

The New Urbanism

BY ERIC O. JACOBSEN

The New Urbanists are quietly reviving the ancient practice of civic art. They are bringing together experts, residents, and stakeholders to articulate a vision for their communities—one based on historical models of blocks, streets, and buildings that form a coherent and aesthetically pleasing urban fabric.

Following the destruction by Hurricane Katrina of eleven municipalities stretched out along 120 miles of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Governor Haley Barbour invited architect and cofounder of the Congress for the New Urbanism Andres Duany to help with the rebuilding. The governor instructed him to “do what you do and do it well.”¹ Duany responded by gathering 100 fellow New Urbanists and about the same number of Mississippians in Biloxi for a week to formulate a coherent plan for recovery.

To many observers, this meeting revealed a different side of Duany and his cohorts. Prior to the publicity from this event, many who had heard of New Urbanism believed it was a specialty niche within the real estate development industry, providing a charming (if somewhat nostalgic) alternative to the ubiquitous suburban subdivision that has dominated the market for much of the post-World War II era. In some respects, their impression of the New Urbanism is not entirely inaccurate. Much of the demonstrable impact of this movement on the built environment consists in their roughly 650 developments in various stages of completion throughout the United States and around the world.² Many of these projects are popular with middle- and upper-class clientele and reflect a distinct similarity to the charming pre-WWII neighborhoods that many remember from their childhoods.

Despite this quaint reputation, the speed and effectiveness with which Duany and his New Urbanist collaborators were able to respond to the rav-

ages of Katrina reveal a deeper significance of this movement for the future of all American communities. While the majority of private developers have been offering individualized products to autonomous clients, and government planners have been focusing more on the needs of automobiles than people, New Urbanists have spent the past twenty-five years quietly reviving the ancient practice of civic art. They have recovered some of the historical models for blocks, streets, and buildings that together form a coherent and aesthetically pleasing urban fabric. They have advocated a planning process, known as a "charrette,"³ that encourages experts, residents, and stakeholders to work together to articulate a vision for what they want their communities to look like.

The upshot of this more fundamental approach is that when a New Urban project succeeds it does so not by selling customers a product or pushing legislators toward a policy. New Urbanism gains momentum by winning converts to their vision one community at a time. People involved in the planning process come away committed not only to a particular plan, but also to a new paradigm for looking at the physical form of their communities. As the number of those converted have continued to grow, it was just a matter of time before a prominent neophyte like Governor Barbour was in a position to invite leaders of the movement to play a role of national significance. The post-Katrina rebuilding effort is just one dramatic example of how the ideas generated by New Urbanism have begun to shape the built environment far beyond the confines of their particular projects.

THE NEW URBANISM

Although New Urbanism has been an organized movement since 1993, its beginnings can be traced back to the development of Seaside on the Florida panhandle in the early 1980s. Developer Robert Davis had acquired an eighty-acre parcel of land that he wanted to develop differently than the beach resorts that were being built up and down the coast. Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, architects who were toying with the idea of planning traditional towns, had not yet had an opportunity to put their ideas into practice. Davis hired them to help him with Seaside.

Since Walton County, Florida, did not have any zoning codes to speak of, Duany and Plater-Zyberk wrote their own and set about laying out the town. They developed a coherent network of streets radiating out from a town center. The public spaces and civic buildings got the best locations and the private residences were allowed to fill in the spaces that were left over. Street parking was allowed but there were no parking lots for cars. Houses were built in relative proximity to one another and were placed close enough to the sidewalk that one could carry on a conversation from front porch to sidewalk without raising one's voice. There was a network of alleys to allow parking behind the houses, which meant that instead of a sea of garages, there were welcoming front doors and porches fronting the

houses. Housing types ranged from large mansions to small cottages, and small apartments were allowed above the stores.

In short, they broke every rule in the private developer's and governmental planner's rulebook. For this reason they were expected to fail miserably, but just the opposite happened. It turns out that people will trade some private space for an improved public life and that giving pedestrians as much consideration as automobiles can lead to a functional and charming environment. In the first decade of its existence, house values at Seaside outpaced those in the surrounding areas, sometimes as much as ten to one.

Following the success and publicity of this project, the firm of Duany and Plater-Zyberk was flooded with work. New projects implementing Seaside's Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) philosophy began sprouting up all over the country. In time a number of other developers, planners, and architects were working along the same lines and (when they could get their projects built) were experiencing the same kinds of success as Seaside. Not all counties were as unregulated as Walden, however, and most TND projects faced significant hurdles from unyielding municipal planners and anxious lenders. In 1993, the veterans of these various battles met together in Alexandria, Virginia, and founded the Congress of the New Urbanism (CNU). Three years later, they drafted the Charter for the New Urbanism and have met annually ever since.

Rather than pursue a radical utopian agenda, CNU has worked to expose the faulty logic behind post-WWII suburban development. In the suburbs everything is separated geographically by its function. Housing is separated from shopping, shopping from offices, large houses from small houses. One of the many implications of this arrangement is that one needs a car to get from one function to the next. Density in the suburbs tends to be low, which further discourages pedestrian activity (as well as public transit) and the public realm is so undervalued that the experience of getting about tends to be demeaning as well as frustrating.

In contrast to this recipe for the abdication of citizenship, the CNU has called for a rediscovery of the notion of neighborhoods, districts, and corridors that can "form identifiable areas that encourage citizens to take responsibility for their maintenance and evolution."⁴ Such high aspirations for their projects distinguish the New Urbanists from other developers who are mostly interested in selling a product. It also helps explain why New Urbanists were so quickly chosen to help rebuild the Gulf Coast.

Despite such elevated goals, New Urbanists are not utopians. They tend to be adept at articulating a concrete vision. They insist, for instance, that traditional neighborhoods have a particular form. Unlike a suburban subdivision, a neighborhood has a clear center and edge, is about a five-minute walk from center to edge, is mixed-use (includes places for living, working, shopping, playing, and worshiping), and gives priority to public places (sidewalks, good public buildings, parks, and plazas).

Over time, the CNU has become increasingly careful to avoid an exclusively urban frame of reference. They developed a transect scheme which articulates six levels of gradation from the dense urban core to a true rural setting.⁵ For each level of gradation, there is a corresponding set of requirements to maintain an environment that fosters human connection and community. This transect zoning model allows New Urbanist projects to function in a variety of settings from typical suburban densities to high-rise condos. In fact, the New Urbanist transect is forcing us to redefine what does and does not constitute a suburb.

Besides defining the neighborhood and gradating transects, the most helpful contribution of CNU to the practice of community building has been their promotion of the charrette planning process. For anyone who has ever been frustrated at a public review meeting where developers or policy makers pretend to listen to community concerns and where people come to read angry speeches, the most important point to grasp is that a charrette is a completely different experience. One factor that makes a charrette work is the breadth of participation.

Organizers take great pains to encourage everyone who has a stake in the outcome to come and join the process. On hand are architects who can quickly draw ideas as they come up and technical experts who can offer definitive answers to questions about culverts and fire codes. Most of the work is done by multiple small groups around tables who collaborate on ideas and then share them with the group as a whole.

By the end of the week-long charrette, there is usually a focused idea that is better than anyone's personal agenda. As the trust level increases during the charrette, players who had been at loggerheads for years are surprised to find themselves engaging in real dialogue and adapting their views and making concessions. The energy and sense of civic ownership following a typical charrette can be a salve to a wounded public process.

With each New Urbanist project that exceeds the expectations of residents, bankers, and policy makers, the next project has an easier time gaining a hearing. As successful projects become known, New Urbanist ideas gain wider acceptance. Government planners and private developers now routinely adopt New Urbanist techniques. Mixed-use development that

Unlike subdivisions, neighborhoods are about a five-minute walk from a clear center to edge, are mixed-use (with places for living, working, shopping, playing, and worshiping), and give priority to public places (sidewalks, good public buildings, parks, and plazas).

allows residential and commercial activity in one neighborhood (or building), which was almost unheard of ten years ago, is now standard practice in the industry. Parking requirements that typically require surface parking in front of every building (think of your local K-Mart or 7/11 convenience store) are being relaxed to allow businesses to share parking so buildings can come right up to the sidewalk as they would on a typical main street. These are just a few examples of how the movement is having an impact beyond its 650 projects.

RESPONDING TO CRITICS

New Urbanism emerged among a group of architects who were frustrated with the architectural establishment. Andres Duany, who was trained at the Princeton University School of Architecture, provides this pointed critique of his discipline:

In response to their growing sense of insignificance, some architects have tried to regain a sense of power through what can best be described as mysticism. By importing arcane ideas from unrelated disciplines – such as contemporary French literary theory (now outdated) – by developing illegible techniques of representation, and by shrouding their work in inscrutable jargon, designers are creating increasingly smaller realms of communication, in order that they might inhabit a domain in which they possess some degree of control. Nowhere is this crisis more evident than in the most prestigious architecture schools.⁶

It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the most vocal critics of New Urbanism are in the architectural establishment. For instance, in response to the news that Duany's team had been invited to participate in the post-Katrina rebuilding efforts, Eric Owen Moss, director of the Southern California Institute of Architecture, predicted that New Urbanists would deliver a "'canned response' to rebuilding the Mississippi coastline and that their traditional designs would appeal 'to a kind of anachronistic Mississippi that yearns for the good old days of the Old South as slow and balanced and pleasing and breezy, and each person knew his or her role.'"⁷ Besides exemplifying a rather nasty and unsubstantiated bit of mudslinging, Moss's comment reveals a common misunderstanding about the New Urbanist movement. New Urbanism is not primarily about favoring any particular architectural style, but about promoting good urbanism. Whereas architecture is about buildings – often treated as isolated objects – urbanism is concerned with how the spaces among the buildings shape the public realm. Urbanism involves making streets feel like hallways and plazas feel like welcoming rooms that invite people to explore, rest, and enjoy social interaction with one another. For urbanists, the architecture of the individual buildings *is* significant, but it is definitely secondary to the central task of urban planning.

Another critique often leveled against New Urbanism is its supposed complicity in the process of gentrification. As middle- and upper-class Americans rediscover the pleasures of downtown living, prices in redeveloped urban neighborhoods are climbing and poorer residents are being priced out of their homes. Frustrated over this demographic trend, Glenn Smith, professor of urban theology at McGill University, offers a common charge about the movement's support base: "New Urbanism is essentially a white, elitist movement."⁸

Gentrification is a serious issue and should not be taken lightly. However, gentrification is part of a much larger social process wherein the poor are forced to live where no one else wants to. New Urbanists are not causing gentrification nor are they able to stop it by some sort of authoritative decree. Gentrification can only be tempered by government policies that protect the rights of the poor or by the work of churches and other institutions of compassion. Market-dependent actors (such as developers, architects, and urban planners) are very limited in what they can do to reverse this trend.

The general principles advocated by the CNU encourage the use of less resources, support public transportation, and lead to a better functioning and more beautiful public realm. All of these things ultimately serve the poor better than the suburban alternative. Often the price for a home in a New Urbanist project is higher because people are willing to pay a premium for something different than suburban sprawl. New Urbanists have been cursed by their success.

A third critique of New Urbanism comes from libertarians who are concerned that New Urbanism is colluding with the government to curtail property rights and prohibit Americans from driving cars. In order to address this concern adequately, we need to draw a distinction between New Urbanism and Smart

Growth. These movements often get confused because they share many of the same goals. Both are interested in supporting a more sustainable, less automobile-dependent, and ultimately more enjoyable way of developing the built environment. In general, New Urbanists are pursuing this goal within the private sphere using the market mechanism as their engine.

When New Urbanists do become involved with issues of public policy,

Urbanism involves making streets feel like hallways and plazas feel like welcoming rooms that invite people to explore, rest, and enjoy social interaction with one another. The architecture of the individual buildings is significant, but secondary to the task of urban planning.

it is often to seek a variance from zoning laws or parking regulations that they feel have been too tightly inscribed. Our automobile-dependent suburbs are not, after all, the product of unrestricted development, but of strict government regulation and targeted subsidies.⁹ In general, the New Urbanists stand to benefit if government were less involved in the development

Jeremiah's message to "seek the shalom of the city to which you have been called" includes peace, wholeness, and restored relationships. We have interpreted this too abstractly—setting up programs to benefit individuals, but neglecting the shalom of the physical city.

process. Smart Growth, on the other hand, represents an attempt among planners to achieve some of the same goals as New Urbanism through the mechanism of government policy.

New Urbanists are not against cars; they simply want to create viable alternatives to using a car for every trip. This agenda strikes me as being strongly in favor of freedom. Many New Urbanists actually want to reclaim the ro-

mance (of driving on an empty highway or parking before a grand building on an urban plaza) that car commercials promise but rarely deliver.

The final critique that I will consider is the charge that New Urbanists have not fully escaped the ghost of Modernism, which has bedeviled the architectural profession for much of the last century. As David Harvey puts it, "The movement does not recognize that the fundamental difficulty with Modernism was its persistent habit of privileging spatial forms over social process."¹⁰ In other words, a fundamental tenant of Modernism is that human behavior can be controlled through the proper manipulation of physical spaces. Almost every example of this philosophy being carried out in the twentieth century—from the failed utopian experiments early in the century to the housing 'projects' of the 1960s and 1970s—have served to disprove this basic belief.

New Urbanists believe that Modernist projects failed because the abstract physical forms they took were fundamentally flawed. By looking to traditional forms of buildings, blocks, and neighborhoods that give shape to urban life rather than some kind of radical new model, New Urbanists are exhibiting more wisdom than their utopian predecessors and have been able to create more humane urban spaces. However, Harvey's point is a good one. Because of their particular area of expertise, New Urbanists will tend to be more comfortable working with the physical form of community development than with the social process that is needed for long-term success.

This is precisely why the charrette process is so strategic for New

Urbanism. The charrette is an effective mechanism for enabling the kind of social process that brings cohesion *and* community ownership to a plan. The New Urbanists' liberal use of the charrette process is one of the movement's greatest strengths, for it prevents the New Urbanists from repeating the fundamental errors of Modernist planners. However, the charrette alone will not inoculate the movement from formalism. The charrette as a social process deals mainly with the initial stages of a particular project. Once the project gets built, there continues to be a need for a social process that encourages residents to become neighbors and neighbors to become citizens. But instigating such a process may be more than we can expect from architects and developers.

SHALOM AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

If we build new traditional neighborhoods that attract homeowners who have lived their entire lives in the privatized world of a suburban subdivision, will these people automatically act more neighborly toward one another? This is a central question as we think about the long-term impact of the CNU on the experience of community. It also provides a good place to begin thinking about the role of the Christian community in this movement.

The answer to this question begins by acknowledging that authentic community usually requires a combination of what I call good 'hardware' and good 'software.' Good hardware is precisely what is on offer from the CNU—buildings, streets, and blocks that dignify daily life, connect us to the physical realities of our local context, and encourage (or, at least, do not discourage) spontaneous social interaction. But hardware alone is not enough. We know this because in some new traditional neighborhood designs the most inviting public places are devoid of vibrant activity, just as in some older traditional neighborhoods the residents do not make eye contact on the street. What is needed in such situations is improvement in the 'software,' the patterns of interaction among the residents. Some TNDs have hired community coordinators to encourage people to get out of their homes and to invest in one another's lives. As the CNU movement develops, I think more creative ideas will be implemented along these lines.

The Christian community can lend support to this effort. If church members are sensitive to the different perspectives represented in their community, a congregation can be an effective catalyst for community development. Members can invest their lives in the neighborhood by enjoying its amenities and advocating for its improvement. The church building itself can be a welcoming public space for both sacred and secular functions.

Jeremiah's message to the Babylonian exiles was to "seek the *shalom* of the city to which you have been called" (see Jeremiah 29:7). *Shalom* includes peace, wholeness, and restored relationships. In the Church we have interpreted this prophetic call too abstractly; we have set up programs to benefit individuals, but neglected the *shalom* of the physical city.

The eleven Mississippi cities destroyed by Hurricane Katrina are not the only North American cities that need an infusion of shalom, but their dire situation is helping us to see some interesting realities more clearly. The CNU has shown it is prepared to undertake the challenge of shalom when invited. May the Christian community, likewise, find a unique role to play in the restoration of cities and towns.

NOTES

1 "Rebuilding," *The Bradenton Herald* (March 7, 2006), 8C.

2 Information about many of these projects is available online at the Congress for the New Urbanism's website, www.cnu.org.

3 "Charrette" (French for "cart") refers to an intense session in which one completes an art or architecture project. This usage probably derives from when tutors at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris in the nineteenth century sent a hand-drawn cart to gather final drawings from students.

4 "The Neighborhood, the District and the Corridor," in *The Charter of the New Urbanism* (1996), online at www.newurbanism.org/pages/532096/ (accessed May 11, 2006).

5 For a description of the six patterns of human environment in "transect zoning," from the unpopulated "preserve" to the highest density urban "core," see "Transect Applied to Regional Plans," *New Urbanism News*, 5.5 (September 2000), online at www.newurbannews.com/transect.html (accessed May 11, 2006).

6 Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York, NY: North Point Press, 2000), 213.

7 Blair Kamin, "Mississippi Rocks the Boat with Bold Coastal Designs," *The Chicago Tribune* (October 18, 2005), 11.

8 K. Connie Kang, "New Urban Model Becomes Article of Faith," *Los Angeles Times* (June 25, 2005), B 2.

9 Lee Hardy briefly summarizes the story of government planning of suburbs in "Dysfunctional Cities: Where Did We Go Wrong?" on pp. 11-19 of this issue of *Christian Reflection*.

10 David Harvey, "The New Urbanism and the Communitarian Trap," *Harvard Design Magazine* 1 (Winter/Spring 1997), online at www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/1harvey.html (accessed May 11, 2006).



ERIC O. JACOBSEN

is a Ph.D. candidate at Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.