Nature in the CNU Charter

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New Urbanists would agree with Anne Spirn's remark about the importance of enriching the natural processes that flow through our cities, towns and communities and incorporating them into our plans for revitalizing and extending metropolitan regions. We also recognize that natural processes and habitat are among the most difficult issues for us to define and integrate into supportive physical form.

The heart of Spirn's critique is a single article in the Charter of the New Urbanism that seems to set built form against natural process. That article, she states, precludes design solutions that embrace natural processes and seems to contradict the charter's preamble.

As primary author of the charter's preamble, I offer a closer reading of it and a brief narrative of its evolution, reflecting especially on how New Urbanists have sought to construe natural processes as an underpinning infrastructure for our mission and work agenda.

Reading the Charter

The charter consists of two related sections, the preamble and its articles. The preamble is a set of overarching principles that outline key relationships between urban systems, cultural patterns and natural processes. The articles are design building blocks, formal elements that give shape to and support specific local processes.

The central theme of the preamble is to recognize that working with natural process, as William Cronon describes, is an act of "cultural construction," or, as J.B. Jackson has written, "the making of a synthetic landscape, background or infrastructure to our everyday lives." These definitions set the stage for weaving cultural and natural processes.

Spirn's argument about the environmental failures of the charter and the products of New Urbanism is based on one article of the charter:

Metropolitan regions are finite places with geographic boundaries derived from topography, watersheds, coastlines, farmlands, regional parks and river basins.

In framing her argument, she has taken the article out of context. The third line of the preamble addresses her concern about the issue of static natural features versus fluid natural processes:

We recognize that physical solutions ["natural features"] by themselves will not solve environmental, social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability and environmental health ["the process that shape them"] be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.

Of course water is a natural process (a verb) that shapes conditions like climate, ecology, topography and coastlines. Nevertheless, when water flows through urban areas, it is manipulated by public agencies (nouns) like water and sewer agencies, parks departments, flood control districts and port authorities. It is in these arenas that the preamble — and New Urbanism — seeks to change perceptions and, ultimately, policy and management mechanisms.

Figuring the Ground

This approach has been implemented in a public housing project in Minneapolis's Northside community.[1] The pre-existing project, 350 units built in 1938, was demolished and families were relocated for one central reason, according to a brief the city included in its request for proposals: "...one of the chief constraints to the

rebuilding an inner-city neighborhood as it is to developing a new town on former farmland.

In many inner-city neighborhoods, vacant land is concentrated in valley bottoms on buried floodplains.[4] Water flowing underground, flooding basements and undermining foundations, contributed to abandonment (which was also fueled by political processes like redlining and socioeconomic processes like population migration). Those who developed public housing in the past sometimes built on buried floodplains; ignorant of the hydrological reasons for building deterioration and abandonment in these places, they sowed the seeds of future destruction. HOPE VI projects, which merely replace Modernist superblocks and towers in inner-city neighborhoods with traditional grids, houses and porches without understanding all the underlying causes of abandonment, may blindly repeat these past mistakes.

Rebuilding houses on vacant land over buried floodplains also neglects a potential opportunity. Such areas should be developed as landscape infrastructure that detains storm water, preventing floods and combined sewer overflows downstream, thereby addressing regional environmental issues. Landscape infrastructure need not appear "natural" in order to serve this hydrological function; it can consist of plazas, pools, gardens or even parking lots.

Natural processes of water, weather, erosion, plant growth and succession shape landscapes, from small gardens to entire regions. Overlapping, interacting, interwoven over time, these processes compose the rhythm of a place. Together with cultural processes, such as movement and trade, cultivating and building, wasting and worship, they mold material and produce forms, giving a place its distinctive character.

Traditional building forms and settlement patterns are the product of dialogues among natural and cultural processes in a given landscape over time. Landscape features are dynamic, related markers of change, not discrete, fixed objects. Composing a place as a formal arrangement by adapting the plan and elements of a historic garden or town, borrowing a phrase here and there from contemporary work, is like trying to compose a sentence or paragraph entirely of nouns and adjectives, without verbs. Neglecting pertinent processes can lead to failure of function and expression.[5]

These failures of knowledge and practice apply to most architects and planners, not just CNU members. They reflect a failure to grasp the substance and scope of landscape architecture as a discipline, a disregard for the profession's contribution to site design and landscape planning beyond the selection and arrangement of plants.[6]

Reversing these failures of knowledge and practice requires rethinking how plans and designs are conceived and how they are implemented and maintained over time. CNU members are well acquainted with this type of enterprise. In adopting the design of the development process as part of the designer's brief, they have succeeded in creating denser and, arguably, more sociable environments. Designing and managing natural processes entails similar habits of mind.

Notes

1. Congress for the New Urbanism, *The Charter of the New Urbanism* (www.cnu.org/charter).

2. Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Brian J. L. Berry, "The Urban Problem," in Archibald M. Woodruff, ed., *The Farm and the City: Rivals or Allies* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980); Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1915).

3. Congress for the New Urbanism.

4. See the stories of Boston's Dudley Street and Philadelphia's Mill Creek in Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). I described the link between floodplains, vacant land, and community development many years earlier; see Spirn, "Urban Nature and Human Design: Renewing the Great Tradition," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* (Fall 1985).

5. These ideas are described more fully in Spirn, *Language of Landscape*.

6. For example, out of more than forty speakers at the conference "Exploring (New) Urbanism(s)," held at Harvard's Graduate School of Design last year, only three were landscape architects (George Hargreaves, Warren Byrd and myself). All three appeared on the same panel: "Region, Environment, Landscape."

new development is the soil condition in the area."

In glacial times, this site was a primary channel of the Mississippi River. The river left behind a mosaic of sand and expansive clays. The area was first used as an excavation site for making bricks. Then it became a low-income neighborhood and, eventually, a site for the WPA housing project. Over the last sixty years the housing authority has waged an expensive, losing battle to hold together the block buildings, which were settling unevenly across this complex soil matrix.

Local residents, city officials and even HUD officials all saw that it was too costly to keep fighting the natural process of this site. They have embraced the idea that natural material of this place should be used for making a working landscape, managing storm water and building a 36-acre park.[2]

The Designer's Brief

Spirn's most important point concerns CNU's effort to tackle the challenges of her statement: "These failures of knowledge and practice apply to most architects and planners, not just CNU members." I would add to this list landscape architects, engineers and public officials.

The charter was written in spring 1996 by the CNU board. The creation of the preamble was a turning point for CNU. Prior to this, the primary focus had been on refining the physical building blocks — an aggregation of city planning components and architectural design codes derived from neo-traditionalist and transit-oriented design projects. Meanwhile, New Urbanism had evolved into a national congress that gathered a diverse membership working on a wide range of greenfield developments, inner-city projects and local, regional and national urban and suburban policies. We realized that the articles (or physical building blocks) alone were not adequate: we needed to articulate urban design and planning principles that would allow us to engage in political debates about issues like the sprawl, smart growth and social and environmental equity.

Thus the preamble seeks to elevate a set of performance criteria, which are implicit in the articles. It provides a more explicit account of the efforts of CNU 's members — design professionals, civic leaders, entrepreneurs and government officials — to redesign the political processes that shape and manage economic, social, cultural and natural systems.

There is still debate within CNU about whether the preamble policy statements are needed. It is a well-founded concern that, as in the past, the attention to process will subsume the concern for formal quality (inherent in the articles) into shallow policy cliches or simplistic slogans.

What are those terms of policy and design that must be re-explored and realigned so that New Urbanist projects can increase their capacity to integrate natural process with built form? The debate has been carried into the work of CNU committees (including an environment committee), which have become research networks. CNU has also launched an annual award for New Urbanist landscape design, first given last year.[3]

The charter is an evolving document, just as New Urbanism is an evolving body of practice. Seeing nature as a cultural construction and an infrastructure for making New Urbanism landscape is a long and messy process. It requires demonstrations, access to and translation of the latest research, and an insightful eye into the mechanisms of institutional processes and standards. We are only at the beginning of this exciting and expanding work.

Notes

1. The design brief was developed collaboratively by the Minneapolis housing authority, the Northside neighborhood and the University of Minnesota's Design Center for American Urban Landscape (under the direction of former CNU board member and landscape architect Catherine Brown). The developer (McCormack Barron) and the design team (Urban Design Associates, William Wenk Associates, Close Associates, SRF Engineering) are now engaged in project design.

2. For more information, see <http://www.cala.umn.edu/dcaul.html>.

3. See "The 1999 Catherine Brown Award for the Landscape of the New Urbanism," *Places* (13.1), 74-77.