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## The Secret Tools of New Urbanism

Steven Bodzin

CONGRESS  
FOR THE  
NEW  
URBANISM

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Ask a New Urbanist, “Why do you waste your time?” A movement takes time and energy. Most designers don’t worry so much about their social legacy and their environmental impact. And most people who do care about such issues become political activists, NIMBYS, and even, on occasion, terrorists. What does it take for someone to convert a political and social sensibility into the design and development of real estate?

I recently asked three prominent New Urbanist practitioners what formed their sensibility, and how others would do the same. Their replies were, in most ways, quite different. Yet the same tools kept popping up: Travel agent. Measuring tape. Patience. Hope. Anger.

### Travel Agent

The single item that comes up time and again for urbanists is travel. Travel reveals how to build, and how not to build. Sometimes, the travel doesn’t have to go far to take a big step. The urbanist aesthetic “is hard-wired,” states Andres Duany, of Duany-Plater Zyberk and Company. “I have taken students who grew up in sprawl. I have taken them to see street life. ‘Ah-hah!’ they say.” Such a revelation can happen in any real city, and even some small towns.

For the advanced development of urbanist tastes, Robert Davis, developer of Seaside, Florida, recommends Europe above all. “Start with Rome,” he says. “The oldest and greatest city.” In Rome, one can see the attempts of Renaissance popes and others to transform a medieval warren into a legible city.

Elsewhere in Italy, one can find the remains of the Ideal City movement, which Davis credits as “Perhaps the oldest antecedent to New Urbanism.” He recommends Pienza, in particular, as a city that followed the Ideal City tenets in an infill context. “It had to face the constraints of politics,” he says, “But the result is more interesting than the greenfield projects of the same period.”

Stefanos Polyzoides of Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists, and President of the Congress for the New Urbanism, credits his experiences as a child in Athens for his confidence in good urbanism. “I saw 60,000 people in a stadium without parking,” he says. “I saw the advantages of compactness and excellent neighborhood structure.”

In America, Davis recommends Chicago. “We are in much the same picky as our forebears were in 100-odd years ago, when industrial cities had grown at an astounding rate. It was a mess of inadequate infrastructure and ugliness, inhospitable for habitation. City beautiful was posited and acted upon for 40 years, transforming the cities.”

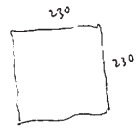
Duany recommends travel for the doubters of urbanism. “Go to China, to Pompeii, you’ll see hamlets, villages, towns, and cities. These forms appear across time and across cultures,” he says.

But for Americans, he recommends visits only to the paradigm towns for the continent, all old settlements on the East Coast. “If you are developing a hamlet, go see Waterford, Virginia. To see a village, go to Nantucket. The best town is Alexandria. The best American city is Washington, or Boston’s Back Bay. These places give you the appropriate distances, scales, building setbacks, tree spacings.”

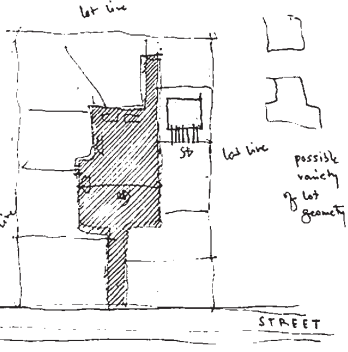
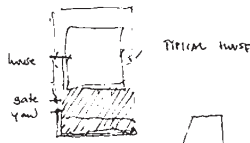
### Measuring Tape

For travel to work, Duany recommends careful study of places. He maintains that exact imitation allow for certainty. “When a doctor looks in a chest, he can say, ‘That is an aorta. It

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typical dimension or desired ± 1 acre



Discovering the compound type characteristics

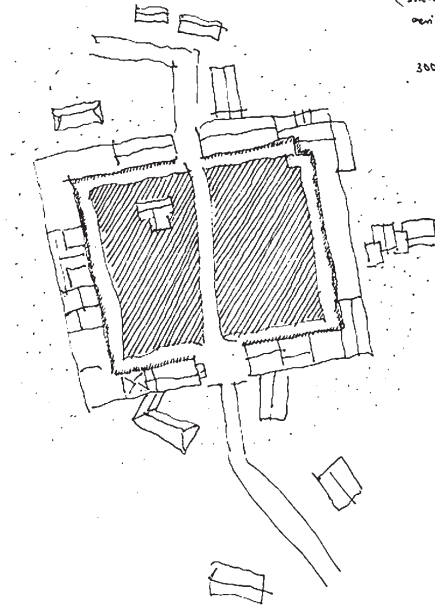
→ trees / pig access / gravel

1. Internal service yard - variety of configuration
  2. individual house lots - variety
  3. degrees of house attachment
- STEWART compound sketch from memory

Chimayo Old Plaza  
Plaza del Cerro 4 Aug 96

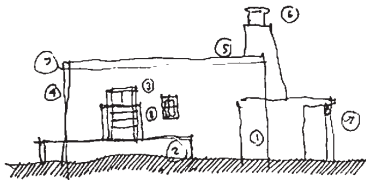
3x5 proportion??  
(sketched from collage aerial photo)

300' x 500' ?



Architectural language - generic  
15 Aug 96

- houses — normative & exceptions



Architectural Code Issues

- A = wall — parapet, base
  - B = roof — geometry
  - C = openings
  - D = materials
  - E = threshold elements — stairs, porches, awnings, screens, fireplaces, cooling towers
  - F = Add-on elements
  - G = Courtyard walls
- direction of composition

- ① volumetric overlap
- ② three levels — wall on 1st story, two stories
- ③ vertical proportions cut into wall — deeply
- ④ bottom wall, no parapet
- ⑤ flat roof
- ⑥ Added elements
- ⑦ Threshold elements
- ⑧ Wood doors & windows
- ⑨ Roof or no roof trim

Visiting places where urbanism has flourished, and observing them and measuring them, can inform a New Urbanist sensibility and practice. These sketches record traditional spaces and housing types in New Mexico.

Courtesy Stefanos Polyzoides

needs a shunt.’ But can an architect or planner say, ‘That is a street, it needs to be exactly 34 feet wide?’ They will be called arrogant. Certainty comes from visiting and measuring.”

Some items to record are the lots per acre, the distance between doorways, sidewalk widths, street lane widths, tree spacing.

“These are notched,” says Duany. “There are specific ways that people have always built hamlets, villages, towns, and cities.”

Having measured real places gives a planner a valuable tool. “Nobody can say Charleston doesn’t work,” he says. “I’ve been there. I’ve measured it. It works.” And by implication: We can build city neighborhoods like Charleston’s, and they will work, too. Even if they attract tourists as Charleston has.

### **Patience**

For Polyzoides, urbanism requires patience. “In Playa Vista, it’s been ten years since we began, and none of it is on the ground. Architecture, from concept to execution, is usually about a year,” he says. “Urbanism takes five to ten years. If you want your work in 30-minute spurts, become a chef.”

Duany adds that new urbanist projects are just starting points. They lay the groundwork for future changes.

Davis takes this notion to the extreme. “Rome,” says Davis, “Gives courage and confidence about newness and artifice. It gives you a sense of the missing ingredient in New Urbanism, which is time. The city is never done, it’s not even seriously begun in a lifetime.”

### **Anger**

“We designed our first project,” says Andres Duany, “To look like a place we loved. Coral Gables, where we lived. And we found that was illegal. I believe most New Urbanists are fueled by a low-grade anger.”

Polyzoides, while dwelling on hope and beauty,

seemed to agree. “The last 30 years have seen the total destruction of nature through arbitrary acts of destruction,” he says. He credits his own urbanism with his childhood in a dense, livable neighborhood of Athens—including summers spent 30 miles away, in a rural retreat. “Both are gone,” he says. The neighborhood was “blown up to increase profit. No more gardens, dogs, cats, or sunshine in the streets. It is now four times the density.”

At Princeton, he saw McDonald’s open in New Brunswick, New Jersey. “No one was defending either the city or the countryside,” he says.

CNU Environment Task Force chair Dan Williams’ entire explanation of his new urbanist tendency is “

Describing Salinas, California, Polyzoides sums up his frustration with placeless places, “If the world doesn’t value where you live, you have no hope. I think living there would make me homicidal.”

### **Memory and hope**

Fortunately, 2,500 people have joined the proactive CNU, while few funnel their frustration into arson or murder. The difference is hope for the future, and an assumption that most people will do the right thing with the right information.

“I have children,” says Polyzoides. “I want to leave them a future with clean air and food, not spending all their money on driving. They should have a sense of place, and institutions that they respect.”

So far as the big public, he says, “Change comes from understanding, not fear. We must have ideas that people find acceptable and palatable.”

Hope also translates into motivation for change, rather than acceptance of the world as it is. Duany separates architects into “reformers of the world as it is, and recorders of the world as it is. Decons record with their buildings and say ‘look how well they fit in.’ But reform—new urbanism—is the true inheritor of modernism.”