

## Comment on Charles C. Bohl's "New Urbanism and the City: Potential Applications and Implications for Distressed Inner-City Neighborhoods"

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### *Abstract*

This article argues that distressed neighborhoods greatly benefit from New Urbanist design. New Urbanists have been rebuilding distressed neighborhoods for years, and New Urbanism's mix of architecture, planning, and public policy offers inner-city neighborhoods the best set of tools available to improve the quality of life for their residents. Principles based on flexibility and absolute rejection of formula allow New Urbanism to offer solutions for a broad range of situations.

**Keywords:** Development/Revitalization; Low-Income Housing; Urban Planning

As I sat this past February surrounded by 1,500 housing authority officials all excitedly talking about designing housing for families with a range of incomes, determining the appropriate dimensions for streets, and meeting the challenges of integrating day care, parks, and shops into neighborhoods, I found myself overwhelmed by a sense of euphoria. How long has it been since public housing bureaucrats have been sincerely interested in the quality of the places they were creating? When was the last time that design was at the center of a federal housing program? Most would say that it has been a long time, if ever.

I am proud of the contribution New Urbanists have made to this remarkable cultural shift among the individuals and agencies responsible for providing decent housing for the poorest families. It is not just about fulfilling the design fantasies of a few notable architects; it is about righting the mistakes of the past and applying cutting-edge ideas about urban design and development to the most challenging problems our country faces. Seeing that our ideas are making a difference shows their potency and relevance.

American urbanism is experiencing something of a sea change. In just a few short years, the ideas that formed the basis of the New Urbanist movement have evolved from being considered radical to standing at the center of a national conversation about our future. What started as a small cadre of mavericks is now a large, growing, and diverse move-

ment. In just a few years, the Congress for the New Urbanism's (CNU's) membership has expanded from a core of architects, designers, and planners to a diverse group that includes public, private, and nonprofit developers; financiers; transportation specialists; elected officials; academics; and citizen activists. Our strategies for making prosperous, livable, and beautiful places are being talked about in town halls, coffee shops, and boardrooms. In small cities and large metropolises, livability, affordability, and quality of place are being debated. These are the issues that increasingly matter.

What seems to be missed by most critics of New Urbanism is that the movement's ideas and principles purposely defy categorization and specialization. By its design, the *Charter of the New Urbanism*, the document that guides the efforts of our members, calls for a holistic approach: one that spans disciplines and seeks to integrate social, economic, and physical strategies to combat the problems of sprawl and the decentralization of urban America. The charter also sets forth a series of principles for all scales of place—region, neighborhood, and block—as well as all types of places within a region—urban, suburban, and rural. This complexity is the reality of development practice and the realm of policy issues that practitioners face today. To quote the charter:

The Congress for the New Urbanism views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental degradation, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge.

We stand for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy. (CNU 2000)

Most critics point to New Urbanists as the builders of a better suburb, without understanding our simultaneous interest in the whole region and all its parts. Yes, the suburbs do in fact need attention. Because the vast majority of this country's development is located in the suburbs and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future, we believe that our focus on building transit-linked networks of walkable neighborhoods is a viable and valid strategy. It makes sense from environmental, economic, and equity perspectives precisely because New Urbanist neighborhoods are compact, mixed use, and mixed income.

Critics ignore the fact that many New Urbanists have been working in urban settings for years and believe that as market interest in urban reinvestment grows, the pressure for development at the edge will

gradually slow. As well documented in Bohl's article, advocates for New Urbanism have taken their ideals to both market-rate and subsidized housing projects in the inner city. This work is not about transferring the low-density strategies of the suburbs to urban neighborhoods; nor is it about sanitizing the vitality and experience of cities to one common denominator. By its very nature, New Urbanism calls for design, development, and management strategies that are place sensitive, respect the desires of residents, and bring a renewed commitment to city living.

The work New Urbanists have done to reintroduce design and place making to public housing investments has made a difference. Some 150 HOPE (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) VI projects are under way across the country. Granted, not all of them are the best examples of great architecture, and many of the architects involved in them would be the first to point out places where they would have preferred to build with greater density, as Bohl rightly points out. But most of these projects do make a substantial leap forward by being sensitive to the architectural traditions of their region, respecting individual pride by making each housing unit identifiable, addressing safety concerns by reconnecting isolated street networks, blurring the distinction between the "haves" and the "have nots" by building all units to the same level of quality, and—perhaps the greatest insurance for building long-term value—giving residents a voice in the design process. Strip away the rumors attached to New Urbanism and these are the strategies at its heart.

Some critics argue against the policies of the HOPE VI program and, by association, CNU. It is true that many of the projects receiving funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under this program are using traditional building types. This often results in fewer units as derelict high-rises are replaced by housing that is similar in character and scale to the housing in the surrounding community. However, we need to examine our priorities. Isn't HOPE VI's admission that the public housing of the past was a failed mistake that hurt communities and ruined family lives more than a symbolic statement? Isn't the attention to design excellence and the commitment to building all housing regardless of residents' income to the same level of quality a step in the right direction that could be improved if coupled with additional local and regional efforts? Watching the way HUD has continually raised the bar each year as competition for funding becomes fiercer gives me confidence that the program has the flexibility to continually improve.

I am the first to criticize HUD for not always requiring one for one replacement of affordable housing units and transferring remaining

residents to portable housing vouchers.<sup>1</sup> Whether one believes in the effectiveness of portable Section 8 vouchers or not, much more should be done to build scattered-site permanently affordable housing in communities throughout a region. HUD should be a leader in this effort precisely because it is creating a demand for affordable units and because it has made a commitment to mixed-income neighborhoods. Even if we do not count the families forced by HUD to find suitable housing with a voucher, there is a tremendous need for decent, safe, and quality housing for those with limited incomes. We should be expanding the supply of affordable housing to a diversity of households in neighborhoods close to growing job centers, in communities that have good school districts, and in areas that have always been considered places of privilege but also need people to mow lawns, clean homes, and teach children. But a design-based movement cannot do this alone.

Persuasive arguments need to be made to convince citizens that new housing in existing neighborhoods need not ruin their quality of life; to encourage public officials to zone for mixed-income neighborhoods, not just income-generating commercial properties; to entice banks and lending institutions to loan funds for innovative projects; and to show developers that there is an upside to doing business differently. Making these changes will take a broad-based coalition of interests that touches all sectors and all interest areas.

Much of the criticism heaped on New Urbanists stems from a belief that designers (though we are not all designers) should not be concerned about social issues or economic strategies. Critics say, “Design alone can’t make community life flourish” or “design can’t get someone a job or improve their health.” Only the most simplistic view of the world would make such a claim. As very clearly stated in the charter:

We recognize that physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework. (CNU 2000)

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<sup>1</sup> The year 2000 HOPE VI grants are creating more housing and losing less public housing. The 18 projects receiving funding will demolish 6,778 units (of which 30 percent are vacant) and create 10,128 new units. (This will increase the occupied stock by 128 percent and the total stock by 50 percent.) Unlike what happened in previous years, 60 percent of demolished public housing rentals will be replaced, and another 14 percent will be targeted to public housing families eligible for homeownership units. The remaining units will be made available to families of diverse incomes.

Not all new grantees will rebuild on site. Off-site development has become an important element of the HOPE VI strategy for deconcentrating poverty and revitalizing communities. Less than two thirds of the housing to be built by year 2000 grantees will be located on the original public housing properties.

New Urbanists recognize that the process of effecting change in our communities is built on the strength of partnerships. Thus, collaboration among disciplines, by diverse interest groups, and with citizens is key to making a difference on the ground and creating replicable models for community change. It is a problem-solving approach, rather than an attempt to stake out territory.

Bohl has done a remarkable job of documenting the work of the New Urbanists and addressing many of the common criticisms of a movement that is not static, but rather is constantly growing and evolving. His research illustrates this point well by describing a great variety of projects under the New Urbanism banner, from efforts to revive high-density living in San Francisco and Jersey City (NJ) to filling in damaged neighborhoods in Chattanooga (TN) and rural Mississippi. Each setting demanded a different physical response to market conditions and community concerns. It is this flexibility and absolute rejection of formula that I believe defines the cutting edge of New Urbanism.

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### *Reference*

Congress of the New Urbanism. 2000. *Charter of the New Urbanism*. World Wide Web page <<http://www.cnu.org>> (accessed September 7).