechapel that Perfectly Marries Form and Function”, *The Evening Standard*, September 27, 2005, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.interculturalurbanism.com/?cat=3>.