

Comment on Charles C. Bohl's "New Urbanism and the City: Potential Applications and Implications for Distressed Inner-City Neighborhoods"—The Politics of Design: The New Urbanists vs. the Grass Roots

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Abstract

This article briefly reviews the origins of New Urbanism and its manifesto as emerging from the social change movements of the 1960s, which evolved out of ideas of a previous generation of American and European designers living through the rise of modern industrialization. Arising from the same turmoil of the 1960s, and parallel to the New Urbanists, evolved a more loosely affiliated network of progressive academic and practicing planners and architects who have aligned themselves with disenfranchised underclasses not benefiting from the wealth of the postwar era and who take direction not from a manifesto but from a body of thinking linked to a broader intellectual and political agenda. This group works primarily with grassroots organizations in lower-income communities and intentionally stays out of the limelight to better serve its constituents. The article concludes with ideas for possible collaboration between these professional groups serving different ends of the socioeconomic spectrum.

Keywords: Development/Revitalization; Low-income housing; Urban planning

Origins

This article is written by someone who has been living four lives at once: one as a practicing architect serving almost exclusively lower-income communities, another as a professor training future architects to do the same, a third as a political activist assisting lower-income communities in their efforts to achieve economic and social justice, and finally as a preacher/author trying to improve the design quality of environments for lower-income communities in regions beyond where I practice professionally.

Contrary to the way it may be portrayed by, or to, the media, New Urbanism was not created suddenly by a handful of people who invented these ideas. The organization represents the natural convergence of ideas incubating among thousands of my peers who, over the past 30 years, have been rethinking, experimenting, and practicing these ideas we thought would be better ways of organizing humanity and implanting ourselves on this planet. As we approached our fifties, we had the experience and track record, whether in the academy or in practice

(or both), to find ourselves in positions of power and with the credibility to begin to be heard. We understand that the values underlying the products and environments produced for the middle classes in the late industrial age are out of sync with the intelligence and environmental awareness of a growing segment of those same classes, a quality of life awareness gained during the Information Age, built on half a century of postwar, publicly subsidized higher education. But some of us are also realizing that the recommendations of our generation to help those classes out of their dilemmas are too often out of sync with the needs of lower socioeconomic classes.

Our generation's sense of mission sprang from both the benefits and mistakes of the previous generation of architects. An earlier generation of artists, designers, and architects who shaped the Modern Movement also sprang from a set of social, economic, and political conditions unique to their time that linked them with industrialists and other forms of emerging new wealth to promote the values of mass production and the liberating promises of the Machine Age. Partly inspired by admirable, socially motivated tendencies, many wanted to spread the cultural wealth that industrialization promised. Mass production held the promise of expanding the demographic base of consumption, leading to physical comfort and convenience for everyone, while modern design, with its more "rational" basis for mass production, held the promise of better meeting human biological and even spiritual needs.

The more "progressive" designers of that same movement wanted to weaken the hegemonic cultural control exerted by the wealthy classes through their pompous architectural displays and possessions, an aesthetic learned in educational settings that mimicked France's elite *École des Beaux Arts*. While these creations required labor-intensive work by skilled craftsmen, they often ignored the needs of the masses. The Modern Movement in architecture provided a new and exciting aesthetic foundation for mass production, but at the same time it was assisting the increase in wealth and power of the industrial new rich who exploited the growing numbers of factory-based workers.

The progressive architects of that earlier generation saw the burgeoning factory-based cities of the Machine Age as desperately needing reform and simultaneously devised two opposing strategies, one for rebuilding and one for escape. Inner-city densities and mixed uses in older cities inspired architects' dreams of erasing their dense and unhealthy mixes with high-rises and open spaces to improve light and air, in their view the ingredients for a healthy life. Others, driven by more romantic, almost anticity dreams, developed ideas of how to build idyllic communities in more country-like settings. While the former (rationalists) gave support to urban renewal schemes, the latter (romantics) and their descendents went on to contribute to America's mid-20th-century suburban escape.

And so was born America's interconnected system for urban renewal/removal and suburban growth/sprawl, both resulting in a wasteful consumption of resources and negative consequences for families, whole communities, and the environment. Both efforts primarily served the interests of citizens who appeared to pay their own way, although major government subsidies heavily assisted both enterprises. Both efforts created less than admirable consequences for the poor and working poor.

In the face of these disconcerting conditions, my generation was entering the schools of architecture and planning during the 1960s. The Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War and its military draft reaching up into the middle classes, the unjust consequences of urban renewal and removal, and the damaging exploitation of the environment all angered my generation. It prodded these new design professionals to direct that same doubt and suspicion about arrogant corporate and military expertise toward their own educational institutions and the dogma popular at the time that dictated how to design a better world for humanity. By the mid-1960s, boycotts were the order of the day in schools of architecture and planning, and radical reform of design and planning curricula was the preoccupation of the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s.

It should be noted that most of my generation accepted the culture of consumption and its exhibitionism, joining in its celebration either through overtly commercial applications or as high art in various strains of radical individualism and self-indulgence and some stretching the limits of their believability by claiming links to philosophical deconstructionism.

An old adage states that architects do not come into their prime until they begin to approach 50. It is not by accident that these many strains of protest and quests for better alternatives are now reaching maturity for this generation. What might be characterized as the progressive left has coalesced around such organizations as the Planners' Network (PN), the Association of Community Design Centers (ACD), and Architects Designers and Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR). The first two formed in the early 1970s, a direct outgrowth of the previous decade's disenchantment with the results of market-driven economies, and the last in the early 1980s in response to Reagan's callous disregard for social and economic justice and poor environmental stewardship. Also in the early 1970s, university-based faculty and researchers looking toward the social and behavioral sciences formed the Environmental Design Research Association to improve the foundations on which the work of architects and planners is based. Some of the more mainstream practicing professionals, who also held academic positions permitting them to reflect and experiment, were also seeking change by resurrecting proven physical patterns and formal solutions from U.S. and Euro-

pean urban history and revising them to suit today's realities. They congealed only recently under the rubric of the "New Urbanism," which formalized itself in the early 1990s. It came on the scene to serve the suburbs, which finally grew to being the nation's centers of political and economic power, maturing to intolerable physical conditions while at the same time their offspring were rediscovering the cities. Even when the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) is attempting to serve the underclasses, its entrée into these efforts is through agencies whose style and interests are often distrusted by those being served, and for good reasons learned from experience.

Hence, as in the Modern Movement and the International Congress of Modern Architecture, internal differences of opinion within my generation of architects and planners revolve around class issues, that is, where in the body politic and culture do these ideas arise, and who is paying for their evolution? Some understanding of these differences may lead to an understanding of areas of overlap and potential complementarity between the members of the CNU on the one hand, and the ACD, PN, and ADPSR on the other. Some of us, myself included, are members of all of these organizations because of their significant areas of overlap and mutual contributions. And as with all organizations, some would classify their differences as either more or less severe than I do.

Characteristics

Scale

The CNU has placed itself squarely in the service of some very established sponsors: the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and its HOME and HOPE (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) VI programs; private developers working in the suburbs; private developers and redevelopment agencies working in older inner cities; and, only occasionally, nonprofit development corporations. The last tend to execute smaller infill projects that do not have the power to attract major media attention or to display as dramatically the promise of the organization's physical design principles. The CNU, whether consciously or not, wants larger projects to achieve real impact and to provide demonstrations it thinks are worth emulating. So the CNU, with only a few exceptions, gravitates toward larger-scale sponsors. In doing so, it often finds itself having to represent powerful interests that are displacing others in the way of development, whether land uses like agriculture on the edge of the city euphemistically referred to as "greenfields" or blue-collar industrial uses and low-income residents within the city, derogatorily referred to as "brownfields." Redevelopment agencies, and now public housing authorities (PHAs) using the HOPE VI program, are examples of this kind of revitalization through gentrification.

However, most members of the PN, ACD, and ADPSR frequently find themselves serving grassroots organizations and communities bearing the brunt of change instigated by these larger public and private partnerships. Their professional skills are aimed at local self-determination and developing forms of revitalization that include protection against displacement. Indigenous communities, squatters, migrant workers, inner-city tenants' rights organizations, and "communities of resistance" are among their clients. This is not to say that governments do not contract for the services of these professionals. Quite often they do, to help agencies steer their policies in directions that will reduce friction across socioeconomic classes. An excerpt from the PN's very brief statement of purpose as given in its journal highlights its basic differences with the CNU:

We believe that planning should be a tool for allocating resources and developing the environment to eliminate the great inequalities of wealth and power in our society....We advocate public responsibility for meeting these needs, *because the private market has proven incapable of doing so* [emphasis added].

Politics

Given who it serves, the CNU must appeal to the moderate middle of the body politic and avoid deeper structural criticisms. Injustices in the system must be noticed, but solutions must first pass the test of the centralized sponsoring agencies. To its credit, the CNU is not intended to be another academic manifesto, but one whose principles get applied, no matter what. If the powers that be—HUD or a local mayor or redevelopment agency—see homeownership as the solution to neighborhood revitalization, and renters must be displaced, the CNU adopts that ideology. Does anyone ever seek to displace large concentrations of wealthy people to create a healthy mix of incomes? Of course not. Only those *without* property stand in the way of progress and since they are much cheaper to move, and since it is believed that they have serious social pathologies anyway (which is why they have gotten themselves poor in the first place), some must always be displaced to create healthier communities.

We as a nation no longer have slavery, but tenants, whether rural or urban, are truly second-class citizens and are treated as less than equal by our property laws, tax codes, and development policies. The CNU, fixated on applying physical design formulas, skirts these issues as the purview of others. Inviting Angela Blackwell to speak about gentrification at the recent CNU conference in Portland came after many cries for attention to this issue, and her minor presence on the agenda was eclipsed by the growing magnitude of the CNU's built work that facilitates gentrification.

Recently, the University of California's College of Environmental Design at Berkeley sponsored a conference on New Urbanism. One of the keynote speakers invited to the conference was Oakland's Mayor Jerry Brown, presumably because he is encouraging the development of 6,000 new units for 10,000 new residents in downtown Oakland. The organizers paid little attention to the fact that he is not only luring in developers of market-rate housing, but he is also aggressively and publicly campaigning against any more production of affordable housing, calling it the "slumification" of Oakland. He is encouraging developers and property owners to shut down the remaining SROs and he has already given an eviction notice to an SRO and multiservice center for the homeless owned and operated by the city. He has even encouraged a nationally known development corporation interested in downtown Oakland to exclude the 20 percent set-aside for affordable units it was planning on its own to include in its development. The price paid by the CNU is going to bed with the centers of power that embrace the logic and ideology of the free market. The CNU, more consciously than not, is taking sides at times that are proving to be embarrassing, if not structural, to its approach.

Methodology

For the CNU, if there is to be any local participation in decision making, it is usually facilitated by professionals under direct contract to the sponsoring agencies to be certain that outcomes do not contradict their goals and intentions. The CNU speaks to the need for flexibility and responsiveness to local conditions through participation, and the goal is to achieve comprehensive solutions to community problems, which may not always be physical. But the CNU approach ultimately rests on a collection of physical design formulas. Local participation is directed into and within that framework. To question the expenditure of public dollars on sticks and bricks instead of intensive tutorials, serious job training, educational trust funds for residents, microloans for small businesses, and perhaps spending less on physical improvements with only enough to meet code and repairs is simply not tolerated. Both public and private developers, viewing the world from the middle of the class structure, see a well-designed environment as a higher priority than intensive people-oriented solutions.

Never in words, but always in actions, the measure of success in this world view is too often seen in terms of increased property values. Recent claims of success by HUD in its HOPE VI program state that residents' incomes have risen by 32 percent in the transformed projects. This may disguise the fact that people with higher incomes were imported into the upscale projects and lower-income households were exported with vouchers. Also, given the history of capitalism, the present so-called economic boom will eventually come to an end, and how

will we fare when incomes of poorer households drop and because of HOPE VI there are fewer units available for communities to use as a safety net?

A quick scan of just a few of the PN's newsletters and a review of some of the projects undertaken by the ACD's membership reveals a bottom-up methodology. These efforts have, first and foremost, the intention of achieving empowerment, not rebuilding real estate conditions. Community organizing is the long-term goal, to use whatever real estate project undertaken by local organizations as a means of building that community's ability to protect and expand its interests against more powerful propertied interests. Good design and sensible spatial combinations of land uses are important goals, but both are always in the service of building the economic and political capacity of disenfranchised members of a community, not merely improving local property values. In fact, in a market-driven economy, these goals can often be in direct conflict.

In this alternative view, award-winning physical solutions are not the ends, but act more like trophies to prove that a local, underserved population has the capacity to achieve fine results when given the opportunity. Hence, how local human resources are brought together and involved in analysis, invention, and implementation is critical to achieving this long-term human goal. If the very idea of bringing change to a community and finding ways to achieve it is instigated by outside sources of capital, any effort to seek local involvement in someone else's plans will always meet resistance, no matter what good intentions the design team may have of soliciting local input.

The point being stressed here is the fundamental difference in the position that physical design plays in organizations like the PN or ACD versus the CNU. For these alternative designers and planners, their work and their products are tools for organizing disenfranchised communities, as a review of their periodical, *Planners Network*, reveals. For the CNU, the photogenic results of the built environment and the policies and codes that will achieve them, after all is said and done, still seem to be the end purpose, given the overwhelming majority of the content of its periodical, *New Urban News*. A reader cannot help but conclude that they believe good physical planning and design, as defined by its experts, are the sine qua non for making a better society.

HOPE VI

In some ways it is no wonder that HUD and local redevelopment agencies are rushing to the physically fixated CNU formulas. To the progressive left, this predisposition for seeking quick physical fixes as signs of social improvement is endemic to the class position of those

who steer these agencies. After all, they are directed by legislators and executives who reflect the dominant ideology. This is not to downplay the importance of well-designed and comfortable environs for everyone, for this is what all four of my lives as an architect are about. But there are too many beautiful places in the world populated by perfectly miserable people and too many miserable places populated with perfectly wonderful people still living with high hopes because certain social, cultural, and educational opportunities are perceived to be, or are in fact, in place for their offspring. Such observations from traveling in the First and Third Worlds cannot help but give pause to messianic assertions about the important role of good physical design in making a good society. It is for this reason that I have hesitated to submit my work as examples of New Urbanism because I cannot ascribe to it the same levels of salvation as its leadership does. When used in this manner, our work as architects and planners becomes a kind of cultural legitimization for the inordinate preoccupation with property values held by elements of the larger society.

It is often argued that the dramatic removal and rebuilding of communities is what the poor also want. But what choices are given? If, instead of a new HOPE VI unit that may cost up to \$250,000 to develop, a family were offered an alternative in the form of a minor code rehabilitation of its existing home accompanied by an annual grant of \$25,000 for five years (taken from the annual interest on \$250,000) to create an educational trust fund for their children, which would that family choose? A family may reside in the newly built unit for five years; maybe for a decade as it gets older and more worn. What is the asset life span of a quality education? A lifetime.

The CNU may respond that physical improvement is HUD's charge, and after all, under HOPE VI some funds can now be diverted away from sticks and bricks to social and economic programs. But if the CNU has achieved the clout with HUD that it claims, it could be using its bully pulpit to refuse to serve those PHAs that are fixated on unnecessary physical improvements, either in the form of totally rebuilding or gut rehabilitation, to the detriment of people programs. And, certainly, they should not be serving any PHA that has not made one-to-one replacement a high priority to ensure that all units for very low income households are replaced one for one, either onsite or offsite.

This has not been the case, and there has been an unconscionable silence on the part of the CNU about the lack of a national one-to-one replacement policy. A few years ago I helped a tenants' rights organization in Seattle prepare an alternative to a plan for a HOPE VI teardown of over 900 public housing units for very low income residents. The new plan was to have only about one third of the new units available to households at that level. The CNU, under the auspices of HUD, was asked to review the local housing authority's design along with others emerging around the country, to be certain they were "CNU approved."

The tenants' rights group was convinced that the proposed New Urbanist remake was too costly—the application of certain of its planning principles for gridded streets and alleys necessitated an extensive road and infrastructure system, which consumed an inordinate amount of the budget. A less expensive but equally workable revision was devised as an alternative; it saved the existing picturesque garden city layout and most of its 250 mature trees and also saved substantial funds to help build off-site replacement units available to very low income residents. The tenants' rights coalition convinced the city council, which withdrew several million dollars of city funds, redirecting them to nonprofits to help build the lost units offsite. The original New Urbanist layout, however, went forward, with the reduced number of units available to very low income households. Across the country, stories abound about the injustices of HOPE VI and co-opted methods of “resident participation,” which are “vouchering out” outspoken troublemakers.

The Seaside Institute is sponsoring a series of a dozen conferences for 2000–01 about New Urbanism. All but one are open to the public or to anyone who can pay the admission fee. Only the one being cosponsored by HUD, the CNU, and the Urban Land Institute on the design of public housing is *by invitation only*. This exclusivity can only send the message that this union has something to hide or is afraid to include certain topics of discussion that critics might bring to the table.

Style

This will not be a discussion of architectural style. I am referring to the self-management style of the CNU itself. Granted, the organization is not even a decade old, but after eight years the same handful of founders still rules its board with tight control over its content and direction. Task forces established by the members are a recent innovation to get them participating in the organization's direction, but ultimately their recommended initiatives must be approved by the board. A recent effort to single out the unique conditions of lower-income communities in the inner city as opposed to greenfield conditions, and more specifically how to deal with the problems of structural poverty, gentrification, and so on, was to be addressed by an Inner-City Task Force. This group has been folded into a larger task force called Development and Implementation, presumably to ensure that discussions about equity remain part of other discussions that include private developers pursuing market-driven strategies. Only time will tell how these particularly thorny political issues will survive in that setting.

While the organization wants to be more inclusive, it remains affordable primarily to well-paid professionals. Its recent conference in Portland cost \$400 per person, in addition to hotel and travel expenses. The ACD

held its conference at a local community facility in the same city at the same time, with an entry fee of \$50. This is a reflection not only of the incomes being earned by the different memberships, but also of a difference in approach that attempts to expand access to nonprofessionals of modest means. Because of the simultaneous timing of these two conferences, the ACD, with 30 years of experience as architects and planners in lower-income communities, approached the CNU with its less than 10 years of experience, to mount a panel discussion of the unique issues facing designers, as learned from its perspective. The CNU turned down the proposal. While the ACD mentioned in its conference literature that the CNU was occurring simultaneously and that members were encouraged to attend both when possible, the CNU made no mention of the ACD conference in its literature. In fact, many of the CNU leadership had never heard of the ACD.

Possibilities for collaboration with the CNU

Given that the CNU sees its mission as giving physical form to the goals and aspirations of larger development entities, whether government agencies or private developers seeking major transformations in the physical environment, and recognizing that these interests are not always in sync with the interests of lower-income populations, perhaps the membership of the PN and the ACD can be seen as a pool of advocacy professionals available to those with less economic and political clout who may feel themselves to be, or who are in fact, threatened by the consequences of these larger interventions. In the same way that the justice system ensures balanced representation by allocating two pools of public funds to support both public prosecutors and public defenders, there needs to be professional representation for those without property when plans to alter our environment are being developed. Those threatened must be organized sufficiently to select their representatives and be prepared to develop their own proposals for change independent of the sponsoring agency's team or to make informed responses to those proposals from a base of professional advice that they can trust.

With all due respect for the CNU's members, they cannot be all things to all people if specific interests are paying the piper. This has always been true with real estate development, and the CNU has not proven itself immune to these biases. This approach can bring much relief to CNU members when addressing inner-city conflicts because they no longer have to play a duplicitous role, fearing the anger of their sponsors if they side too much with the complainants, while scheming with graphics and language to seduce suspicious lower-income residents or neighbors to accept their sponsors' plans. Even when dealing with the kind of NIMBYism (not in my backyard-ism) that market-rate developers face when operating in more upscale communities, the experience

with careful, honest community participation built on neighborhood trust, which ACD and PN members have developed, can be an asset to moving such developments forward.

I personally have been tapped by private developers who attended my presentations about the methods I have used for involving lower-income communities in the planning and design of projects sponsored by local nonprofit developers. These other developers recognized the value of the same processes even when involving more upscale communities in the process of designing their projects, since ultimately there really are no class conflicts between the proposed developments and the local communities. However, I have turned down requests by nonprofits and public agencies to facilitate participation in projects that ultimately would have co-opted the interests of lower-income residents.

The role of the advocate architect or planner is to seek workable solutions acceptable to those threatened. The teams of professionals engaged by both sides are not in a win-lose encounter, but on an honest quest for options that can satisfy everyone. There will certainly be compromises on both sides, but those who distrust the motives and potential consequences of the sponsoring agencies will at least have the satisfaction of having been heard and not having been manipulated by someone else's team.

Conclusion

Those who know my built work cannot understand why I have been so vocal in my criticisms of the CNU. My affordable housing work has won its share of awards and is seen as sympathetic to CNU principles. Given my explanation at the start of this article of where most of my generation of architects have chosen to apply their talents, some may think I am just a few degrees away from where the CNU seems to be headed. As a CNU member, I fully respect the extraordinary way the organization has tapped into middle-class discontent about lowered quality of life and, moreover, the way it has been able to muster the attention, if not the involvement, of architects, which is nothing short of herding cats, myself being a case in point. And the case studies the CNU has been collecting are truly extraordinary achievements, given the effort it takes to move the inertial mass of our culture away from its habits of living learned over the past 50 years.

But it is that very central position of physical design put forth in the CNU's overall scheme for improving society—not just how narrowly that position may be defined, but also how it is being applied within disadvantaged communities—that has alienated me and others in the organizations I have cited, as well as other caring members of the larger design professions who hesitate to embrace it. By accepting the

dominance of the “material” in our society, the organization may be just perpetuating the deep causes of our maladies, correcting them only enough to redress its recent destructive social and physical consequences, to allow us all to continue to make acquisition and appearances the centers of our being.

The critics of the CNU will not bring down what is becoming the dominant ideology of the mainstream for the development of our environment in the foreseeable future because it is compatible with the logic and philosophy of market-driven economies. While the CNU may help many in the years ahead, we can only hope that its members will make the effort to minimize the pain they will be causing others. If not, the next generation will soon be after them, pointing to their contradictions and failings and noting how capitalism compromised their charter and co-opted their membership into simply creating a more seductive form of business as usual.

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