

New Urbanism: Touchstone for Planning

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Like most planners I got into this business because I care about the built and natural environments. It angers me that most of what is built today is just plain awful. Sure, there are attractive individual buildings, and there is some nice landscaping, and we are even managing to protect some open space. But are we creating any more “special places”, places worthy of our affection?

Think of the places that we admire: Portsmouth, Peterborough, Wolfeboro, Portland (both of them), Burlington, Boston’s neighborhoods, Nantucket, Manhattan, Charleston, Savannah, Alexandria, Cape May, Santa Fe. We have made it virtually impossible to recreate such places.

The DNA of our zoning ordinances – with help from traffic standards, a “blow and go” attitude among developers, rigid financing requirements, designing mainly for fire trucks and the 50 year party, loss of the craft of urban design, lack of imagination and nerve in the planning community, fear of liability, and myriad other factors – virtually dictates construction of soul-less subdivisions and commercial strips.

Traditionally, land was broadly demarcated by settled areas and a hinterland. Both have their charms. The city at its best showcases human achievement and vitality while nature offers beauty and solitude. And now what do we get? The ‘burbs. This juggernaut is inimical to nature *and* the city. Its all over low density pattern of development is oriented above all to the happiness of the automobile.

The Smart Growth movement honors the dichotomy of town and country. There is a consensus among planners, and indeed, among citizens, that we need to preserve open space. Yet, there seems to be little devotion to enhancing the complementary piece – the city, the place where we actually dwell. Smart growth advocates creating compact, vibrant, mixed use communities but it doesn’t say much beyond that. New Urbanism is the manual for how to create such places.

New Urbanism acknowledges the fundamental role of the automobile in modern society but the movement seeks first to build places oriented to the spiritual, social, and aesthetic fulfillment of human beings (while also accommodating the car). Jeff Speck, an architect with the firm of Duany Plater-Zyberk, said:

New urbanist work differs most dramatically from conventional development practice in that its fundamental building block is not the single-use pod, but the mixed-use neighborhood. Instead of constructing metropolises out of housing subdivisions, shopping centers, and office parks, the new urbanists construct villages, towns, and cities out of neighborhoods. The neighborhood is carefully defined as compact, walkable, and diverse, containing a wide range of activities and housing types within an interconnected network of pedestrian-friendly streets. It is

recognized not as a new invention, but rather as the fundamental form of human settlement throughout history. Indeed, it is by emulating historical places that the new urbanists were able to reintroduce the neighborhood into American planning practice.

New Urbanism (also called Traditional Neighborhood Development) may be contrasted with sprawl (also called Conventional Suburban Development) by their respective emphases on the following:

Traditional Neighborhood Development

Public realm
 Community
 Neighborhood parks, greens, squares
 Conservation of open space
 Moderate/high density
 Diversity
 Vitality
 A mix of uses
 Zoning by building form and scale
 Buildings oriented to the street
 Build to lines (i.e. maximum setbacks)
 Interconnected street network with short blocks
 Clear order to streets (such as modified grid)
 On street parallel or diagonal parking
 Narrow local streets, wider "boulevards"
 Large shade trees close to street
 Pedestrian oriented and human scale
 Multi-modalism
 Sidewalks
 Concern for civic art, design, and beauty
 Emphasis on architecture

Conventional Suburban Development

Private realm
 Isolation
 Large private lots
 Large private lots
 Low density
 Homogeneity
 Placidity
 Separation of uses
 Zoning by use
 Buildings turning away from the street
 Set back lines (i.e. minimum setbacks)
 Cul de sacs and collector roads
 Meandering "spaghetti" streets
 Off street parking lots fronting street
 Uniformly wide streets
 No trees near street for fear of liability
 Oriented to ease of movement for automobile
 Its all about the car
 Drive or walk in the street
 Concern mainly with engineering and utility
 Gaudy commercial buildings functioning as advertising for national chains

One hears various objections to New Urbanism - that it is only skin deep nostalgia, that these are great ideas but they are not practical, that it won't work in the North where we have snow, that it involves undue government control, that people reject density, that people reject mixed use, that there simply isn't much of a market for it. I do not think these objections hold up, though I concede that the movement faces significant challenges. Doing sprawl is simple and cheap and our institutions support it. Creating special places is complex and sustaining them is fragile. But, these ideas are very powerful and I believe New Urbanism represents the new paradigm.

Indeed, it is the dream of many Americans to have a large house on a large lot, separated from all around it, except for other large houses on large lots. This model may work for a conventional family with two cars and small children who can play safely in the cul de sac. But it does not serve the needs of those who don't drive or those who seek community rather than isolation - elderly, handicapped, or low income citizens, empty nesters, childfree couples, singles, hip planner types. And once the small children become a little older they need to explore, to test themselves. What kind of adventure is possible in this sterile environment?

We can't say the market really demands sprawl because homebuyers have not had a real choice. Sprawl is all that we have offered. In surveys, most people say they want to live in a town, not a suburb. Hence the huge prices for homes in genuine older neighborhoods and in the handful of new communities built in a traditional manner.

There are now many new urbanist developments around the country. I have visited several and been absolutely stunned by their beauty. These are wonderful, bold, dynamic places. Once we have a few examples in New England the idea will spread. I urge my colleagues to foster New Urbanism in their own communities. Establish a Planned Unit Development or a special TND zoning district. Demand good design and implement the ideas piecemeal wherever you can. Try to streamline the review process for good development and block the bad projects. Become a student of traditional planning principles. And above all, fight like hell to protect the few existing older neighborhoods and downtowns.

New Urbanism is my touchstone as a planner. What other touchstones do we have? Let us be more than handmaidens to traffic engineers, fire chiefs, lawyers, and shortsighted developers. Let us be passionate advocates for something better, for a planning approach whose merit has been established over thousands of years.