

Integrating Urbanisms: Growing Places Between New Urbanism and Post-Urbanism

CARL GIOMETTI
Miami University

"Thinking has its strategies and tactics too, much as other forms of action have. Merely to think about cities and get somewhere, one of the main things to know is what *kind* of problem cities pose, for all problems cannot be thought about in the same way. Which avenues of thinking are apt to be useful and to help yield the truth depends not on how we might prefer to think about a subject, but rather on the inherent nature of the subject itself."¹

- Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

The city is the culmination of the human condition, a manifestation of utopian ideas and practical policy. The ideas guiding the city down different "avenues of thinking," are as diverse as the people who reside in them. The city has the power to absorb and reflect whatever theory is being thrust upon it. In the end, the city will evolve, sometimes for the better, sometimes not; but it will emerge fresh, ready for the next idea. New Urbanism and Post-Urbanism describe current ideas of the existence of a city. This paper will outline a possible "next idea"; keeping some of the thoughts of each, while discarding those that no longer apply. The two schools of thought often appear at odds with each other; however, when treated as ingredients they actually make up a more complete idea of urbanism. The recent Michigan Debates on Urbanism created dialog among many seemingly disparate ideas of urbanisms. What always emerged, despite whatever disagreements the participants may have had, was recognition that there is no right answer to designing a city; we can only hope to ask the right questions.² Negotiating a place

between New Urbanism and Post-Urbanism may or may not lead to any new solutions, but it may raise better questions as to how we can form a more integrated urban theory.

New Urbanism

The most popular of the recent urban movements is New Urbanism. Its theoretical foundation relies upon on creating lively neighborhoods that possess diverse of styles of living. Constructed upon Jane Jacobs's idea of "organized complexity" a city, neighborhood, or town is a complex organism consisting of interconnected parts.³ The New Urbanist theories concerning "community," as both an idea and a physical object, have been mainstreamed into planning practice.

The practitioners of New Urbanism have expanded beyond theory and many explicit design "manuals" exist on how to execute the ideals of the New Urbanist. These manuals have shaped a multitude of plans throughout the country. Unfortunately, New Urbanist developments are typically enormous, over-planned communities with little variance in architectural or economic style. Even Peter Calthorpe, a well-known proponent of New Urbanism, questions whether New Urbanism is a style rather than a set of open-ended principles.⁴ Reasons for this may arise from the difficulty to execute a project of true spontaneous diversity. Diversity is only achievable by differentiations in several urban qualities, particularly time. Certain roles, such lower income housing, and retail are difficult to fulfill in new construction.⁵ It has proved problematic to create truly mixed-use, mixed-income developments. These sorts of purposes will be brought upon by the

evolution of an area, not cataclysmic creation. In order to fund new construction for the low- and middle- classes, where profit margins are small, it must be executed on an enormous scale (this business model is often referred to as the Wal-Mart model). As Modernism demonstrated, large urban renewal projects, are inappropriate and in contrast to the ideas of neighborhood and economic growth. Therefore, New Urbanism copes with projects that are just as architecturally sterile and economically unsustainable as its Modernist predecessors were. These projects attract labels of being "nostalgic" or "old-fashioned" and disappoint those, like Peter Calthorpe and other founders of the Congress for New Urbanism, who see their ideas gone awry. A city is not nostalgic. It may contain elements that represent a previous period but longing for the past produces stagnation, devolution.

From a theoretical perspective, New Urbanists seem "too ready to return to the old city." Critics point to those such as Leon Krier for an extreme case of the historical approach to urbanism. Although Krier is a fringe element, his positions are worth noting. While they may seem absurd under most circumstances, his schemes must serve as a warning to wholeheartedly accepting historical models of urbanism. This point is the most relevant criticism for New Urbanism. Historical models are useful as lessons for the future, not determinations of it. Moreover, no lesson has been more valuable than understanding the sensitivity needed when making changes to the urban fabric, as each building serves its own particular, and often unrecognizable purpose and that regardless of whichever period of urbanism one aligns with, a good neighborhood is a terrible thing to destroy.

Post-Urbanism

"If there is to be a 'new urbanism' it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty... Since it is out of control, the urban is about to become a major vector of the imagination."⁶

Rem Koolhaas

"The center is not the center."⁷

- Jacques Derrida

If New Urbanism is looking to a city's past for guidance, Post-Urbanism is looking beyond the present for its direction. "Post-Urbanism" is a term coined by Douglas Kelbaugh to represent those who believe that urbanism is an idea of the past or will soon become of the past.⁸ Unlike the term "New Urbanism" which represents specific, agreed upon ideals, Post-Urbanism refers to a group of people practicing design around a shared philosophical foundation. He aligns the writings of Rem Koolhaas, among others, to this classification. Adjectives shared among these philosophies are disconnectedness, placelessness, and the notion that there is no context. Cities are no longer centers but a "gray" area lacking of edges or boundaries. Those who fit the classification of "Post-Urbanist," beside Koolhaas, include names such as Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman, and Daniel Libeskind; although most seek to refrain from any association as such. They earned the moniker of being "post-" or "anti-" urban by designing buildings that act to differentiate, a sculptural reaction against the urban fabric. Armed with the philosophies of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, their architecture exploits the loaded adjectives used repeatedly in postmodern discussion. A building is not bound by its function or its geography. There is no such thing as context nor is there anything to refer. This ideology is the zeitgeist mentality, the current spirit of the age. Buildings respond to technological achievements that allow people to become more connected, while removing the necessity for physical proximity. At first, it may seem difficult to discern how a design philosophy that preaches the destruction of contexts is necessary in an urban philosophy.

Post-Urbanism is necessary for the creation of the unique, the departure from communal context. If New Urbanists developments resemble the "Wal-Mart model" of architecture, Post-Urbanists are the Gucci of architecture. Post-Urbanists are the trendsetters, the icons, and signature practitioners. Their rejection of context has given its architects incredible proficiency at creating places. Put another way, in their rejection the ideological "centers" of architecture, they end up creating even stronger ones. Across the world, cities display the place making effects of having a Post-Urbanist building. Bilbao, Chicago, and Los Angeles all have a Gehry building. An

abstract, entirely unique piece of architecture that is used for its iconic value. These buildings are the points of reference that Kevin Lynch championed.⁹ The “post-urban” object, as it is described here, can be traced throughout time, it possesses permanence. It is a representation of an urban condition at a particular point in time.¹⁰ However, like its counterpart, Post-Urbanism is not without its shortcomings as well.

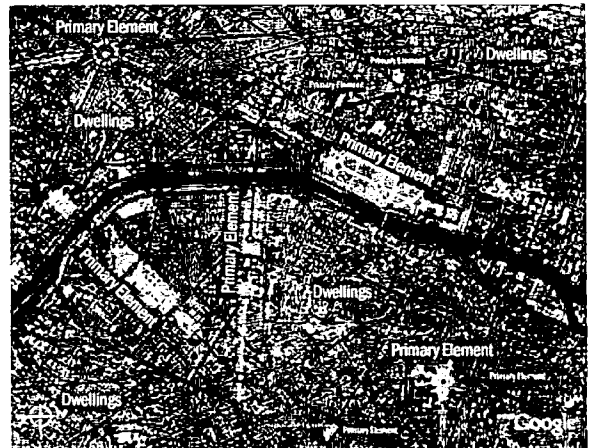
Columbus, Indiana has long been visited for its unique array of architecture. It boasts buildings by Eero Saarinen, Harry Weese, I.M. Pei and Richard Meier, among many others. Each building stands out as an extraordinary architectural achievement. However, despite the quantity and quality of the numerous designs, the town remains architecturally stagnant, but in a rather odd way. By constructing individual pieces that each demand its own attention, the city becomes a virtual gallery of architecture, something meant only to be experienced in a certain environment, a Disneyland of architecture. Void is any architectural contrast in quality, where Saarinen’s church might emerge and stand gracefully among a real urban fabric and truly create a place. Instead, it is engaged in a battle with every other building for dominance over the area. This conflict is akin to placing two Eiffel Towers right next to each other. In this case, it is more like placing fifty together. The over abundance of defining elements diminishes their effectiveness to a null value. To use Robert Venturi’s language “...the exception has become the rule.” The context of Columbus is to have no context, the Post-

Urbanist dream. The absence of an urban fabric prevents the city from developing community and architecture from gaining an identity.

An Urban Typology

To begin the formulation of a theoretical intermediary between these two, a language is useful to guide the dialog of the city and define roles within the urban whole. Aldo Rossi undertook the task of analytically dissecting a city and defining the role of each of its parts. He argued that the city is a collection of two principal types of architecture: dwellings and primary elements.¹¹ The satellite picture of Paris

defines these two elements better than a textual definition. There is a collection of buildings and block layouts, which are all slightly similar to each other, generally describable as “ordinary.”



Departures from this understood pattern are present; signified with architecture of a different scale, quality, or aesthetic. While, it may seem problematic to rely on a structuralist dialect to describe the chaotic forces apparent in a city, Rossi’s system has some distinct advantages. Rossi articulated this condition:

“In order to study the irrational it is necessary to take up a position as a rational observer. Otherwise, observation and eventually participation give way to disorder.”¹²

One of the strengths of Rossi’s idiom is while dissecting different parts of a city into its components, the actual application of his typologies is an open-ended system. That is, the idea of dwellings and primary elements is more ephemeral than it is explicit. The syntactical structure, like a city itself, can evolve through time while still maintaining its pertinence and applicability.

Dwellings are the present representation of a city, an item that is not unique but responds to the entirety of a superior structure. The dwelling builds what is to be the urban fabric. Lars Lerup employed a French word, *meme* to describe the way dwellings are constructed. *Meme* is reproduction through imitation. He states, “*Memes* help affect our values. They do not exactly determine our values, but direct and constrain them.”¹³ It is this

process by which the urban fabric is created and sustained. The values of the city are established by the vernacular and the dwellings arise out of the need to "summarize the city's image." The dwelling embodies the values of the culture that it houses. For example, the suburban dwelling exploits mobility and privacy, creating "American distance" between people.¹⁴ The dwelling is reliant on the whole, constructed image, to fill the spaces along the street. It is a created perception of what is normal to a city. New York has its brownstones, Chicago its bungalow, San Francisco its cascading row houses.

Rossi titles the second of the two principal city typologies as the primary element. The primary element is the artifact of a city, an "element(s) capable of accelerating the process of urbanization in a city." It is a complete entity unto itself, it does not require an immediate aesthetic relation to its surroundings, in fact, primary elements are most often considered such because of their disassociation with previously established patterns.

The idea of the primary element gaining its distinction by emerging from the dwelling demands a brief mention of the relational architecture. Often architecture is judged solely on its artistic achievement, its ability to dissent from the ordinary. After all, how often will a building achieve notoriety for its ability to "fit in?" This criterion limits the title of "good architecture" to that of primary elements, those buildings that depart from the context. However, the ability of a piece of architecture to satisfy its role within the urban form should be given equal, if not greater merit. Jane Jacobs first described the value of the "plain, old brick building" in terms of its socio-economic function. It provides cheap rent encouraging small businesses and the eventual development of an interconnected neighborhood. Old buildings are small business incubators and can be more valuable than any signature piece of architecture.¹⁵ The dwelling establishes the field from which the primary element will depart. A place cannot be unique without the ordinary. These plain buildings will never appear on the cover of architecture magazines, but a theory of urbanism that does not value the vernacular of an area is simply incomplete.

Re-engaging the two presiding theories now creates a more complete picture of what is urban. New Urbanism describes the life of a dwelling, the common everyday interconnected-ness that allows a city to function. The approach to understanding this condition is similar to that of Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects* but brought to a contemporary context. Dwelling spaces are not artistic expressions, they respond to other universal ideas. The Dogon village Rudofsky studied is the result of social, economic, environmental, and a slew of other forces. The interpretation is the responsibility of the whole population. Perhaps this is a reason for New Urbanism's widespread acceptance outside of the planning and architectural professions. It is responding to the commonly held ideals that shape the universal nature of our environment.

Post-Urbanism is then sufficient to explain the primary element, the particular, artistic interpretation. It produces artifacts that will either question or celebrate the execution of the universal. This is the architect's realm. The ability of a city to provide opportunities for the particular to emerge is incredibly important, especially when discussing the growth of a city.

The Growth of a City's Architecture

The joint resolution between New Urbanism and Post-Urbanism is more than a theoretical compromise. The interplay between the two can test a city's architectural life. The appearance of context-creating and context-departing buildings tracks the rise and fall of an urban area.

For an area to grow into a city it must have some original structure, in other words, it must have a collection of people. Upon the incorporation of a town or village, the existing structures become its dwelling. At this point the goal of the city must be to grow worthy of a primary element. While it exists in this "seedling" form, it draws architectural resources from outside areas. It does not possess the maturity to develop its own architecture. When the United States was a young country, much of its culture and thus architecture was only slightly different from that of England. When a city begins to diversify its fabric, it earns a primary element. That is, when an aspect of their culture grows

unique to that of a greater whole, a piece of architecture will be constructed to serve as an artifact, freezing that uniqueness in time.¹⁵ The evolutionary process of creating dwellings to earn new unique elements is perhaps the most explosive innovating force in the architecture of a city. However, this process is not without precedent.

For some time, Economists have understood this model as "import replacement."¹⁷ For example, an area is developing an industry around the production of coasters. The local craft of making coasters is sought after worldwide. While the town is the center of the coaster-making world, they lack industries to create drinks to place on the coasters, so they must import them. Eventually, a perceptive businessman thinks that perhaps the people in this town would like to have their own glasses to place upon their world famous coasters. Therefore, he builds a shop making various glasses that work in conjunction with the coasters. His business becomes popular and the town no longer needs to import glasses to place on its coasters. It has absorbed an import, diversified its economy, and is now searching for another import. The next import could be cup holders or perhaps paper towels to clean the unfortunate spill. If this process continues and compounds, as it does in growing cities, the town will be developing new industry after new industry, perhaps even over achieving its original businesses. This growth, however, did not occur until it produced something other than its beloved coaster. The ability of a city to import new types of architectural elements, into its own model and then replace it with another import is a measurement of a city's vibrancy. Every populated area will possess its own dwellings, but its ability to depart from this context or "original industry," will determine its architectural achievement.

Every large city has experienced this type of architectural growth during some period of prosperity. Chicago during the late 1800's and early 1900's was departing from its bungalow context more rapidly than perhaps any other city at that time.¹⁸ London, Paris, Rome and many others all had similar periods. All at one point, were smaller, less diverse towns that grew because of they were able to create unique primary elements and then rapidly build the strength to construct another one. Because of their role as the symbol of a

culture's pervasiveness, the creation of primary elements is also a good indicator as to the health of a city.

Returning to Chicago, in the early part of the 1900's, the Loop was the center of all economic activity in the American Midwest. The city grew at incredible rates, as evidenced by the rapid construction of primary elements. Architectural imports were absorbed and replaced quickly. The Tribune Building competition gathered ideas from throughout the architectural spectrum where they battled each other for primacy on Chicago's turf. German architect Meis Van der Rohe took his ideas of Modernism to the city, and created some of the best artifacts that remain of this period. As in most cities, the growth eventually slowed, and Chicago ceased to replace its architectural imports with new ones.¹⁹ Architects began to copy each other and created *memes*. That is, instead of new artifacts being created, the process stalled. From this point, the city began to attempt to build the vernacular support for new unique elements.

Often excluded from these histories, is the role of the dwelling, the neighborhood. During this same period, Chicago was increasing in population faster than any city previously had. The influx of people demanded the expansion of the dwelling space. Immigrants of all nations stitched themselves into the urban fabric, popularly known as the American "melting pot" effect. Ethnic neighborhoods each began their own, more localized process of city vernacular. The strength of a context has a direction correlation to the amount of meaningful opportunities to depart from it.

Formulating Strategies

Armed with the joint theories of New and Post-Urbanism, it is necessary to look how they may shape the future, not simply explain the past. Recently, few topics have received as much attention as suburbia. Cities have struggled for years to cope with the transition into becoming a region. At the time Rossi authored *The Architecture of the City* he set forth three scales with which to study a city. The levels were:

1. The scale of the street, including the built areas and empty spaces that surround it;

2. The scale of the district, consisting of a group of blocks with common characteristics;
3. The scale of the entire city, considered as a group of districts.²⁰

In the present day, a fourth scale must be added:

4. The scale of the region, an area made up of a city and its subordinate areas.

By adding this new level, Rossi's hierarchical system of describing an area still pertains. Certain suburbs are dwelling areas, the bedroom communities, each imitating the other with slight variation, the *meme*. Others, due to some unique circumstance, become centers. Whether it is a center of retail or entertainment or whatever functions it specializes in, is irrelevant. The center-suburb is the primary element for the suburban region.

The individual suburb can be analyzed using the same criteria. In addition to the various social and environmental arguments, suburban development has been criticized for its lack of place. It is an endless, undulating row of strip developments and detached single-family houses. Only recently, and mostly thanks to New Urbanism, have areas such as the suburban central business district (CBD) or transit-oriented development (TOD) come to exist. These developments enclose areas of density and diversity in a suburban setting, a "pedestrian pocket."²¹ They begin to develop street life and other urban characteristics. These developments could perhaps represent the maturity of the suburb. The suburb creates an artifact by growing a portion of city life. Suburbs have always been characterized as a sort of thief to the city. Businesses relocate to suburban locations while people move outward in search of open space. Rather than labeling the suburb as a detrimentally to a city, it is more appropriate to view it as something that is benevolent to the urban area. Therefore, it is the ultimate achievement for a suburb to create its own center, sub-city life in a suburban setting.²²

This idea changes the role of the architect in suburbia. Rather than attempting to change the patterns of life set forth by universal values, the architect should seek opportunities

to create suburban primary elements playing the role of the Post-Urbanist. Reworking Rossi's words, a primary element is that which will accelerate the suburbanization of an area. That is, an element that recognizes its own local identity while paying homage to the greater whole. Through this acceptance, the suburb can reinforce the identity of the city and region.

The city and its relatives are constant interplays between the particular and the universal. It is a field the theoretical terms to do battle at any scale, whether it is to that of a park or to that of a region. As Douglas Kelbaugh noted while he was moderating the Michigan Debates, the series gave birth to new types of "urbanism." He attributed this to the complexity that is inherent when discussing a subject such as the city. Cities are guided by urbanisms with all varieties of suffixes and prefixes; each one bringing a different understanding to the organized complexity that is a city. The most valuable "next" idea will be the one that continues to meld different thoughts and observations into a more integrated urban theory.

"I am an architect, a constructor of worlds, a sensualist who worships the flesh, the melody, a silhouette against the darkening sky, I cannot know your name. Nor can you know mine.

Tomorrow, we begin together the construction of a city"²³

Lebbeus Woods

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Images

Satellite image of Paris obtained using "GoogleEarth" a free program available online at www.earth.google.com