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BOOK REVIEW

New Urbanism and American Planning: The Conflict of Cultures

by Emily Talen

Routledge, 2005, 318 pages

Reviewed by Jason Alexander Hayter

New Urbanism is official. Not merely a transitory fashion or a conceptual aesthetic, the publishing of Emily Talen's work *New Urbanism & American Planning: The Conflict of Cultures* ensures that from now on even those critical of the hybridized, resurgent neo-traditionalism of the Congress for the New Urbanism will have to acknowledge them, just as the New Urbanists today have to acknowledge the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Modern*. Talen, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, has created the type of book that can be found in the canon of every trend-turned-movement: a reframing of history which places the ideology of the converted at the end of the tale. Yet, while New Urbanist writers may have a well earned reputation for placing polemics over research and romance over history, in this book Talen makes a considerable contribution to the field of planning — regardless of what one thinks of Seaside, Florida. The reason for this has to do with the scope of her subject, which is not New Urbanism but rather *American* urbanism, and in framing the topic this way the author grants herself ample intellectual room to explore.

Talen begins pragmatically by framing American urbanism as “the vision and the quest to achieve the best possible human settlement ... within the context of certain established principles” (p. 2). But she quickly asserts that there is “an American teleology when it comes to urbanism” that elevates these “urbanist proposals from mere utopian dreaming into something more substantial” (p. 5). In examining this national teleology she categorizes American urbanism into four “planning cultures”: “Incrementalism,” which originates with the settlement house movement, but includes Camillo Sitte, William Whyte, Jane Jacobs, and Christopher Alexander (p. 18); “Urban plan-making,” which contains the more comprehensive visions embodied by the City Beautiful and City Efficient movements and their associated metropolitanism (p. 19); “Planned communities,” which includes “utopian and quasi-utopian ideas,” from Ebenezer Howard to Frank Lloyd Wright, about how cities and societies function (p. 19); and, lastly, “Region-

alism," which addresses settlements in their "natural regional context" and draws on works from Patrick Geddes to Ian McHarg (p. 19).

American urbanism, Talen feels, "can be interpreted as a project that needs to reconcile these cultures" (p. 35). This viewpoint leads to an investigation that is integrative and synthesizing, that deconstructs prominent ideologies and important settlement forms that are usually dealt with as conceptual monoliths and reconstructs new ideas from their component parts. She finds some good in the patterns of planned communities, fault in some of the writings of Jane Jacobs, and breaks down careers of individuals such as Charles Mulford Robinson into different eras that cross categories. The result is an often compelling rethinking of otherwise standard planning history.

This is still, however, the work of a committed New Urbanist, with a foreword from no less than Andrés Duany. Of course being a philosophical partisan does not automatically negate one's ability to write authoritatively. Lewis Mumford, after all, was a fierce ideologue with a singular vision and membership in an equally vociferous organization — the Regional Planning Association of America — who still uplifted the whole of American letters with *The City in History*. Talen's adherence to New Urbanist principles is at times a benefit, but in other instances it leads her to stumble, and in one key instance, to fall.

Talen's general definition of urbanism — "human settlement that is guided by principles of diversity, connectivity, mix, equity, and the importance of public space" — shows her partisan credentials (p. 37). But in her application of this ideal to planned communities, regionalist principles, and garden cities — often while directly questioning the writings of luminaries such as Mumford and Jacobs — Talen surprisingly expands classic urbanism into realms still ignored by even the harshest critics of New Urbanism. In her discussion of those things which work against urbanism, though, Talen occasionally lets doctrine affect her line of argument. Her commentary on zoning is practically devoid of acknowledgement of the important concerns of public health and property protection, as if all zoning ever did was separate retail from housing. But, this slight at a key tool of professional planning is minor. Talen's discussion of Modernism, however, is another story.

If Talen works to expand the application of the ideals of urbanism, she also works to drastically narrow concepts of "anti-urbanism." She explicitly defines it as the "tendency toward separation, segregation, planning by monolithic elements ... and the neglect of equity, place, the public realm, historical structure and human scale of urban form" (p. 37). Central in her mind is modernist urbanism, which she unwaveringly excoriates as "the near embodiment of anti-urbanism" (p. 38). To Talen this movement did

nothing more than leave a “deleterious mark on American places” and is now the “exemplar of anti-urbanism” (p. 38). In fact, at times the author is so vehement, and so vitriolic, in her condemnation of the usual modernist suspects that she allows her ideology to drown out any appearance of concern for factual exploration.

All told, *New Urbanism & American Planning* is a work that can be at turns enlightening and infuriating. But Talen’s integrative, thoughtful approach to the broad, disparate field of planning history more than makes up for her anti-modernist fervor. What’s more, this work addresses the importance of the physical realm at a point in time when the planning profession seems to have moved as far away from urban design as possible. Most importantly, though, her work expresses a refreshing hopefulness, and argues for the importance of optimism in creating a better future. She rightfully notes how the “inability to pull something together out of the rich history of American urbanism has been damaging to a profession like city planning” (p. 277). Yet, the “innate appeal of an emerging American urbanism,” Talen asserts, “will ultimately find the power to turn things around” (p.117). No matter what the future may hold for New Urbanism, anyone who believes in the role of planning in the world can only hope that she is right.

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