

New Urbanism as a Counter-Project to Post-Modernism

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Critiques of New Urbanism

New Urbanism's unusual combination of neo-traditional styling and progressive attempts at social reform has made strange bedfellows out of its liberal and conservative critics. Bashed from the left as conservative nostalgia and bashed from the right as liberal social engineering, New Urbanism has an uncanny way of attracting uncommon enemies and advocates.¹

Urbanism, "new" or otherwise, is far too complex to advance purely right- or left-wing agendas, and critiques of New Urbanism that attempt to dispose of it neatly on ideological grounds tend to be grossly oversimplified. New Urbanism has been able to attract a surprisingly diverse following precisely because it cannot be easily reduced to a single agenda, as its critics claim. As a forum and a model, it merges popular, pragmatic, critical, idealistic and subversive strategies, allowing for many interpretations.

I find myself attracted to New Urbanism not for its traditionalism, but for its radicalism; not for its capitulation to market forces, but for its critical defiance of them; not for its formulaic responses, but for its truly multi-disciplinary approach. I admire New Urbanism's commitment to a political process of mobilizing and empowering communities to challenge the pattern, regulations and financing of seemingly out-of-control sprawl.

Where many of my academic and architect colleagues see Luddite reactionaries resisting progress by indulging in nostalgic simulations of the past, I see committed reformers critical of the status quo debating and sharing multiple strategies and scales of alternative forms of development. In a post-industrial world dominated by the placelessness of digital media and global transactions, I see New Urbanism as a counter-project to post-industrialism.

How do we determine if such a position is reactionary or revolutionary? Assuming continued advances in computer and telecommunication technologies, post-industrialism promises peace and harmony through global economic interrelationships and unlimited access to information. These, in turn, will presumably lead to abundant good equitably distributed, laborless leisure and self-determination. This view portrays the decentralized and dematerialized post-industrial world as a very progressive place.² Architects like Frank Gehry and Bernard Tschumi make extensive use of digitally mediated design processes that expressively endorse the promise of a post-industrial future of

unlimited possibilities. Similarly, Rem Koolhaas and Peter Eisenman embrace the freedom represented by the speed, mobility and malleability of digital, nomadic, post-industrial culture. Koolhaas argues for a "lite urbanism" that ridicules traditional preoccupations with matter and substance.³

But post-industrialism has a dark side as well. The pace of innovation in digital technologies has been matched by an ever-widening income gap between rich and poor. As the economy has become more integrated globally, it has become increasingly decentralized locally. In U.S. metropolitan areas, sixty to eighty-five percent of real estate development during the past thirty years has occurred on exurban peripheries.⁴

The resulting landscape of decentralized, disconnected pockets of office parks, malls, strips, condo clusters, corporate campuses and gated communities clipped onto suburban arterials reflects the values and policies of mobile capital, the service economy, post-Fordist disposable consumerism and banking deregulation. This pattern, expanding at the periphery in ever lower densities, further exacerbates the spatial segregation of rich and poor, consumes open space, requires more and more driving and degrades air, water, land and habitat in the process.⁵

New Urbanists see the environmental and social impact of the post-industrial landscape as regressive. They have turned away from this future to promote diverse, compact, mixed-use, mixed-income, transit- and pedestrian-oriented communities. While their critique and concern for social and environmental goals may indeed be viewed as progressive (though hardly new), the prevalence of neo-traditional styling in New Urbanist projects that perpetrates the cultural dominance of traditional elites means they are generally viewed within architectural discourse as conservative.

Can New Urbanism open itself more to the progressive aspects of post-industrialism? Can it recognize the positive impact of the global and the digital, and use these to induce more inclusive expressions of design, place and power? I will argue that New Urbanism's continued development as a progressive force would benefit from a greater recognition of its role in the shift from industrial to post-industrial culture and development. Instead of providing a retreat from the post-industrial present, New Urbanism's promise lies in creating stronger interchanges physical neighborhoods and digital networks, in not simply countering post-industrialism but urbanizing it.

New Urbanism vs. Sprawl

During the 1970s and 80s, while the American economy was hard at work producing sprawling beltway boomtowns and Edge Cities, architectural discourse focused on issues of stylistic theory and professional journals highlighted the individual buildings of star designers. New Urbanism emerged in the early nineties as one of the few organized forums for discussing alternatives to conventional exurban development. Various approaches coalesced and diverged, from reconfiguring exurban patterns into townlike forms to filling in underdeveloped locations in existing cities. All recognized a common enemy in the regulations and development practices that perpetuated sprawl.

The movement grew as it took on the rewriting of regulations and the partnering with various institutions and other disciplines involved in development. The involvement of diverse professionals focused increasing attention on the non-physical aspects of city design, such as community-building programs, affordable mortgage policies and financing structures. Initially recognized for its concern about greenfield new towns, New Urbanism has expanded its attention to urban and suburban infill, most notably through work on HOPE VI public housing projects.⁶

If sprawl is the post-industrial landscape of private investment, the insistent now, speed, disposability and the temporary contract, New Urbanism counters that by emphasizing that which is public, pre-existing and enduring. New Urbanism urges people to slow down, to get to know their neighbors and to become more connected with their environment.

New Urbanists have proposed a now-familiar alternative pattern that recasts the isolated office parks, strip malls and housing developments into mixed-use, walkable, transit-served districts and neighborhoods oriented around public town centers. Wide cul-de-sacs and wider arterials are replaced with gridded networks of narrow streets that calm and distribute the flow of traffic. Sidewalks, street trees and architectural codes governing the basic profile of the building front treat the space of the street as a figural public space or outdoor room. Front porches or stoops (depending on the regional architectural history of a place) are intended to promote sociability among neighbors; the close mixing of lot sizes and building types is intended to encourage socioeconomic diversity. Densities from eight to forty dwelling units per acre are sought both as means of increasing social interaction, preserving unbuilt land and wildlife habitat, and supporting shops and transit service.

This is more than an alternative template. New Urbanist developments seek to build on the existing identity of a place, rather than allowing it to be determined by ever-changing stores and short-term uses. Unique landscapes, whether streams, forests or wetlands, are preserved and made into identifying or recreational features. Regional building types, materials, landscape and planning strategies are called upon to further link the present to that which has endured in a place. Codes and covenants are intended to sustain this character, emphasizing predictability to post-industrial flux and changeability.

Stuck in the Past or Moving into the Future?

New Urbanism arose out of its founders' reformist impulse to improve situations through design solutions. They rejected the design autonomy sought by post-structuralist theorists and neo-avant-garde designers. Instead of critiquing culture, New Urbanists engage and redesign it. Moreover, they fervently believe that design is not autonomous but synergistic: Each individual design decision matters in terms of how it triggers social, environmental and economic effects within the urban whole.

This belief in the power and meaningfulness of design has helped attract many designers to the movement, myself included. It has helped to empower designers and non-designers alike to refuse to accept sprawl's logic of autonomous development as inevitable. Instead, through the power of design, new development becomes an opportunity for radical re-imagining. From Seaside to the New York Regional Plan Association's aerial views of conventional versus reconfigured development patterns, the early New Urbanist designs were startling precisely because they so radically broke with conventional expectations.

Even more revolutionary was the New Urbanists' willingness to work on regulatory and procedural issues in order to empower their designs. The coalition building with allied organizations, the reaching out to other professions involved with city building, the drafting of model ordinances and the promotion of policy changes at agencies like the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Environmental Protection Agency and Fannie Mae are remarkable achievements. They could not have happened without the New Urbanists' strong convictions about the need for change, the possibility of change and the viability of their alternative.

Sadly however, in fighting for change and winning over converts, New Urbanist principles seem to have stiffened into rules. Types have become models.⁷ The elasticity and ingenuity of design is increasingly being sacrificed to the need for formulas, easy answers and a recognizable marketing image.

There is an odd disconnect between what is exciting about the ambitious New Urbanist agenda and the places New Urbanists claim as successes. While the agenda looks forward to a world of vital neighborhoods and diverse communities, the places themselves seem increasingly frozen in a very singular image of the past; there seems to be little recognition of the value of ongoing change. Even where regional characteristics help particularize the architecture, there is a generic quality to designs that draw almost exclusively on white upper middle-class traditions, and the quiet gentility and formal civic behavior associated with them.

As New Urbanism has become more successful, its designs have become more reactionary and less revolutionary. What happened to the spirit of invention and discovery that the changing of the regulations was meant to empower? Has New Urbanism become a part of the machine it set out to resist, simply another formula to replace the earlier one?

New Urbanism is premised on the idea that designers armed

with strong knowledge of good precedents can translate the movement's simple principles into a master plan and images from which to generate design codes in a relatively short time—during a seven- to ten-day charrette, for example. The expectation has been that the charrette introduces urban variety through the inclusion of many hands, and that the execution of the design by many builders over a period of time will introduce architectural variety.

However, as New Urbanism moves into the mainstream, production builders and financing entities seek to undertake projects in ever larger increments. Developing in larger increments means more repetition of models, rather than development of typological variations. The bigger New Urbanism gets, the more it repeats itself.

Seaside is an expensive resort hotel. It cannot be the poster child for New Urbanism. But, in fact, it got so many things so right. It is infused with a respect for tradition and feeling for place, but never allowed those lessons to squelch a love of design and innovation. Even though a non-coded common interest in Victorian architectural language has settled into the place, it still speaks in varied voices. Resembling post-Fordist mass customization, each house riffs jazzily on familiar themes. There is a far greater balance between individual expression and a unified communal identity than in many later New Urbanist developments.

Conversely, at projects like Celebration, the use of pattern books, intended to raise the quality of the work of production builders while keeping costs down, has resulted in far greater uniformity than at Seaside. Designers' efforts to tweak, change, customize and improve the world no longer seem welcome. I worry that as New Urbanism becomes more focused on formulaic recreations of the past, it will lose its commitment to design and fall short of providing for the post-industrial future.

New Urbanism needs to think more creatively about how to use new technologies to create a future that rises to its challenge of simultaneously addressing the larger scale of the region, where characteristics of the land and ecosystems might dictate broad development patterns, and the smaller scale of the neighborhood, in which varying degrees of variety and individual expression might be encouraged.

Grasping the Post-Industrial Future

Perhaps New Urbanism has written off the promise of a post-industrial future too quickly. Do the digital and the global have to work against placemaking and result in decentralized, economically segregated, consumerist sprawl? Certainly not, and this is where there remains room for design innovation.

Many New Urbanist developments are heavily wired and are already attracting the digerati who can choose to live anywhere. New Urbanism can offer people working all day at computer screens easy opportunities to take a break from technological

interfaces. People-filled places and natural habitats would be a short walk away, accessible without using a car. Many of the increasing number of telecommuters are likely to embrace the social, environmental and transit possibilities of New Urbanism.⁸

But New Urbanism could go much further in imagining how telecommuting, computer software and digital networks might more radically reconfigure buildings, neighborhoods and regions.

As sociable, local neighborhoods become overlaid with highly-used global information networks they are likely to foster ever-more flexible, hybrid building types—such as new combinations of retail and services, entertainment and education facilities, and living and working. This mixing and integrating of activities is consistent with New Urbanist principles and in many cases can be easily woven into traditional neighborhoods, but it requires new approaches to flexible building design, development financing and land-use regulation.

Taking full advantage of the new technology and economy requires a willingness to further adapt neotraditional typologies, even to develop new ones. For example, New Urbanists have done a better job at integrating retail and residences than workplaces and residences. More thought could be given to converting office parks into mixed-use urban neighborhoods, using skinny floorplate buildings with incubator office space in neighborhood centers, and designing live-work units that allow for the running of a small business (with dual entries, accommodation of delivery services and variously sized office suites/workshops). And just as New Urbanists think about the benefits of the corner store, they could consider providing neighborhood-based telecommuting, delivery-coordination and business support centers.

While analysis of regional vernacular building materials and typologies can go a long way toward helping New Urbanists design in relation to climate and place, New Urbanists would also do well to consider the newer digital tools that allow designs to be more specifically responsive to their particular places. Innovative uses of geographical information systems, computational fluid dynamics modeling and traffic modeling programs can be used to better understand the specific wind, sun, drainage and transportation patterns of places. Such digital information can be extremely useful in designing plans and green building designs that are more place-specific and environmentally responsible.⁹

Some New Urbanists are already finding innovative ways to use digital technology to empower local voices in the process of design and construction. Peter Calthorpe recently posted growth scenarios for Salt Lake City on the Internet and got 17,000 citizens to vote their preferences.

In recent decades, many sectors of the industrial economy have employed computers to better coordinate supply and demand and produce more consumer-responsive high-quality, au-

tomated, small-batch, varied product lines. Sophisticated market monitoring and analysis enabled this kind of “mass customization” to be linked to consumer preferences. Though these techniques have been used to develop niche markets where fashion serves to differentiate consumer identity, exacerbate class and economic differences, they might also be put to the service of New Urbanism.

In a small step toward “mass customization” in housing construction, Armonics, an Indianapolis-based architecture firm, has used the computer to diversify the number of builders involved in a large housing project. They adapted “Expedition,” a program commonly used for construction management, to enable them to monitor numerous contracts (fifty seven in all, ranging from \$2,000 to \$2.8 million) on a 200-unit HUD HOPE VI housing project. Many of the contractors were from the local area and consisted of one- or two-person teams. In addition to contributing a significant amount of variation in finishes and details to the completed homes, this process recirculated dollars in the community and provided opportunities for disadvantaged businesses.¹⁰

New Urbanism is not a one-size-fits-all model. It is a forum for sharing strategies about a variety of models that implement the principles of its charter. As such, the Congress of the New Urbanism already is a post-industrial information exchange. The challenge for New Urbanists is to continue seeking ways of looking not just to the past, but to the future, to open design back up to the positive, innovative and inclusive aspects of post-industrialism.

New Urbanism’s critique of the destructive and regressive aspects of post-industrialism and sprawl provide the movement with tremendous strength. New Urbanism’s privileging of local places, connecting to existing conditions, face-to-face commu-

nication, communal interaction and preservation of unmediated landscapes and natural habitats, resonates especially effectively at a time when these seem threatened by post-industrial forces.

However, as a counter-project to post-industrialism’s doctrine of speed, mobility and malleability, New Urbanism should be wary of being overly committed to replicating the slow, the fixed and the enduring. The more perfect the recreation of the past, the more inflexible it becomes for dealing with the future, with diversity, and with less perfect neighboring conditions.

New Urbanism was initially proposed as a forum for promoting democratic tolerance for difference, not a tyrannical consensus. Instead of the absolute order and lockstep conformance of perfectly unified seventies-vintage planned urban developments, New Urbanism was premised on a somewhat looser process of incorporating multiple voices into the system, with the intent of producing more variety—albeit within strict constraints at the interface between public and private space.

In confronting the realities of working with production builders, public agencies and consumers’ and bankers’ expectations of predictability, New Urbanism has lost much of that original flexibility, diversity and choice. New Urbanists would benefit from remembering that there is a virtue in the inclusion of the imperfect and the unfixable; a bit of peeling paint and the occasional purple house remind us that we are not slaves to consensus and conformity.

Similarly, a fervent and creative embrace of post-industrial opportunities and tools may help New Urbanism avoid becoming a slave to consensus and conformity. Enriching the interface between neotraditional neighborhoods and the internet may provide the opportunities for New Urbanism to better connect the past with a progressive and diverse future.

NOTES

- ¹ For liberal critiques of New Urbanism, see the comments by Margaret Crawford, Detlef Mertins, Michael Hays, and Michael Sorkin in the CD-ROM proceedings of *Exploring (New) Urbanism, Proceedings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Department of Urban Planning and Design). From the political right, see for example the on-going defense of sprawl and critiques of New Urbanism in the libertarian journal *Reason*. Their recent articles are summarized in "Sprawl Brawl," *Reason Online* (8 April 1999).
- ² Various writers and futurists have contributed to this rosy picture: Daniel Bell, Marshall McLuhan, Alvin Toffler, George Gilder, Thomas Friedman and William Mitchell, etc.
- ³ OMA, Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau, *S M L XL* (New York: Monacelli, 1995), 971.
- ⁴ From 1980-1990, cities with strong downtown markets retained about 40 percent of office growth, while weaker downtown markets lost up to 85 percent of office growth to their suburbs. See William C. Wheaton, "Downtowns Versus Edge Cities: Spatial Competition for Jobs in the 1990s," Working Paper 45 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Center for Real Estate, 1993).
- ⁵ For more discussion of sprawl, see Ellen Dunham-Jones, "Temporary Contracts: The Economy of the Post-Industrial Landscape," *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall 1997.
- ⁶ Despite the inclusion of projects executed in a variety of styles, scales, densities and locations in books like Peter Katz's *The New Urbanism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), and *The Charter of the New Urbanism*, Michael Leccese and Kathleen McCormick eds. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999), the neotraditional small town has firmly established itself as the dominant model of New Urbanism in the eye of the public, the architectural press and many CNU members.
- ⁷ In his *Dictionnaire* of 1832, Quatre-mère de Quincy distinguished between the *type*, of which many permutations are possible, and the *model*, which is repeated precisely. The shift from interpretable design codes to pattern books, discussed later, exemplifies this change.
- ⁸ Some research indicates that the growth in telecommuting is expected to be greatest in people who telecommute three to four day a week and visit traditional offices on other day. These workers cannot really choose to live anywhere; they still must live within commuting distance of their workplace. New Urbanism's stress on the availability of transit may be an especially strong attraction to this group of part-time commuters. See "Alternative Workplace Strategies," *Wharton Real Estate Review*, 1:1 (Spring, 1999). William J. Mitchell predicts that the emerging wired generation will gravitate to precisely this kind of lively twenty-four-hour neighborhoods. William J. Mitchell, *E-topia* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).
- ⁹ To help Los Angelenos establish neighborhood centers, Marc Futterman wrote a program called "Ped-GRiD" that layers information about pedestrian activities onto a GIS database. Analyzing diverse data such as how many beds in a hospital, traffic counts and parks, Ped-GRiD can predict which locations will better support pedestrian activity and where community-building development should be directed. He hopes to make the technology available to individuals, who could then upload their own information to the database and conduct their own research as a form of teledemocracy. See Dan Damon, "Driven to Despair," *Guardian—Online* (15 July 1998).
- ¹⁰ Rick Holt's failed attempt to create a "contractors guild" at his Fairview Village east of Portland (see "Theory Practice Project Place," elsewhere in this issue) would have been an example of using mass customization to raise quality and bring down costs. Future collaborations with manufactured housing producers could further explore the introduction of mass-customized components as a way of providing typological continuity and greater degrees of customizable variety.