

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

New Urbanism Meets the Existing City [Forum]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5tn4v3bq>

### Journal

Places, 12(1)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Gantt, Harvey

### Publication Date

1998-10-01

Peer reviewed

## New Urbanism Meets the Existing City

I was drawn to and attracted by the philosophy and principles of New Urbanism immediately upon hearing about them five years ago. The use of the word “new” affixed to “urbanism” suggested freshness, vitality and energy. The concepts of liveability, sustainability, small-scale neighborhood development, walkability and more intense utilization of public transportation were appealing to someone like me, who had literally spent decades fighting suburban sprawl. The notion that the public realm was important to building a sense of community meant a lot to me, since I had been an elected official struggling at times to get funding for parks, sidewalks and open space. It was also important to see the concept of connectible streets—old gridiron patterns designed to control traffic without giving automobiles dominance. I could go on and on touting the merits of New Urbanism, for all it has meant for bettering urban settlement patterns and controlling sprawl.

But I am also a lover of “old urbanism,” a child of the city. I have spent my entire adult life working in the core city, where development patterns already exist. I grew up in a salt-of-the-earth, working-class neighborhood with sidewalks, front porches and stickball in the street. Today I live within two blocks of my office, and walk to restaurants and go to pop concerts a few blocks away.

My fascination with New Urbanism has as much to do with my reaction to the so-called decline of cities, which has been reinforced in the popular media which has helped to create negative perceptions of the urban in the last thirty to forty years. To many people, urban means poor folk, too many minorities, crime, drugs and unstable families. It means overcrowding, high density, traffic jams, limited open space, substandard schools and facilities. It means political confusion, abandoned shopping centers and even abandoned neighborhoods.

Cities are the places that have the greatest opportunity to make a difference in urban settlement patterns. Cities have tremendous assets that are too often overlooked. They are the home of great medical centers, colleges and universities, cultural facilities, government buildings, employment centers and the basic infrastructure of streets, utilities and public transportation—not to mention the wonderful diversity of people that reflect what America is all about.

These resources are struggling against the forces that draw people and investment away from the core. The result has been a tremendous flight of middle Americans chasing the “American Dream,” coupled with meaningless municipal boundaries that have not only accelerated physical abandonment, but also isolated core cities, socially and politically. There are some notable successes, such as Portland, Seattle, Denver, Milwaukee, Charlotte and Charleston, but even in these cities there are still at-risk neighborhoods with present complex social and physical conditions.

There is a real challenge here for New Urbanism. If the goal of the New Urbanism is to rekindle the “American Dream” (admittedly an ephemeral and spiritual goal) by building settlements that encourage community, liveability, convenience, decent housing and preservation of the environment, then a significant thrust of this movement must focus on the existing core city. This especially means infill development of at-risk neighborhoods, whether in urban or first-ring suburban areas.

Are we up to the challenge? I have some concerns:

- Much of what has won us recognition so far has involved greenfield development, new towns in suburban locations. While these settlements are superior to old patterns of suburban development and represent important work that we must vigorously continue, a reasonable argument can be made that they contribute to more dispersion—thus supporting further decline at the core. Our attack must be two-pronged, with as much emphasis on infill as on suburban design.
- It is not clear that New Urbanism principles, as implemented in new towns, offer enough opportunity for economic diversity. All too often developers, eager to adopt a new trend, bastardize or subvert New Urbanism design principles for their gated communities, which discourage diverse or heterogeneous populations. It is problematic to expect much in the way of true economic diversity given the laws of supply and demand, which drive prices beyond the reach of lower-middle-class, not to mention working-class, families.
- The design of New Urbanist communities all too often derives from a single formula or master plan, often implemented before there is a community to give

These forum pages are produced under an agreement between the Design History Foundation and the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU). CNU, which has no direct affiliation with *Places*, is a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation, receiving support from membership dues and sponsors, including the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Fannie Mae Foundation and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Inquires about CNU membership should be made to:  
Congress for the New Urbanism  
5 Third Street #500A  
San Francisco, CA 94108  
415-495-2255  
email: [cnuinfo@cnu.org](mailto:cnuinfo@cnu.org)



The success of Pittsburgh's Crawford Square development in attracting a mix of people, including middle-class professionals, has fundamentally changed the image of the central city and demonstrates the effectiveness of New Urbanist strategies. *Photo:* Urban Design Associates

meaningful input. I question how this approach will work in existing areas where complex politics and existing community are firmly entrenched.

This is not so much a critique of what we have been doing, but a reminder that the existing city is new turf that requires different technologies. Neighborhoods are complex living organisms. Issues related to revitalization and redevelopment are likely to be difficult and perplexing. Gathering support for any kind of initiative will require working through a maze of community leaders, politicians, neighborhood groups, racial groups and so forth. It would be nice to see more of these kinds of people involved in future Congresses! We will need them.

The Congress for New Urbanism has the brainpower, resources, values and design principles necessary to meet the challenge of infill, core city development. Here are five challenges we will need to address:

First, the initial problems are not always a matter of physical design. They involve investment patterns, job security,

school quality, racial discrimination and the political complexities that produce tangled bureaucracies and archaic, ineffective zoning. We must recognize that working in the inner city does not lend itself to quick-fix solutions that lead to five- or ten-year plans. It may require years of work to change something like bad zoning laws—which when changed can encourage investment in housing, business and job creation. I have seen at-risk neighborhoods in Charlotte begin to turn around with nothing more than better police patrol, better newspaper coverage, a neighborhood watch program or a new elementary school principal dedicated to educating his children.

Second, we must be prepared to think incrementally—street by street, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood. Except in the cases of so-called “brownfield” developments, there are no grand plans to be laid down. Sometimes it may be a simple improvement like a mini-park, a reformed slum landlord making improvements to his property, or an adaptive reuse of an abandoned shopping center. In Charlotte, the Hope VI program was a

The Randolph neighborhood, in Richmond, VA, was a decaying area, ruined by 1960s urban renewal programs. Today, 300 new and refurbished homes have brought the area human-scale, a diversity of households and new investment. *Photo: Urban Design Associates*



stimulus. Whatever it is, we must have the patience to see these incremental actions as a positive catalyst to hundreds of individual decisions that have the cumulative effect of turning a community around. The question is whether we commit to the long-term involvement required. Can we be patient?

Third, we must ask whether we prepared as architects, urban designers and planners to work at gaining credibility with neighborhood activists, politicians and the community? We should not assume that we can be immediately trusted in the inner city. Often, we are seen as the enemy—we helped to build the freeways that facilitated the exodus, we built the regional malls, we built suburbia, so we may have to work to regain credibility.

Fourth, design will be a real challenge for us. We must see ourselves as the resource and experts for good urban design principles, but we cannot be as formulaic as we have been with greenfield development, where there are fewer actors involved in decisionmaking. This means we need to be coalition builders, willing to work in the world of give and take one finds in complex and diverse urban areas. I contend that we can be the leaders of this process as well as team players—if we can take what is given and help to make it more livable.

Fifth, are we prepared to measure success in a different way? As important as physical renewal and revitalization is, the real success of revitalizing the old may have to do with human dynamics. Do people feel like they are part of a place or a community, has crime decreased measurably, are children becoming better educated? Does the promise of the American dream seem more real to more people? These are tough ways to measure success, but I think if we can find ways to quantify what has happened to people, we will really have accomplished something.

Few would argue that the New Urbanism has already made a substantial contribution to the movement to control urban sprawl. We still have much to do in this area—where the push for growth is still larger than in core cities. But if we take on the challenges of infill development and help to make revitalized cities common place, we will move this Congress to a new level.

*Harvey Gantt is a board member of the Congress for the New Urbanism. He is an architect and partner in the Charlotte-based firm of Gantt Huberman, and served two terms as mayor of Charlotte.*