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NEO-TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE DEBATE

Susan Handy

One of the hottest topics in the planning field today is the concept of neo-traditional development—that is, the creation of new communities that look and function like towns of times past. Nearly every issue of the American Planning Association's monthly *Planning* has an article related in some way to this topic, and these articles are inevitably followed each month by numerous letters from around the country. At the July conference of the American Collegiate Schools of Planning and the Association of European Schools of Planning, several papers from both American and European researchers addressed the topic either directly or indirectly. The American Institute of City Planners' Training Service held a series of workshops, entitled "Neo-traditional Town Planning" last spring and summer.

Indeed, interest in and debate over the concept of neo-traditional development is growing not only among planners, but among designers, developers, business groups, politicians, transportation engineers, environmentalists, and residents themselves. As the problems faced by metropolitan regions mount—congestion, high housing costs, fiscal crisis—the search for a solution has become critical to all of these diverse interest groups, groups which have traditionally been adversaries with respect to planning problems. Neo-traditional development is seen by many sides as a possible solution and thus provides a common ground on which to discuss issues and alternatives (Morris 1991). In many ways, the debate is as interesting and as important an issue as the planning problems themselves.

This essay ventures to portray the character of this debate, of the commentary both supportive and critical. The characteristics of the development proposals themselves will be outlined only briefly. After exploring the assertions of the proponents, the range of questions raised in the planning literature within the past year will be reviewed. Finally, without attempting to answer these questions, a possible perspective from which to explore these issues will be proposed.

Neo-Traditional Development

"Neo-traditional development" (NTD) is the generic term for a set of more specific proposals that go by a variety of names: pedestrian pockets, urban villages, compact cities, compact urban development. Pearson (1990) has defined five interrelated characteristics common to these proposals, characteristics which will serve as a definition of neo-traditional development. First, NTD proposals include a mixed-use core

from which most residents live within "walking distance" or not more than a quarter to a half mile away. The core generally includes retail and services, as well as residential development. Second, the plans include employment centers, so that residents have the opportunity to both live and work within the development. Third, the proposals attempt to create a sense of community. Public spaces and civic centers are often the focal points of the project. Fourth, the designs aim to generate street life by creating pedestrian-friendly environments, with narrower streets, wider walks, and more street trees. Finally, they seek to establish a sense of tradition, despite their newness. Front porches, detached and set-back garages, and "granny" flats, for instance, are typical design requirements.

The adjective "neo-traditional" fits because many features of these proposals are drawn from suburban communities of the pre-World War II era. They are clearly designed to create a settlement that is reminiscent of the small town of the past. Audirac & Sherman (1991) assert that this vision "encompasses a nostalgia for European cities and New England small towns," while Pearson (1990) contends that "the model . . . is the more isolated, rural village." The proposals, then, differ from new towns and planned unit developments (PUDs) of post-WWII years in that they are smaller, denser, and contain a richer mix of land uses and building types, the result being a more heterogeneous environment (Kelbaugh 1989).

The ideas of Peter Calthorpe have been particularly influential in Northern California. His ideas are clearly conveyed in *The Pedestrian Pocket Book: A New Suburban Design Strategy*, edited by Doug Kelbaugh of the University of Washington. This book outlines ideas that emerged from a one-week design workshop led by Calthorpe and involving eight architects and sixty students. The town of Auburn, Washington, was used as a focus for the design exercise, the goal of which was to explore alternatives to "this placeless smear called the suburbs" and ultimately to challenge "the vast and seemingly inexorable process of suburbanization." The alternative highlighted in this work is the "Pedestrian Pocket," consisting of "a simple cluster of housing, retail space and offices within a quarter mile walking radius of a transit system" (Kelbaugh 1989).

These concepts are being applied in fast-growing areas throughout the country. Calthorpe's plan for the development of Laguna West, a 1,000-acre site 11 miles south of downtown Sacramento, is the first such project to be realized. The plan won the California Chapter of the American Planning Association's 1990 Outstanding Planning Award, among other honors, and was the subject of numerous write-ups. Other cities in California's Central Valley have incorporated features of

the Pedestrian Pocket into their planning, as they prepare for the tremendous growth that is occurring and is expected to continue in the next decade (Lee 1991).

The most prominent advocates of neo-traditional developments besides Calthorpe are Andre Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, designers of the resort town of Seaside, Florida, called "one of the most influential" of these developments (Langdon 1988). This design team has prepared plans for other east coast communities and have participated in numerous conferences and workshops. Although there are some differences between their Pedestrian Pocket approach and other neo-traditional approaches, their many similarities will be the focus of this discussion.

Interest in NTD extends beyond North America. In Europe, where compact, mixed-use development was not abandoned after WWII and was perhaps a necessity, concern is growing over recent development that more closely resembles suburban development in the United States. Breheny (1991) reviews the European Commission's "Green Paper on the Urban Environment," which cites as problems both "undifferentiated urban sprawl" and "highly specialized land use policies" that create "functional ghettos." The Green Paper, he says, "advocates very strongly a 'compact city' solution to the problem"—that is, higher densities and integrated land uses, akin to proposals in the U.S.

Advocates' Assertions

The excitement over and interest in these proposals is not just that they physically resemble communities of the past, but that they will actually function at least to some degree like communities of the past, or so their advocates assert. Proponents see them as the "design solution to urban ills attributed to American postwar automobile-based and deconcentrated development patterns," according to one critique (Audirac & Sherman 1991). In particular, proponents claim that these developments will both reduce the need for travel and create a sense of community, in contrast to life in modern suburban developments.

- *Reducing the need for travel:*

The combination of density and mixed land uses is seen as a way of reducing the need for travel, since residential areas will be closer to needed services. Automobile trips will be shorter as well as fewer, as they will often be replaced by walking trips. For example, Duany states (in Knack 1989) that "most of the needs of daily life can be met within a 3000-4000 acre, mixed-use development," so that "very few automobile trips would ever hit the collector road" in a neo-traditional development. Calthorpe ascribes to his concept the benefit of blending "the

convenience of the car with the opportunity to walk." Thus, Pearson (1990) maintains that such plans "are being billed as offering solutions to many of the traffic problems that have become endemic to suburbs developed since the second World War."

- *Increasing the sense of community:*

The same characteristics—higher densities and mixed land uses—along with other design features are seen as a way of recapturing the sense of community that proponents claim has vanished from typical suburban developments. For example, Baltake (1991), in describing the plan for Laguna West, asserts that "the typical components of a mixed-use community have been rearranged and connected to create a true sense of community." Indeed, it is a "common refrain" of the proponents of neo-traditional development that "their developments will revive public life" (Knack 1989) by encouraging and enticing residents to venture out from their private realms.

Duany's comments at a recent conference exemplify this belief in the power of neo-traditional development:

The Traditional Neighborhood has several positive consequences . . . By providing streets and squares of comfortable scale and defined spatial quality, neighbors, walking, come to know each other and to watch over their collective security . . . By providing a full range of housing types and work places, age and economic classes are integrated and the bonds of an authentic community are formed. By providing suitable civic buildings and spaces, democratic initiatives are encouraged and the balanced evolution of society is secured. (Duany 1991)

Community is an important theme in the European debate as well, albeit with a slightly different twist. The EC's Green Paper states that "the maintenance of high 'urban' densities of population alongside integrated land uses can achieve [a reduction in overall demand for transport] while providing the social interaction that makes cities desirable" (quoted in Breheny 1991). Thus, the advocacy of compact cities rests "not just on strictly environmental criteria of energy consumption and emissions, but also on *quality of life grounds*" (Breheny 1991).

Critics' Questions

Several authors have taken contrasting stands within the past year, if not to oppose these proposals, then at least to question their underlying assumptions. One designer calls neo-traditional communities "the new planning cliché of the nineties" (Kaplan 1990). Most critics note that the proposals have merit but caution against accepting all of their backers' assertions without more research. Breheny (1991), for exam-

ple, outlines several contradictions inherent in the neo-traditional plan but notes that "none of these contradictions of the compact city deny that the proposal has merit. What they do suggest is that the issue is complex and needs careful analysis and extensive debate." The questions raised can be grouped in five basic categories.

- *The claims are not proven:*

A frequent complaint is that proponents have not substantiated their assertions with empirical evidence. Audirac & Sherman (1991) contend that the assertions about the benefits of neo-traditional development "are rather seven theses—a set of research questions that deserve further scrutiny." Breheny (1991), after reviewing several studies related to the proponents' claims, concludes that "it is clear that the efficiency of the centralized compact city is not yet proven, as the advocates of the compact city would have us believe. Further debate and research is required . . ."

For example, Kulash (1991) purports to show that neo-traditional development results in fewer vehicle miles travelled, particularly on arterials, combined with slower speeds. But this study was based on simulation, rather than actual experience on the ground. Audirac, Sherman, & Smith (1990) raise the question of whether compact development may actually hurt the ecosystem more than sprawl, since the smaller amount of land that is developed is developed much more intensively. These critics thus warn against an unquestioning acceptance of the assertions and call for more research. While existing research may offer some clues as to the potential of these proposals, the claims cannot truly be tested until an example of such a development exists.

- *People don't want these designs:*

Another standard criticism of neo-traditional schemes is that most people don't like and don't want to live in compact, high-density development. Audirac, Sherman, & Smith set out to show in their 1990 *JAPA* article that people prefer low densities and are willing to commute in order to be able to live at low densities. Knack (1991) tells us to "forget all you've heard about neo-traditionalism and other innovations in cluster development. Out in the suburbs, lot size is not shrinking." The one-acre lot remains the American dream, she says. (Yet, she adds that, while resistance to increasing densities persists, rising land costs provide increasing incentives for fitting larger houses into smaller lots.) This argument is heard even in Europe: Breheny (1991) claims that "there is, in the U.K. at least, a continuing anti-urban movement that challenges the very bases of the EC's vision of the com-

pact city." These proposals may thus represent nothing more than the imposition of planners' and designers' own ideals.

- *It is physical determinism all over again:*

A related theme in the criticism of neo-traditional development is that it represents the sort of physical determinism that has already been rejected in the planning field. Audirac & Sherman (1991) assert that "a physical deterministic and autocratic 'designer knows best' attitude pervades these urban design manifestos . . . their social claims are as tenuous as those of the tenets of the modern movement which they so vociferously denounce." By shaping the physical environment, proponents hope to shape behavior in a particular way. Indeed, the very fact that neo-traditional concepts came initially from the field of architecture (at least in their current reincarnation) may make planners doubtful.

- *We need context-specific solutions, not general schemes:*

Similarly, several critics warn against a universal solution and call instead for proposals tailored to each community. Kaplan (1990), for example, questions "whether the cause of pedestrianism is well served by models from another time and place, imposed on a community by developers and designers, however enlightened. The best plans, I believe, emerge from a community's ecology, history, economy, and culture." In a variation on this theme, Leary (1991) opines that "it is far better to build incrementally on what exists, to create new towns in the image and spirit of the old, using the natural and built environment and the public and private investment already there" than to create completely new towns that simply resemble the old.

- *Neo-traditional plans may not be feasible:*

Another basic concern is that even if such developments are desirable, they may not be feasible, given a variety of practical constraints that must be overcome. Pearson (1990), for example, notes that mixed-use cores will need a critical mass of residents in order to survive and will certainly need subsidies, at least for an initial start-up period, which are unlikely to be granted. In addition, planners face technical problems in overhauling traditional zoning practices and in designing the codes necessary to guide this form of development (Siemon 1991; Knack 1991). In other words, neo-traditional plans are more easily proposed than implemented and planners will need to learn from experience as these communities grow and evolve.

The Regional Versus Local Issue

Clearly, these questions cannot be answered without further research, and such research is unlikely to be fruitful without a guiding framework.

Perhaps the most fundamental underlying question is how neo-traditional developments will relate to the larger settlement pattern, both in terms of how they are planned and how they function. This issue has been mentioned but not explored in the debate to date. While new towns were generally planned as just that—new, independent, relatively self-sufficient settlements—NTDs are planned in the context of an existing urban region. Their designers hope to both integrate them into the region and to differentiate them from the region. The result is a tension between the local and the regional roles of the community—the social, economic, political, and transportation implications of which are not entirely clear.

On one hand, these proposals differ from both contemporary planned unit developments (PUDs) and from historic new town proposals in that they "try to connect with (instead of distance themselves from) surrounding development . . . [since] reaching out to surrounding areas sometimes is a necessity" (Pearson 1990). This is done in a variety of ways. Calthorpe's designs center around transit stations, a light rail station in the ideal case, which link the development to the region. Another popular design feature is the use of a traditional grid, which will connect better with surrounding development, in contrast to the curvilinear and cul-de-sac streets popular in modern suburbs that link to major arterials at a few limited points. These physical connections are thought to provide for the necessary social and economic connections between the community and the region.

Calthorpe's writing on the Pedestrian Pocket concept addresses this issue most explicitly. He writes that "these Pockets reconnect an existing suburban fabric and its towns," and that "a Pedestrian Pocket does not function as a self-sufficient town." Indeed, according to another proponent, "in a Pedestrian Pocket people would come to see themselves as citizens of the larger region rather than as participants in the fiction of an isolated town or city" (Kelbaugh 1989). This view assumes that the needs and interests of residents will stretch well beyond the confines of the community itself.

On the other hand, it is clear that the theory "is to make new suburbs that are a good deal more than bedroom communities" (Pearson 1990). By mixing land uses within the development, these communities are more independent than typical suburban developments, where land uses are strictly segregated and widely separated. More needs are provided for within the community itself. This point is crucial to both of the primary goals of NTD, namely decreasing transportation demand and increasing the sense of community. Only by keeping the activities of residents within the community to a greater degree can either goal be achieved.

Implications for Planning

The regional-versus-local question has important implications for planning. While most NTD proposals focus on planning at the local level, it is obvious that regional planning must be considered as well. On one hand, regional planning is necessary if these communities are to succeed. Calthorpe's concept, for example, depends on the development of a regional transit system, preferably light rail. He has in fact envisioned a series of Pedestrian Pocket communities linked by such a regional transit system. This system must link each new community to other parts of the region where residents can access services that cannot be provided locally.

On the other hand, the NTD concept has the potential, if widely adopted across a metropolitan region for both new development and infill development, of reducing many of the region's problems. While cities within the region may adopt such planning policies on their own, some direction and coordination at the regional level may be necessary. Interest in regional planning is growing again in many areas, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area, and NTD concepts may become an important part of those efforts. Of course, whether these efforts will bear fruit is still very uncertain.

The tension between providing local services and regional links poses another challenge for planners. Good links to the region may encourage the use of facilities outside of the planned community, despite the quality and quantity of local facilities. Finding the most appropriate and effective balance between local and regional emphasis may prove to be the greatest challenge for the designers and planners of new communities. In searching for this balance, they must recognize and account for several complications, including:

- the ability of residents to live and work in the same place is limited by numerous constraints, including the match between employee qualifications and employer needs, dual wage earner households, job security, etc.;
- small populations simply can't support all of the services they need and want, in light of the growing variety and complexity of lifestyles;
- residents may not choose to use local services if they have easy access to other areas, since many factors besides location affect destination choice, factors such as price, quality of service, habit, etc.;

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- services must evolve over time as the size and character of the population changes; what is sufficient to encourage use of local facilities now may be insufficient in the future.

Pearson notes that the success of NTD plans depends on their ability to "combine the best of the past with the realities of the present." It's one thing to create a replica of a 19th century town; it's another to expect its residents to behave like those of the past. Residents of metropolitan regions have become accustomed to the variety of services and activities that the region has to offer and will not be content merely with the narrow range that the population of a small community can support. The ever-increasing mobility of society will be a difficult trend to avert.

Conclusions

In listening to the NTD debate, one gets the sense that planners, particularly those in academia, are now saying "wait, stop, hold on here a minute." The NTD movement has taken hold and developments are being built without much regard for what researchers may have to say about them. While NTD concepts are not new to planners—Mumford, among others, discussed many of these issues in the 1950s—the level of interest in these concepts is new, and planners were not the ones who generated it. The NTD debate is greatly in need of substantive arguments, of testing and exploration of issues at a much greater depth than has occurred to date. Planners should now turn toward filling that need.

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