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From Educational Resistance to Professional Reform

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A professional education in architecture and urbanism is an introduction to the field, a process of preparing to practice. It is also an intense moment of acculturation. Students are presented with a structured view of their discipline and instructions on how they may operate within it.

For my generation of architects, who began their studies in the mid-60s, this experience was particularly intense. In those years, the human tendency to question authority and received wisdom degenerated into a torrent of dissent. The perceived shortcomings of our education and perceived urgency to recast our profession led, after many years of soul-searching, to the definition of New Urbanism and an architecture within it.

What were the educational deficits we experienced and how did our response to them lead to New Urbanist counter positions? The curricular focus was on Modernist architectural and urban design ideas, inspired by the Congress International Architecture Moderne. The teaching method was based on the prospect of developing student geniuses under the guidance of brilliant, individual faculty members. The design programs were abstract; the design emphasis was on personal expression. Little has changed since then.

There was no exposure to a method of learning architecture and planning that accounted for the evidence of a living tradition. Design was not presented as a body of intelligence transferred from generation to generation, as it has been throughout most of human history, but as a process of perpetual re-invention. This lack of concern with history is now firmly established in the teaching of our discipline.

There was a lack of engagement with the social, economic and political forces that sponsor and direct both the public and private aspects of development. This was an urgent, almost desperate

challenge at the time. Urban renewal was in full deployment as federal policy, its ravages felt everywhere. Massive tract construction and strip development were threatening the viability of historic neighborhoods and downtowns. The civil rights struggle begged the question of social equity.

This ideologically insensitive curriculum, based on ignorance of the effects of design on society, and society on design, had predictable effects. It drove most of our peers and mentors towards an orgy of formalism that shows no sign of abating. It challenged some of us to rethink our role as architects and to reform the view of architecture then prevalent.

Accommodation or Reform?

The second stage of a professional career begins as graduates enter the context of an existing professional structure. In this time of apprenticeship and accommodation, young professionals can either join their fresh, new voices and personal interests to an established, stable professional ethic, or reject existing canons and practice in an attempt at professional reform.

The founders of the New Urbanism movement chose the second route. Our initial professional exposure to architecture and its allied professions convinced us that our elders' obsession with single buildings, high technology and self-expression was incompatible with redressing the mounting crisis of sprawl.

We realized that the challenge of our lives would be the pursuit of individual design projects in the service of a larger order: The reconstruction of the city and the stewardship of nature. In the early 1990s, we concluded that without sacrificing the individual interests, professional recognition or creative potential of any single office, there would be unimaginable opportunities for

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advancing the cause of American architecture and urbanism if we were to somehow operate in unison under a single ideological umbrella.

Thus was born the New Urbanism, paraphrasing Jaquelyn Robertson's words of fifteen years ago, as "market-driven, community-responsive physical design at the scale of the region, the neighborhood and the single building that could drive the policy agenda of public action in the entire country." Our group grew, and before long we drafted a charter—a manifesto wrapped around a set of principles enabling constructive action. The charter was phrased to allow those who wish to combat sprawl from every direction, not design alone, to find a niche within the Congress.

An Evolving Agenda

The third phase of a career begins when one's personal and professional maturity allow for a full engagement with society. Leadership and service are the process of doing daily work that is principled and in the interest of establishing a new standard of practice. New Urbanism's agenda has emerged directly from the intractable challenges of livability and practice we encounter every day:

Designing physical settings where people can associate by choice. This means places where people can freely generate a community of neighborly interests, not the deterministic framing of humanity in a particular architecture. New Urbanists also advocate designing settings that offer people a choice of living options. Sprawl provides only one: The single-family house in a tract with nature sailing away as subsequent tracts drive it out of reach.

Encouraging cooperation. Andrès Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk persuaded us to look at our colleagues as collaborators, not competitors. They shared their work with others, many of whom launched new practices, thus spawning a whole new professional class of urbanists. Sharing common goals and cooperating, New Urbanist practitioners have precipitated change in scale and speed disproportionate to their numbers.

Promoting generalist practice and multidisciplinary peace. Modern culture's fetish for professional hermeticism, protagonism and specialization is notorious. The separation of schools and professions dealing with physical design into tribes, each with its own myopic credo and marching orders, is an outrage. New Urbanists, through charrettes and collaborative practice, have promoted respect, self awareness and inquiry among all professions with a role to play in urbanism.

Relying on public advocacy. The public process is grinding, sometimes unpleasant, often irrational and infuriating. But there is no choice except to move New Urbanism forward with the help of deep popular support. All New Urbanist projects, without exception, are carried out in public. Community engagement is particularly important beyond the single project level: Changing general plans and zoning codes means rallying citizens. New Urbanism's strategy of providing superior living places through design in the marketplace is also a form of eliciting popular support.

Continuing to learn. Urbanism is a lost art, thus New Urbanists are making a substantial effort to enhance the theoretical base of this movement. Some of us are engaged in typological and morphological studies of buildings and urban settings in order to establish the regional strains of urban form. The most profound contribution has been Duany's *Lexicon of the New Urbanism*, an encyclopedia that clarifies nomenclature and provides a taxonomic order of the formal elements of urbanist practice.

There is awareness that we do not know enough about the nature of our work, that we need to discover its past and invent a new order of practice. We need to continue to learn in the interest of remaining critical observers and self-critical actors in the process of urban development. The task of defeating sprawl requires no less a commitment of intelligence and energy.

CNU Charter Awards

CNU's new Charter Awards will be granted to projects that best fulfill the Charter of the New Urbanism. There are three categories, corresponding with the three sections of the Charter: the regional scale, the neighborhood scale and the small scale of blocks and buildings. The jury, chaired by architect Raymond Gindroz, comprises experts from the tops of their fields. Materials must be requested from CNU by November 1, 2000; full submissions will be due December 15.

Stefanos Polyzoides is incoming board chair and a founding board member of the Congress for the New Urbanism. He is principal of Moule and Polyzoides, Architects and Urbanists, and professor of architecture at the University of Southern California. This essay is excerpted from The Seaside Tapes, A Critique of the New Urbanism, to be published by Rizzoli this winter.