

Agenda for a New American Urbanism: A Critique of "The New Urbanism"

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INTRODUCTION

"The New Urbanism" is a term employed by writer Peter Katz to describe the work of a particular group of urbanists in his 1993 book entitled: *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*.¹

URBANISM DEFINED

Webster's Dictionary defines "urbanism" as: "*the character of life in cities; urban life, organization and problems*".²

Since its recorded origins in antiquity, *the search for a new urbanism has intended a better quality of life*, whether motivated by moral conscience, economic gain or political power. *Its democratic height has been in the Modern Era*, a basis for the dictionary definition.

MODERN ERA PRECEDENTS

Modern Era precedents evident in The New Urbanism are appropriate for an urbanism that is uniquely American. *Their agendas were tied to the idea of social reform; of facilitating a better quality of life for all citizens*. Dedicated to health and education in an industrializing society, *they sought cultural integration of working and immigrant classes via public engagement*.

Frederick Law Olmsted was a farmer, landscape architect and contemporary of George Perkins Marsh, initiator of the Conservation Movement and our National Parks System. Olmsted's ecologically chosen parks and greenways served the social reform he espoused in *The New York Times* in the 1860's. *He decried improper uses of land and labor as threatening democracy and cited the moral disintegration that large cities, formless in social community and visual comprehension, engender*. His Public Parks and The Enlargement of Towns, 1862, launched programs for the reservation of land in developing urban areas across the nation.

Daniel Burnham was an urbane proponent of L'Ecole des Beaux Artes design in a midwestern city that came into being with the Industrial Revolution and which possessed little of the collective public domain of older eastern cities. His

social reform program for building a symbolic civic realm for public engagement served his desire to construct a monumental infrastructure of parks, buildings and boulevards.

The armatures of Olmsted and Burnham were political savvy gained through public service and immense powers of persuasion. With urgent social problems to solve, they understood how to tap private wealth for support. *They claimed sites which both served their design intentions and were considered too problematic for private development*.

In *An Architect's Notes and Reflections upon Artistic City Planning*, in 1889, Viennese architect Camillo Sitte argued against the expansive movement-oriented extension of cities. He favored buildings, driven by Modern programs and technologies, as definers of a public realm extension tied to the intimacy of the Pre-Modern city. His designs infused these patterns with uncharacteristic green space. His venue was the industrializing European City, *which growth boundaries were limited by geography and centuries-old land use tradition*.

In a situation similar to Olmsted's, with the added threat of civil unrest, Ebenezer Howard proposed The Garden City Cluster with publication of *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Social Reform*, in 1898.

Howard's cluster correlates with the Greek neopolis, *a politically and economically self-sufficient satellite city connected, in concert with other satellite cities, to a central city*, the paleopolis, site of amenities affordable by the collective satellites. He shared the Ancient Greek belief in *cities of finite size, comprehensive to the eye and politically workable*. He named the paleopolis the "Central City" and the neopolis, the "Garden City". *Allocating the land separating his cities for food production*, he proposed a harmonious relationship between City and Country. He included implementation plans for capitalist development and distribution of profits to community stockholders. His armatures were the *British Rail System* and public desperation to address civil unrest in the barely inhabitable and ever-extending *City of London, faced with accelerating incarceration of its population*.

CLEAR AGENDAS AND CRITICAL ARMATURES

The importance of clear agendas and critical armatures is exemplified in the failure to realize the Garden City of Letchworth, thirty-five miles from London, in 1902. It was aborted by refusal of industry to isolate itself from the economic synergy of Central London. Thirty-five miles is a long distance and industrial synergy by proximity was a tradition, if not a functional mandate, in the Mechanical Age. *The critical component of workplace unrealized, Letchworth became a Garden Suburb.*

The proliferation of Garden Suburbs elicited response from Scottish planner, lecturer and writer, Patrick Geddes, in *The Evolution of The City*, in 1915. He cited the social injustice perpetrated by extension of the city minus workplace and the growing tendency toward socioeconomic segregation in new community composition. *He coined the term "connurbation" to describe the phenomenon of urban sprawl and center city decay that leaves the immobile and socially disenfranchised to lead lives of ignorance and desperation at its center.*

Lower-density site planning and grouped housing, advocated by lecturing British planners prior to the Great Depression, interfaced with the growing American use of wood frame construction, *an urban rail system cleansed by electricity* and a seemingly endless horizon of land on which to build. Their agenda connected with the American New Communities Movement of the 1920s, which included Clarence Stein, Lewis Mumford and Henry Wright. Sunnyside Gardens, a significant achievement of this group, was motivated by an unwillingness to abandon the Working Class as *the American agenda for social reform was transforming from one of public engagement to one of private abandonment.* Subsequent realization of the new community of Radburn, NJ, aborted by The Great Depression as built residential neighborhoods, paved the way, by misappropriation, for the ubiquitous residential subdivision development that characterizes the American landscape today. *The collusive forces of government and private economic interests set up the American people for the most environmentally costly, economically inefficient, culturally disintegrative, economically undemocratic and esthetically banal way of life on earth.* James Howard Kunstler's *Geography of Nowhere*³ chronicles, with accuracy, the creation of the nightmare dilemma that the New American Agenda must address today.

THE AMERICAN DILEMMA

The current American milieu is a terrain of largely abandoned cities in an ubiquitous sea of suburbia, *formless in social community and visual comprehension*, which came into being with the Automotive Revolution, and *which denies democratic freedom of movement* to that majority population that is too young, too old, too physically challenged and too poor to drive a car. *It demonstrates to the world and for history, the depth of the meaning of*

"connurbation". Our improper use of land and labor threatens 56% of remaining American agricultural land in the next decade⁴ and our only tradition for growth boundaries is the 19th C. Conservation Movement and hope emerging from the 20th C. Environmental Movement by way of the State of Oregon⁵. The sites considered too problematic for private development lay in the abandoned 42-plus percent of the land within our existing urban boundaries⁶. Our agenda for uplifting the underclasses is incarceration in a symbolic civic realm which, like our suburban communities, separates inhabitants according to socioeconomic status.

TENETS FOR A NEW AGENDA

Though the specifics of the American situation have changed, Modern Era urbanism suggests an agenda for a New American Urbanism. It can be effective *only* if subscribed to the following tenets:

Social Reform

Agro and eco system maintenance, democratic freedom of movement, accessibility to affordable housing and upward mobility through education and cultural engagement, are social issues. They must be addressed in the comprehensive manner of Olmsted, Burnham, Howard and Geddes, and with what was largely their following character:

Moral Courage

Social reform must be overtly stated and repeated in the rhetoric of *any* urbanism. If it is not, intentions will be mutated and corresponding physical form disfigured by unenlightened popular desire and status quo political and economic policy.

Critical Reflection

Partial achievements, such as Letchworth and its paradigmatic successor, Seaside, must be as rigorously criticized for their shortcomings as they are applauded for their strengths, or they will be adopted as ideal models.

URBANISM OR URBANITY?

Peter Katz conveniently prefaces the *The New Urbanism* by separating it into two distinct philosophical divisions. He calls the First Division "Regional", even though it squarely addresses the increments of settlement and building. It favors limiting continued horizontal growth and it is introduced by Peter Calthorpe. The Second Division, introduced by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and to which he gives no particular name, favors "working within the framework of current political and economic policies to reconfigure new growth at the edge".⁷

An agenda for urbanism is clearly articulated in the First Division text. *"The city, its suburbs and their natural environment should be treated as a whole - socially, economically and ecologically"*. It further sets forth a line-item agenda for *defined edges (i.e. Urban Growth Boundaries)*,

*circulation systems for the pedestrian (i.e. regional transit systems), formative rather than residual public space, a complementary hierarchy of civic and private domains, diverse population (i.e. affordable housing) and diverse use (i.e. housing/workplace balance).*⁸

First Division urbanism is the Garden Cities Cluster revisited at a time when synergy by proximity is no longer mandated for a *production of goods and services which environmental nature allows its location at the center, rather than at the periphery of settlements. Settlement boundaries are political constraints to Geddes' "connurbation" and are physically defined by agricultural production and the ecologically-based public domain* proposed by Howard and Olmsted. *Use-appropriateness of transportation modes, for which Howard originally placed roadways at the perimeter for production distribution and railways in the interior for pedestrians, is restated in a time when its implications are better understood. Connection with Clarence Perry's one-quarter mile radius Neighborhood Unit*⁹ can be found in the urban district and neighborhood scales of the two Transit-oriented Development models proposed¹⁰. At this scale, this urbanism remains diagrammatic so that *it may be applied to any ecological and prior-development situation, whether located in the city, the suburbs or at the edge.*^{11, 12, 13.}

At the scale of the Transit-oriented Development increment, Howard's *central and secondary zones of public institutions and engagement are given positive configuration* and are heralded by symbolic forms reminiscent of Burnham and credited principles of Sitte and Leon Krier.¹⁴ Codes for right-of-way and mixed-use building design draw upon the *re-thinking of existing codes* that is characteristic of all of the "new urbanists". *Design codes address the Corridor, block and building as one*, and do so with a geometrically defined organizational morphology that does not dictate architectural style. They allow the *rhyming architectural articulation within an established rhythm* that is characteristic of streets we admire.¹⁵

The Second Division is committed to *status quo political and economic policy and seeks to reconfigure the growth those policies mandate at the edge.*⁷ Their "urbanism" is *figural, rather than literal*, and as suggested by Vincent Scully in the Afterward, possesses "the image of community".¹⁶

Minus a regional scope, the Second Division agenda is development design that gives *dominance to a formally defined public realm to which the private domain must subscribe*. Not unlike the agenda of the First Division, and drawing also from the principles of Sitte and Leon Krier, the added influence of the automobile suburb of American planner John Nolan is evident.¹⁷ *Design codes, arising from an initial consideration of building typologies to be employed, intimately engage the design of the architectural pieces in both the public and private domains.*¹⁸

Seaside is the built icon of the Second Division. Its contribution as an isolated built demonstration of the concept of Traditional Neighborhood Development¹⁹ is immense. Its

pedestrianization by density and proximity addresses the larger issue of land depletion. Its formal definition of public and private realms clarifies the existence of the public realm and its esthetically concerned configuration gives visual importance to the concept of social community. The centrality of the public domain and defined outer boundaries yield the visual comprehension espoused by the First Division and the Modern Era urbanists previously cited.

The danger of Seaside as a precedent, and indeed of the Second Division agenda in general, is not in the promotion of its undeniable strengths and achievements, but in the failure to overtly cite its shortcomings with the critical rigor needed to encourage and stimulate subsequent permutations that erode its inadequacies while building upon its strengths. As a practicing architect since 1962, I know what Seaside means to the development industry outside of Sam Davis. It means that it's okay to leap-frog a multitude of abandoned eighty-acre sites within existing urban boundaries to defoliate yet another eighty acres of disappearing pine barrens. It means that it's okay to double the per-acre return on land improvement with now elite-chic higher densities to serve a population which can access it only by private vehicle. *The end realization of Seaside was as predictable as was the fate of Letchworth.*

I have searched the plan of the so-called town of Kentlands, in Gaithersburg, MD²⁰ to find something that fundamentally differentiates it from those to which I was a party in the 1960's. The standard tree-lined boulevard collects automobile traffic from the standard two-thirds-of-the-site and tree-stamped parking lot of a shopping center to which no sane inhabitant of this community would ever walk from its clearly segregated zones of other uses. Beneath it all I can visualize the standard color-coded functionalist zoning map that has driven American development to where it is today. What *is* different is the esthetically conceived *urbane space* between buildings and along corridors, and such is the major strength and justifiably lauded contribution of the Second Division.

I would suggest to Peter Katz that his Second Edition be renamed The New Urbanism and The New Urbanity. *Urbanity is the agenda of the Second Division, defined by Webster's Dictionary as "the quality of being urbane; civilities, courtesies or amenities"*.²¹

THE CASE FOR A NEW URBANISM

The profound difference between the agendas for urbanism and urbanity were demonstrated recently in a Second Division proposal for the revitalization of a nearly-abandoned 19th C. mill town core. This rail-related core lay less than 30 minutes, by car, between the centers of two viable growing cities. The rail line, currently dormant, is the only line in its region being considered by DOT for activation for passenger use. After customary mapping and community meetings, the following were recommended by the Second Division consultant for investment: 1) Two building infills and extensive

streetscaping and building facade renovation along Main Street to comply with a Design Code imported from the consultant's office files, and 2) a Design Code for new housing in the image of the town's 19th C. vernacular millworker house.

The final public meeting revealed what I have repeatedly found to be true. Sufficient numbers of the general public know what urbanism is about and are willing to ask meaningfully unanswerable questions such as the following: "What goes in these buildings on Main Street?"; "Hasn't this been done to hundreds of still-vacate falling-down main streets over the past twenty-five years?" "How can we market housing that looks like the house in which so many have died of Brown Lung Disease?" "If the railway tracks crossing main street have no value, why not rip them up?"

The New Urbanist must have the comprehensive intelligence to recognize that meaningful revitalization of this core lies in the considerable potential for re-activating the rail line that created it in the first place.

The New Urbanist must have the moral courage to say: "Don't spend your money on a failed Downtown Redevelopment model. Join forces with the two anchor cities, engaging the other small towns between, to exert the political pressure needed to bring meaningful redevelopment to your town via rail service".

THE CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The defense of the New Urbanity is that it works with reality. In this sense, it is culturally sensitive to dominant American thought since November of 1979. History shows us that occurrence of this political mentality is cyclical. Though not yet expended, we must already pose such as the following questions in response to the current rebuttal to and effective urbanism:

How can Urban Growth Boundaries be un-American when our right of Eminent Domain seized billions of acres of productive tax base to build an interstate highway system?

Why must public transportation pay for itself when elimination of the current public subsidy of private transportation would increase the price of a gallon of gasoline by \$2.25 at the pump?²²

Why is subsidized housing by way the mortgage interest tax credit "democratic" and to-household rent and mortgage subsidies "socialistic"?

Why is large-acreage agribusiness the only feasible means of food production for the U.S. but not for the 350,000,000 citizens of the E.C.? It was a New Urbanist architect, Barry Benepe, who re-activated the symbiosis between the population of New York City and the small-acreage farmers of Connecticut, New Jersey and New York, once doomed to extinction.²³

Why must American cities scramble for billions of dollars to re-build mere ghosts of previously ripped away surface rail transit systems²⁴ when the City of Boston must not?

Answer: *The "T" was never privatized.*

Is not the majority text of Vincent Scully's *Afterward* critique of Seaside, devoted to its settlement form and single-family houses as precious objects, symptomatic of a decade-long retreat by architectural practitioners and educators from the nobler aspirations of *Architecture*?

Is it not "urbanity", masquerading as "urbanism" an example of the old chestnut of "re-arranging the deck chairs on the sinking Titanic"?

NOTES

- ¹ Katz, Peter. *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. New York: 1994. McGraw-Hill.
- ² *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*. Second Edition New York: 1983. Simon & Schuster.
- ³ Kunstler, William Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere*. New York: 1993. Simon & Schuster.
- ⁴ United States Farmland Trust. Report. Washington, DC: 1993.
- ⁵ Kunstler, William Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere*. New York: 1993. Simon & Schuster. p. 204-206.
- ⁶ United States Congress Subcommittee on Urban Growth. Report. Washington, DC: 1980.
- ⁷ Katz, Peter. *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. New York: 1994. McGraw-Hill. p. x.
- ⁸ *ibid.* pp. xi & xii.
- ⁹ Perry, Clarence. "The Neighborhood Unit," Vol. III, *Regional Survey of New York and Environs*. New York: 1929.
- ¹⁰ Katz, Peter. *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. New York: 1994. McGraw-Hill. p. xxxi.
- ¹¹ Calthorpe, Peter. *The Next American Metropolis*. New York: 1993. Princeton Architectural Press. pp. 61.
- ¹² *ibid.* pp. 136-137.
- ¹³ Katz, Peter. *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. New York: 1994. McGraw-Hill. p. 119-133.
- ¹⁴ Calthorpe, Peter. *The Next American Metropolis*. New York: 1993. Princeton Architectural Press. p.15.
- ¹⁵ Peter F. Smith. "Urban Esthetics", *Architecture for People*. New York: 1980. pp. 74-86.
- ¹⁶ Katz, Peter. *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. New York: 1994. McGraw-Hill. p.226
- ¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 226
- ¹⁸ *ibid.* pp. 225-226.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.* pp. xvii-xix.
- ²⁰ *ibid.* p. 31.
- ²¹ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*. Second Edition. New York: 1983. Simon & Schuster.
- ²² Goddard, Stephen B.. *Getting There: The Epic Struggle Between Road and Rail in The American Century*. New York: 1994. Basic Books, Division of Harper Collins. p. 250.
- ²³ New York Green Markets Program, State and City of New York: 1988.
- ²⁴ Kunstler, William Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere*. New York: 1993. Simon & Schuster. pp. 91-92.