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Just Architectural Business as Usual

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Recently I published an interpretive book, *Architecture in the United States*, in which I mentioned New Urbanism.

The major passage came at the end of a long essay that discussed 4,000 years of efforts to represent and construct community in America, ranging from ancient Native American mounds and Iroquois longhouses to the U.S. and Nebraska capitols, the Ames family's North Easton, the Colonial Revival, ethnic revivalism, the Cincinnati Gateway and Laguna West. I showed that these built communities have been framed through the lenses of a variety of religious and secular theories, as well as high- and ethnic-cultural values. My comments on New Urbanism were framed in terms of my argument that the inclusive representation and creation of community in physical form is a long-sought but difficult enterprise that has never been successfully accomplished, and may not even be possible.¹

I also mentioned Laguna West in the context of an essay on expressions of nature in architecture, emphasizing the tendency to conceive of the natural in theological terms and to view the human relationship to nature in terms of sin and redemption.² I chose Laguna West rather than more famous New Urbanist projects like Seaside because I believe that New Urbanists in the West take their environmentalism more to heart and address ecological concerns more explicitly in their manifestoes, if not always in their realized projects.

I imagined that my remarks were mild and pretty familiar. To my surprise, they provoked squeals of outrage on the New Urbanist e-list. From the many posts, I learned that I am a purveyor of half-baked sociology, a trickle-down Marxist, a basher of the middle-class who also wishes to punish the proletariat, an apologist for Rem Koolhaas (who is never mentioned in the book) and a proponent of paving the landscape. Although my comments paraphrased (to the extent that such a short essay allowed) the major claims of New Urbanists in words and phrases close to their own, I am portrayed as a

parodist of New Urbanist truth and a poisoner of the minds of architectural students. Even allowing for the hyperbole that characterizes electronic discussion groups, I was credited with an impressive list of accomplishments.

New Urbanists are a significant force in contemporary American architectural theory; they deserve careful response rather than simple uncritical praise. On the face of it, their goals are well-meaning and unexceptionable. The Charter of the New Urbanism attacks urban disinvestment, suburban sprawl, class and race segregation and environmental degradation. Only a few people would defend any of these. In general, the means that New Urbanists propose, which favor greater density over so-called sprawl and social, economic and land-use diversity over formal and informal zoning, seem equally unobjectionable. However, when one moves beyond official theory to praxis, as evidenced in unofficial statements, public perception and built projects, New Urbanism becomes more problematic.

A naive materialism, derived from fundamental and long-held tenets of Euro-American culture, lies at the heart of New Urbanism. European culture incorporated a strong materialist strain long before European colonizers arrived in North America. By this I mean that people assumed that physical environments and intangible human values are somehow closely related. The organizers of the English settlement at Jamestown, for example, believed that a good environment shaped a good society, and so gave precise (but unimplemented) orders for the form of their new town. Similarly, English, French and Spanish colonizers believed that European-type houses would instill European values in Native Americans, and they read Indian acceptance of such houses as evidence that they had embraced the entire cultural package.

This materialist tautology — if a good society produces good architecture, then good architecture can produce a good society — has been a recurrent element of Euro-

American architectural faith throughout; New Urbanism carries on the tradition. Vernacular or traditional towns are good forms arising from more humane, more personal, more neighborly periods of American history, so close study of older towns can offer models for building new towns that would resurrect the desirable social qualities of traditional ones. This claim is carefully hedged in official documents like the charter, which argues that “physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems.” However, in less guarded statements, New Urbanists make it evident that they do grant considerable power to the material world.

We must all make some sort of materialist leap of faith, or there is no point in being interested in the physical environment as scholars or as designers. Our faith is supported by current work in cognitive science, psychology and philosophy, which has demonstrated that critical aspects of the self are shaped by engagement with the physical environment. To make such an argument, though, requires precise use of carefully analyzed evidence. The connection between forms and values is very elusive and is rarely carefully observed or described by New Urbanists. So far, their arguments for the benefits of their approach and the detrimental effects of current suburban models (for, despite the name, New Urbanism has clearly identified the suburbs, rather than the center city, as its target) have been entirely anecdotal.

New Urbanism is based on nostalgia for a small-town life that never existed. Witness the Southern small towns eulogized in the widely disseminated accounts of the origins of Seaside. Many of these towns — at least those that have not been decimated by urban renewal or economic collapse — are undeniably visually attractive. There is no more appealing urban landscape than that found in the white neighborhoods of Selma, Alabama, for example. But their apparent social and spatial intimacy was premised on invisible, rigidly (often violently) enforced social practices and separations that permitted the illusion of commonality by suppressing differences. The same was true, to a less sensational degree, in the pre-war towns, North and South, that New Urbanists admire.

New Urbanists have the relationship between society and environment backward. So-called traditional land-

scapes are shaped to facilitate existing or evolving social practices, they are not the causes of those practices. The public, exterior spaces of vernacular environments are inextricably linked to the private, interior ones, and all are in turn the products of cultural, relatively stereotypical, ways of imagining human relationships that are at best approximations of the texture of actual daily life.

Thus, vernacular forms, once codified, may help to reproduce or reinforce certain social practices, but they often outlive the social practices they were meant to house, as traditional townscapes themselves demonstrate. The fit between architecture and society is both complex and loose, and not necessarily amenable to simple formal imitation. At the very least it requires more extensive, more careful and less purely visual study than New Urbanists have yet accorded it.

Until more rigorously presented evidence for New Urbanism’s claims is offered, one must continue to ask whether the right questions are being asked and whether the right answers are being proposed. Once again, we face the materialist issue. Is urban design the

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solution to the social and economic problems that New Urbanism claims to address? Or are these problems functions of political decisions, economic policies and social practices that seem too daunting (and tedious, unglamorous and, perhaps, intractable)?

New Urbanism’s modesty in disavowing claims to having all the answers might be read as an evasion of these difficult questions. Like much of the architectural profession, New Urbanists often hide behind a realist argument: architects and planners must work within the existing socioeconomic structure. Perhaps. But the existing socioeconomic structure is not a force of nature; it is the cumulative result of choices made by individuals who could have made other choices.

Like many of their predecessors in urban planning and other aspects of social reform, New Urbanists present

a social vision in the guise of a set of tools for implementing a universal good — the creation of a more humane landscape. This is a refreshing change from the rejection of social concerns that prevailed in architectural discourse in the 1980s. However, as the hysterical responses to my comments in *Architecture in the United States* revealed, New Urbanism has become an evangelical crusade that brooks no skepticism.

At the core of the movement is an age-old quest for something called “community.” The proposition is that many of our social ills would vanish if we would all begin to experience one another (once again) as members of a community, a goal that can be facilitated by small-scale settlement patterns that encourage face-to-face interactions among diverse neighbors. But what happens when one’s neighbors want to party until 2 a.m., or wash their cars and play loud rap music on the village green, or let their lawns grow wild? It is difficult to answer these questions precisely, because while New Urbanists have much to say about racial and economic diversity, they have little to say about diversity of values, goals or interests and the inevitable conflicts these generate when they overlap in one place.

Throughout American history, calls for community have commonly been raised in response to perceived centrifugal social forces. It is a concern as old as the debate over the Constitution, when anti-Federalists doubted whether a nation of diverse regions, classes and interests could hold together, and as new as the claims that the forces of consumerism and the mass media are undermining our society. By imposing or propagating vaguely defined common values, complexity and conflict can be reduced to manageable proportions. What should these values be? So far, the built products of New Urbanism suggest that the operant definitions of neighborliness and community will be genteel and upper-middle-class — those modes of urban interaction that the conservative communitarians call “civility.” As a neighbor, complaining about my parking in front of her house, once said to me through clenched teeth, “In this neighborhood we cooperate.”

So when New Urbanism calls for a more humane landscape, we must ask by whose standards it is more humane. It is well to remember that many small-town residents of an earlier era found such places intolerable. To them, what we now look back on as a sense of community too often resembled Foucauldian surveil-

lance, while common values bored and constrained. Wasn’t Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (and *Madame Bovary* before it) set in a traditional town? Those who felt stifled on *Main Street* found the anonymity and lack of community of the large cities to which they fled comforting, even stimulating.

To write off those who demur from the aesthetics and the social values of New Urbanism as proponents of shopping malls and uniform subdivisions is condescending and evasive. Some people value the messiness of the real city and the cumulative results of many individual choices, and they understand the appeal of the anti-social. They want genuine variety rather than minor rule-determined cosmetic variation, and seek a range of opportunities and cultural stimuli that no small town or suburb can provide. Unfortunately, the cumulative results of individual choices are as unlikely to happen in most real cities now as they are in New Urbanist subdivisions: that is not where the economics of real estate point at the moment.

The critical social and political problem is pluralism, not community. It is relatively easy to get along with one’s neighbors, but as the mean-spirited tone of contemporary politics shows, it is much harder to find ways to live with and act responsibly toward those who are not, who never will be, and who do not want to be one’s neighbors, but who are nevertheless one’s fellow citizens.

This is also a planning problem. New Urbanism strikes me as another of the devolutionary movements so conspicuous in the politics and social policy of the 1980s and 1990s. These movements abandoned the effort to grapple with large-scale problems altogether, or left them to be solved by voluntarism and the magic of the market. New Urbanists’ modesty in their claims are appealing in theory; in practice, they avoid the critical problems of existing cities and populations in favor of creating suburban fantasy lands for the comfortable.

It seems to me that New Urbanists, like everyone else, can best address the issues that the movement says it wants to address as citizens rather than as intervening experts. Otherwise New Urbanists should admit that they work to appeal to the aesthetic and social sensibilities of a certain segment of the upper middle class. There is nothing wrong with this, but nothing particularly praiseworthy about it, either. It is just architectural business as usual.

Notes

1. Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 101-5.
2. Upton, 147.