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Editors' Introduction

From Seaside to Southside: New Urbanism's Quest to Save the Inner City

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Introduction

Our national mood is improving. Crime is down and the economy is up. Even our long-troubled cities seem to be enjoying a renaissance. Riding the wave of renewed interest in cities is New Urbanism—architecture's answer to our rediscovered urban heritage. New Urbanism models its developments on an eclectic combination of traditional urban neighborhoods from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Neotraditional building styles and mixed-use, mixed-income, and pedestrian-oriented development are New Urbanism's defining characteristics. The Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), complete with a charter and annual conferences, is the member organization that advocates New Urbanist design.

Many people long for what was lost with the decline of "the old neighborhood," even if most Americans today have never lived in traditional urban settings. New Urbanism's initial success with resort towns like Seaside, FL, capitalized on this nostalgia. What started with a resort town soon led to upscale suburban developments such as Kentlands in Maryland and Laguna West in California. Now in a new twist, New Urbanism is turning its techniques—borrowed from old city neighborhoods but developed for the suburbs—to the inner city. This forum examines how a design movement that began with the resort town of Seaside can be used to redevelop the country's "southsides"[1]—low-income, minority neighborhoods found in central cities.

In some ways, New Urbanists' interest in turning their attention to distressed inner-city neighborhoods seems like a logical progression. It has come full circle: returning to help the very places that inspired the movement. However, New Urbanism's inner-city initiative is not without its critics. How well suited is a design movement born in wealthy resorts and suburbs to improving conditions for the poorest

[1] "Southside" refers specifically to neighborhoods in Chicago, but here it is used as a generic term for distressed inner-city neighborhoods. Claritas Corporation, the nation's leading target-marketing firm, uses the label "Southside City" to describe the lowest-income population cluster found in cities (Claritas 1999).

of the poor? Does using New Urbanism in these places really just herald gentrification, turnaround, and displacement? We commissioned the articles in this forum to address New Urbanism's applicability to distressed communities. In addition, an earlier version of the lead article framed a special panel session at the 1999 Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) conference in Chicago.[2]

The forum

The articles in this collection represent a range of opinions about what New Urbanism can do for distressed neighborhoods. All three authors agree that New Urbanism can make very low income neighborhoods and public housing projects more livable places. They diverge, however, on most other points.

The lead article, by Charles C. Bohl, argues that New Urbanism's application to distressed neighborhoods offers solutions but is not a cure-all. Within limits, New Urbanism is indeed an effective tool. Problems arise, however, when too much is ascribed to it. New Urbanism's critics raise the charge of physical determinism—that New Urbanists believe pretty buildings alone will solve social problems. Bohl's article addresses this issue and seeks to reconcile New Urbanism's ambitions with its limitations. In the panel, Avis Vidal explained that Bohl describes New Urbanist design as what she calls an "enabling tool." Design can create an environment where good things can happen more easily, but it does not have the power to change social behavior all by itself.

Bohl's article also provides numerous examples of how New Urbanism works in inner cities throughout the country. He describes its role in rebuilding public housing through the HOPE (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) VI program as well as its use in infill projects in distressed neighborhoods. These cases highlight the impressive physical improvements that New Urbanist design can make. While Bohl generally offers a positive appraisal of the cases he covers, he also recognizes that New Urbanism is only one element of a comprehensive community redevelopment effort.

> As an isolated approach, New Urbanism is open to the criticism that it represents a quick real estate fix that relies on the discredited notion of physical determinism. As part of a coordinated strategy, however, it provides a flexible, incremental approach for revital-

[2] The panelists were Alexander Garvin, Planning Commissioner for New York City's Planning Commission and a Professor at Yale University; Neal Payton, Senior Associate at Torti Gallas and Partners-CHK; Robert Shibley, Professor of Architecture and Planning Professor at the University of Buffalo–State University of New York; and Avis Vidal, Principal Research Associate at the Urban Institute.

> ization that blends with the city and complements it, rather than fragmenting and dissolving it.

Shelley R. Poticha, Executive Director of the Congress for the New Urbanism, not surprisingly argues that distressed neighborhoods greatly benefit from New Urbanist practices. She states that New Urbanists have been rebuilding distressed neighborhoods for years and that 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. She also notes that contrary to common assumptions, New Urbanism is not an orthodoxy. Its "flexibility and absolute rejection of formula," rather than any strict design doctrines, define the movement.

Poticha also discusses the best-known application of New Urbanism in distressed neighborhoods—HOPE VI. The Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) partnership with New Urbanism in the HOPE VI program often comes under fire from critics. Detractors charge that HOPE VI redesigns reduce the number of project housing units and thus displace some of the original residents. Poticha points out that this is HUD's policy, not something inherent in New Urbanist design. In fact, she is "the first to criticize HUD for limiting its financial support of affordable housing to the project site and transferring remaining residents to portable housing vouchers."

In sharp contrast to Poticha, Michael Pyatok argues that New Urbanism has very limited applicability to distressed communities. He bases some of his argument on an examination of the design tradition from which New Urbanism and the CNU arose. Unlike community-based design groups such as the Planners' Network and the Architects, Designers, and Planners for Social Responsibility, the CNU coalesced mostly from more centrist, less grassroots professionals. As such, New Urbanism focuses more on improving the products—the buildings and streetscapes—than on addressing social problems. As he states, "By accepting the dominance of the 'material' in our society, the [CNU] may be just perpetuating the deep causes of our maladies."

The difference between Pyatok's and Poticha's views is even clearer on CNU's relationship with HUD and HOPE VI. Pyatok believes that the CNU has the responsibility to redirect HUD's emphasis on expensive physical redesign and abandonment of one-to-one replacement of public housing units:

> 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 [public housing authorities] that are fixated on unnecessary physical improvements….And, certainly, they should not be serving any PHA that has not made one-to-one replacement a high priority.

Also, while Poticha advocates for more scattered-site public housing to make up for the reduced number of on-site units, Pyatok claims that the CNU's insistence on massive physical redevelopment means that there is less money available to subsidize off-site units. In a sense, he believes that New Urbanism has the wrong clients, that it caters to the needs of HUD and other big developers rather than directly to the needs of community residents.

Despite their differences, Bohl, Poticha, and Pyatok are all CNU members. The interrelated set of problems that the CNU recognizes—failing inner-city neighborhoods, suburban sprawl, automobile-dependent growth—concerns all three authors. They would all agree that design should have some role in addressing these issues. The disagreement lies in the path one chooses to get from distressed neighborhood to revitalized community. On this question, Poticha and Pyatok have polar views, and Bohl falls somewhere in the middle. Poticha believes that design is paramount. Without it, the social and economic elements of redevelopment will not hold together and will not be sustainable. Pyatok places greater importance on the social and political context in which design is used. He worries that by focusing mostly on design, New Urbanism plays handmaiden to those who may use it to legitimate controversial and inequitable public policies.

All three articles stray into larger issues when addressing how effective New Urbanism is for distressed inner-city neighborhood revitalization. To formulate an idea of its inner-city applicability, we first need to consider its definition. Is it an architectural style, design manifesto, or social movement? By untangling the vast number of ideas that people term "New Urbanist," we hope to better understand what New Urbanism can and cannot do for low-income city residents.

Growing pains

New Urbanism is getting more complex as it matures. When reading through the ACSP session transcript and the forum manuscripts, we found that several concepts are often conflated: the aesthetic of New Urbanism; the CNU; the work of individual design firms such as Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company; urban design in general; and particular financing, zoning, and planning tools. These are all at one time or another referred to as "New Urbanist." Part of the problem may lie in the fact that as New Urbanism gains popularity, more and more people latch on to its likable premise. This means that more and more practices are being called "New Urbanism" than ever before.

This growing complexity, which is illustrated in the CNU's movement from "Seaside to Southside," causes an identity crisis. One can find parallels to this crisis in the evolution of numerous social and religious

movements. It is not uncommon for these movements to begin with strict orthodoxy and then shift toward accommodation with the rest of society to secularize—over time (Niebuhr 1987). That appears to be occurring with New Urbanism. It began with a small band of architects and designers who devised a new design manifesto that rejected prevailing development patterns. The CNU has since expanded its focus and is now working with some of the very organizations that have long been the purveyors of "bad" urban design, such as HUD and the Urban Land Institute. This may make the founders (and for that matter CNU's critics) a bit uneasy, but it is an important step if the movement is to have a major effect on American cities.

As the CNU expands its scope and broadens its impact, some of its practices must become flexible. For example, a strict interpretation of New Urbanist design can be so costly that fewer public housing units can be built. If New Urbanists offer a less expensive version of their design for public housing, they risk compromising their principles to satisfy HUD. Many in the movement will probably be willing to make such sacrifices so that New Urbanism can work in distressed communities. However, in time, some may argue that such compromises will undermine its effectiveness.

Untangling New Urbanism

In the ACSP session, Jay Chaterjee, dean of the University of Cincinnati's College of Design, asked our panelists, "It is clear to me that New Urbanism is neither 'new' nor 'urban.' What is it?" If the head of an urban design school has difficulty pinning down a definition of New Urbanism, it is further indication of an identity crisis. Is New Urbanism a "collection of expert helpful hints" as Robert Shibley says ("New Urbanism and the City," 9), a comprehensive program to rebuild cities as Poticha describes, or something entirely different?

Peter Katz's 1994 book on New Urbanism divides the practice into three levels of urban hierarchy: the region, the neighborhood (including districts and corridors), and the street (including blocks and buildings). The Charter of the New Urbanism, first adopted in 1996, codified these geographical scales. In fact, the CNU recently instituted a new "Charter Award," which recognizes architects and urban designers for projects in each of the three categories (CNU 2000). The CNU believes that when city-building is done well, the street, the neighborhood, and the region are tightly integrated and function together.

Although geographic integration is a worthy goal, in reality the elements of the hierarchy often do not relate to each other. The disjunction leads to situations where New Urbanist design is applied in a neighborhood that has no interconnectivity to the region. For example, there

is no effective mass transit to the New Urbanist development of Kentlands in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. This may lead some to ask whether Kentlands truly meets the charter's requirements. The CNU would rightly argue that Kentlands is a first step toward creating a New Urbanist region. This may be true, but there are a lot of obstacles in moving from project to metropolis. In the short term, the existing built environment shapes how New Urbanism is used.

The charter describes what New Urbanists believe a well-designed metropolitan area should ultimately look like, but we need a different categorization to explain how New Urbanism is actually being used in today's sprawling America. The de facto categorization we offer here examines how people apply New Urbanism—regardless of whether they share the CNU's larger vision. New Urbanism is really at least three different practices: an aesthetic style, an urban design practice, and a set of land use policies. Its aesthetic style refers to neotraditional, contextualized architecture. Urban design practice refers to New Urbanist–prescribed streetscapes, public spaces, and densities. New Urbanist land use policies include mixed-use, mixed-income, mixed-tenure, and transit-oriented development.

Figure 1 shows the relationship among the three New Urbanist practices. The pyramid reflects the hierarchy of the use of New Urbanism.[3] The most ubiquitous is aesthetic style—it is often used without the other two. For example, many subdivisions now feature New Urbanist–inspired neotraditional homes but they are on standard suburban lots. The urban design component has not been as readily adopted as the aesthetic style, but it is more common than New Urbanist land use policies. To do "true" New Urbanism, all three categories must be in place. But as the Kentlands example illustrates, it is difficult to integrate style, design, *and* land use.

Why are there so few true New Urbanist projects—ones that meet the high standards the Charter of the New Urbanism outlines? The land use policies required to meet those standards are very difficult to implement, mostly because the market will not bear it. For example, Gyourko and Rybczynski (2000) point out that because of their mixed-use nature, New Urbanist projects are difficult to finance. Even when investors want to use New Urbanist streetscapes and density levels (this sort of design appeals to a niche market and can increase property values), the mixed-use component is so hard to finance that investors abandon it. Despite this niche market demand, most consumers still resist New Urbanism. In a 1995 survey conducted to estimate the market for New

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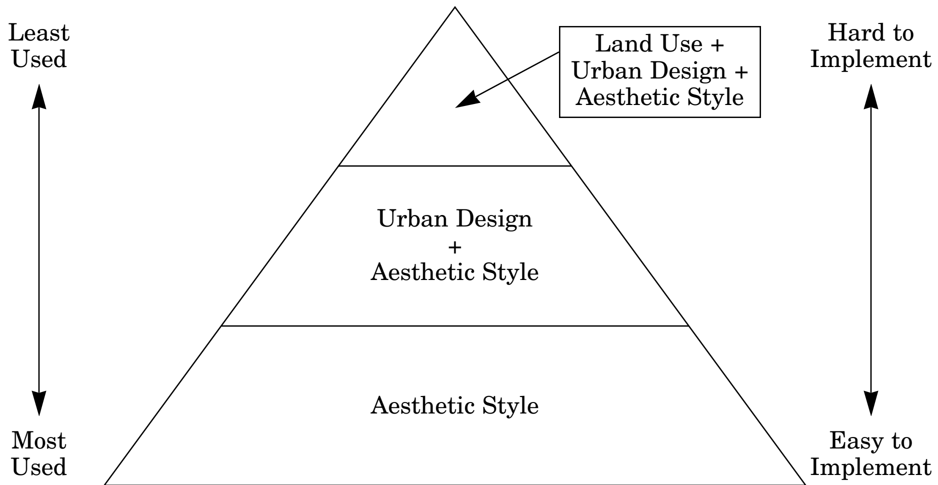
[3] The hierarchy is organized as a Guttman scaling. Louis Guttman developed the scaling to show the hierarchy of combined elements in observations. Some elements, the most common, can appear alone, while others require the presence of elements lower on the scale (Babbie 1986).

Figure 1. **Hierarchy of the Use of New Urbanism**



Urbanist design features, only a fifth of the respondents liked New Urbanism as prescribed by the CNU (neotraditional architecture with high densities and mixed use), while nearly half wanted New Urbanist–style houses, but *without* New Urbanist urban design (American LIVES, Inc. 1995).

The real world is messy. Because of our cities' complexities, the ideal metropolis described in the CNU's charter is not easily built. The New Urbanist elements most frequently implemented—its architecture and to a lesser extent its urban design—move us toward neighborhoods where pedestrians come first, cars come second, work and services are evenly matched with homes, and urban sprawl remains in check. There is a danger, however, that the style and urban design New Urbanism champions may decouple from its deeper socioeconomic and environmental goals and leave us with slum clearance of a different sort. Instead of displacing the poor by razing their homes through urban renewal, they may be displaced by being "priced out" of their own neighborhoods.

Learning from Modernism

New Urbanists use Modernism as a point of comparison.[4] Contrasting the two illustrates how New Urbanism's housing design draws from local vernacular where Modernism rejects it. New Urbanists are quick to point out that their design better blends low-income housing into neighborhoods and even reduces the stigma that residents of such

[4] This comparison sets Modernism up as a bit of a straw man. For example, Modernism has not influenced public housing design for several decades.

housing may suffer from living in easily identified subsidized units (Bothwell, Gindroz, and Lang 1998).[5] New Urbanism also solicits the input of current residents through the charrette process, while Modernist designers would never think of asking those living in their developments for an opinion (Wolfe 1981). While New Urbanist architecture and urban design process are starkly different from Modernism's, some similarities bear a closer look, for they offer a cautionary note.

Both New Urbanism and Modernism began their influence in niche markets that included government projects and wealthy patrons. New Urbanism began with resort towns and exclusive suburban communities, and then spread to subsidized developments such as HOPE VI. Modernists were originally commissioned for luxury homes, including upscale apartment buildings, and then moved on to public housing. Wolfe (1981) noted the irony that some of the nation's poorest and richest citizens lived in high-rises designed in the same architectural style. The same can be said, although a bit less dramatically, of New Urbanist developments.

Just as it did with the Modernists, the federal government stamped its seal of approval on the New Urbanist movement. Both movements successfully lobbied federal officials to adopt their public housing design. In 1996, New Urbanists succeeded in having HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros sign their charter. The three forum articles point out that HUD subsequently adopted many New Urbanist practices in the HOPE VI program.

As Alexander von Hoffman noted in this journal several years ago, Modernist public housing advocates believed in the primacy of design in changing social conditions. They felt that "an ideal or improved residential environment will better the behavior of residents as well as the conditions of its inhabitants" (von Hoffman 1996, 423–24). In *From Bauhaus to Our House,* Tom Wolfe (1981) says that Modernist architects also convinced public officials that their designs could transform the lives of the poor. The result, Wolfe argues, was a disaster. Commenting on the problems at the famous Pruitt-Igoe housing projects in St. Louis, Wolfe (1981) noted that

> In 1971, the final task force called a general meeting of everyone still living in the project. They asked the residents for their suggestions….The chant began immediately: "Blow it…up!"…In July of 1972, the city blew up the central blocks of Pruitt-Igoe with dynamite. (74)

[5] This may be true to a degree; however, it is also possible that over the next several years a distinct low-income New Urbanist design that once again stigmatizes its residents could emerge.

What caused this reversal of fortune? How could a design practice that held so much promise become the symbol of all that is wrong with city building? Part of what happened, as Robert Shibley noted in our panel session when someone suggested that New Urbanism was simply an architectural style, is that there are unintended consequences when style gets separated from larger goals. If New Urbanism is simply an architectural style, Shibley says, "We run the same risks that the Modernists ran. When Modernism was appropriated as a style, it essentially lost its social charter..." ("New Urbanism and the City," 22).

The bigger concern for New Urbanists is that their efforts to remake low-income neighborhoods will meet the same fate as the Modernists. Will a new design movement be needed 50 years from now to correct New Urbanism's excesses? One way to avoid this possibility is by better understanding New Urbanism's limits. The forum that follows considers this very issue.

Authors

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