

New Urbanism and Planning History: Back to the Future

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At the annual conference of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning held in Atlanta in November 2000, the session which drew by far the largest attendance was architect Andreas Duany's presentation on New Urbanism. Those in attendance were treated to an animated and at times vitriolic attack on planners, not unlike the vinegary verbal assaults Jane Jacobs dished out in the early 1960s in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and in her many reviews, essays and public presentations on planning. Both Duany and Jacobs decried the lack of consideration of human scale in the products of modernists, and challenged planners to revise the rules of development to safeguard vibrant urban places. What was distinctive about Duany's critique was that he celebrated a variety of community designers and builders while bashing the ordinary planners as regulators. He contended in his Atlanta presentation, like he has in other writings, that the period prior to World War II (especially during the 1920s) was a golden era in community design and development. Planning was less institutionalized, subdivision regulations were based upon tradition rather than formulas, and community design schemes were the visionary products of landscape architects, architects and planning consultants given broad latitude by their private developer clients. New uniform community design standards perpetuated by the Federal Housing Administration beginning in the 1940s, coupled with the impact of the federal highway program on residential dispersal, created an automobile-dependent residential fabric devoid of interconnectedness and lacking civic virtue. Duany urged the Atlanta audience to look backward for best practices and to revise the development rules for the future, to recapture lost elements from past planning as an antidote to sprawl.

What the New Urbanists offer, according to Duany, is a set of principles and range of development models to guide public policy, development practice, urban planning and design in order to reduce sprawl. New Urbanists regard the metropolis as the fundamental economic unit of the contemporary world, but see it is a finite place with clear edges that separate its inhabitants from farmlands, watersheds, open spaces and river basins. Development practices should sustain the metropolis as a whole through infill development and redevelopment that takes precedence over peripheral expansion. And these new developments should be communities that are physically compact, pedestrian-friendly and mixed use. Within these planned communities, a range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, aesthetics and income into daily interaction, strengthening the person and civic bonds essential to an authentic community. New Urbanism links these compact communities through improved public transit and carefully designed streets that support interaction between civic and commercial centers and diverse residential areas. At the street level, the New Urbanism approach reinstates the local street as a human habitat rather than a machine mover or a barrier, with small streets providing controlled access within the neighborhood and with residential structured oriented to these narrow streets. The overall thrust of the New Urbanist approach is to reintroduce a traditional neighborhood development modeled after the 1920s work and for the traditional neighborhood development to be the building block of a sustainable urban environment.

While conventional planning practitioners might have found some of Duany's trenchant comments offensive, his message was music to the ears of the planning historian. Here was a principal of a leading planning and architecture firm with an impressive track record of successful community projects saying unabashedly that history matters, that planning history is important and can have an impact on quality of contemporary life. Through the influence of Duany, "New Urbanism has invigorated city planning history by invoking the tradition of American civic design to solve the conundrum of suburban sprawl," asserts planning historian Bruce Stephenson (Stephenson, 1999) Of course, it is not all that unusual for architects to draw upon historical influences for the design of residential structures or community motifs, especially since in many parts of the country history and tradition sell well. But what distinguishes the New Urbanist use of history is that it is employed not only as a fundamental critique of the basic form of urban contemporary urban community patterns, but also as a tool to recast conventional patterns. As Lee and Ahn assert in their assessment of Duany's Kentland's plan, the "new urbanist ... paradigm challenges not only the prescriptive design standards and regulations governing suburban design but also the implicit values." It "represents a true value shift from contemporary suburban planning" (Lee and Ahn 2001)

But what is the planning history that informs the New Urbanist critique and that constitutes the core of this paradigmatic shift? Virtually all of the leading publications of the new urbanists identify some key historical influences but there are no two works that are entirely consistent in their acknowledgment of pivotal precedents. (Katz 1991; Calthorpe 1993; Fulton 1996; Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck 2000). One of my purposes in this paper is to identify the explicit and implicit historical influences in New Urbanism. Not only is it unclear exactly which historical influences are most salient but also how this history is inbedded into New Urbanist principles and practices. Examination of a variety of New Urbanist authors makes this clear. But I am also interested in assessing the way history is used, if the application of planning history by New Urbanists is accurate, persuasive and interpretively sustainable. In this context, using planning and urban history inaccurately, without a sufficient rationale, and in such a way as to draw conclusions that cannot be sustained by the historical record might produce undesirable outcomes. The subtitle of this talk, Back to the Future, was purposely selected as a reference to the movies by the same name to underscore a key point in this assessment. Like Marty McFly,

the character played by Michael J. Fox in the Spielberg trilogy, and his excessively frenetic sidekick, Doc Thompson, who invented the time machine that propells them back and forth in time, they discovered that not just knowing (or experiencing) the history determines the future but also how it is used (or misused) by those who experience it to serve other purposes. Although I would not recommend viewing any one of the insipid Back to the Future episodes to check out the veracity of my observation, the Spielberg sagas do have a message relevant to those interested in planning history, which is that it is important for planning historians to consider how their outputs are utilized (or neglected) by practitioners like the New Urbanists. It could influence our own urban future. My approach to the task of examining New Urbanism and Planning History is first to examine history as the New Urbanist planning critique, then to see how they use planning history as precedent and precept in the recreation of a New Urbanist form, and, finally, how planning history contributes critical lessons for New Urbanists.

History as Planning Critique

The New Urbanist use of history as a planning critique follows the standard discourse of planning historians which tends to focus on the limitations of professional application. This is certainly evident in the magnum opus of New Urbanism, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American* (2000), by Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck. The *Suburban Nation* is a saga about the victims of a half-century of bad planning, with particular emphasis on its suburban victims, including children ("the cul-de-sac kids)," alienated and detached women ("soccer moms)," and the "stranded elderly," as well as their urban counterparts in "bankrupt municipalities," namely the "immobile poor." The New Urbanists don't forget the "hapless developer" who is required to operate against a stacked deck in their attempt to create liveable and profitable community in the face of insidious "municipal regulations and engineering conventions." (p. 101)

The New Urbanist critique of planning's failures is consistent with other recent analyses of twentieth century urbanization. As Robert Fishman observed in *The American Planning Tradition*, twentieth century planning history is "a record of missed opportunities and partial successes punctuated by outright failures." At the same time, Fishman tenders the notion of "limited successes" as the misunderstood element of greatness in American planning. The historical antecedents that precipitated the suburban crisis and that inform the New Urbanist planning critique include the following:

1. City Beautiful Movement of the early twentieth century which gave birth to professional planning on the basis of which separating everything from everything else (p. 10)
2. The Federal Housing Administration (and the Veterans Administration) which financed large-scale housing development built on sprawl planning techniques
3. The Federal Highway Aid Act of 1956 which routed highway "directly through the centers of our cities, eviscerating entire neighborhoods – and splitting downtowns into pieces" (p. 87) and the automobile subsidy that diverted funds from transit.
4. Modernist architects designed towers in the park approach which relinquished the design of streets to engineers, and those that prepared the schematic for the modern suburb through proposals such as Radburn
5. The new breed of bureaucratic planner after the 1930s that rejected history, aesthetics, and culture in favor of a process of planning and management relying exclusively on numbers. As Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck put it, "the American city was reduced into the simplest categories and qualities of sprawl. For Duany, the nadir of the contemporary

American city is exemplified in Virginia Beach, the largest city in Virginia in size and population, and by far the least densely populated, with its center dominated by an eleven lane sea of asphalt supported by hundred of acres of parking.

History as Precedent and Precept

The historical antecedents that warrant careful consideration in understanding the New Urbanism precedents include a variety of traditional plans and enduring historic urban communities that pre-date the modern planning era. These include, for example:

1. plan of Washington, DC that allowed higher density, low dependence on automotive infrastructure (Duany, et. al., p. 7)
2. Alexandria, VA as traditional walking city with the following key characteristics: a) a center; b) a five minute radius for each neighborhood cluster; c) a fine-grained street network utilizing a grid; d) narrow versatile streets; e) mixed uses; and f) special site for special buildings

While evidencing a definite affinity for older cities which have preserved elements of their traditional neighborhood fabric, New Urbanism is more appropriately connected to a rich tradition of suburban community planning that has its roots in Frederick Law Olmsted's plan and development of Riverside in the suburbs of Chicago in the 1870s. According to Duany and Plater-Zyberk, "the fundamental organizing elements of the New Urbanism are the neighborhood, the district and the corridor." (Duany and Plater-Zyberk, 1991, p. xvii) One of the formative influences is Ebenezer Howard's Garden City since it offered a prototype of the balanced and self-sufficient community. New Urbanists distinguish the Garden City from the Garden Suburb, the latter being an incomplete version "attached to an dependent upon a city." But in fact there is an important connection to Garden Suburb that more implicit than New Urbanists would want to admit, as I will discuss shortly.

Another important influence is the town planning schemes of planning consultant John Nolen, especially his plan for suburban Mariemont, Ohio, but also some of his community designs in Florida in the 1920s. James Kunstler made the Nolen connection in his 1993 book, *The Geography of Nowhere*, noting that the plan for Seaside, which was the Duany/Plater-Zyberk signature New Urbanist project, "was a modified neoclassical grid straight out of John Nolen." (p. 255) Duany has publicly acknowledged the Nolen influence (even though, I should note, Nolen's name is misspelled in its one reference the *Suburban Nation* and there is no evidence that the authors consulted any of Nolen's writings or works by other scholars on Nolen). Stephenson's research on Nolen is likely to clarify this connection to New Urbanism but at the present it seems to be a more tenuous connection than some scholars would suggest (Sutro and Bednar, 1991)

Less explicit but I think far more important is the contributions of the regionalists of the 1920s (Lewis Mumford, Clarence Stein, Henry Wright and Benton MacKaye) with their notion of concentrated communities of a limited scale meshed together by transportation connectors. Peter Calthorpe (1993) identified Ebenezer Howard's Garden City as a prototype of the transit oriented development that he advocates, namely "towns...formed around rail stations, with powerful civic spaces surrounded by village-scaled neighborhoods." (Calthorpe, p. 11) This was contrasted by Calthorpe with the modernist vision of designer Tony Garnier, whose neighborhood model called for "segregation of use, love of the auto, and dominance of private over public space." (p. 11) Where the regionalists of the 1920s proclaimed the Garden city as the

fundamental unit of the region, the New Urbanists stressed that “the neighborhood is the elemental building block of the regional plan.” (NU Lexicon, C-2)

It is Clarence Perry’s “Neighborhood Unit” plan, which was one of the most influential outcomes from the 1927 Regional Plan for New York and Its Environs, that most fully captures the essence of the New Urbanist design scheme. Although not a planner per se, but an educator by training, Perry was powerfully influenced by the Garden City planning model in devising his neighborhood unit plan. As Howard Gillette pointed out in a 1983 essay, “The Evolution of Neighborhood Planning,” Perry knew what it meant to live in an American variation of Howard’s Garden City since he moved his family into Forest Hill Gardens in 1912, a model community designed by Grosvenor Atterbury and the Olmsted Brothers under the sponsorship of the Sage Foundation Homes Company to introduce the Garden City to the American urban environment.. Perry felt that Forest Hill Gardens contained all the “essential elements” of the ideal neighborhood. It is also important to note that Perry was associated with the settlement house movement and in conjunction with the Russell Sage Foundation became an active participant in a national recreation movement aimed at improving park facilities to promote civic improvement. It was Perry’s contention that expanding the functions of neighborhood schools to serve as neighborhood-based facilities for civic and recreational purposes was a way to strengthen the urban social fabric. In essence, Perry was advancing a notion not unlike the present social capital movement but without any direct link to local governance.

It was in a presentation to a joint meeting of the National Community Center Association and the American Sociological Association in 1923 that Perry unveiled the basic elements of the neighborhood unit plan. A more refined version of the neighborhood unit was published in the 1927 Regional Plan for New York. By the early 1930s, Perry’s concept had been endorsed at President Herbert Hoover’s National Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership as the best way to organize urban areas. (Gillette 1983, p. 422-7) By the 1940s, through the advocacy of national planning consultant Harland Bartholomew, the neighborhood unit plan had been fashioned into a comprehensive urban revitalization strategy and provided the scale model for neighborhood revitalization through the urban renewal program in the 1949 Housing Act. (Silver 1984, p. 168-9)

The organization and spatial arrangement of Perry’s neighborhood unit is directly replicated in the new urbanism planning unit. In the neighborhood unit and the New Urbanism traditional neighborhood development, size is “determined by the walking distance of five minutes from center to edge.” The neighborhood unit plan utilized a civic center with the elementary school as its anchor. A pattern of small streets within the neighborhood dispersed local traffic and the placement of retail and regional institutions at the edge to support the use of automobiles (without requiring automobile traffic to penetrate the neighborhood) were key elements of Perry’s neighborhood unit plan. All of these were elements picked up by Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Company in their traditional neighborhood development. The differences are negligible. For example, the New Urbanists shifted the school to neighborhood edge, expanded space for regional institutions at the edge, and in the center replaced the neighborhood school and the open space playgrounds with a mixed-use civic-commercial center. This mixed use civic-commercial center linked to the edge through the street pattern and was supported by abundant parking. Perry’s abiding concern was to adapt city neighborhoods to the automobile age. He was convinced that “the automobile has been... a destroyer of neighborhood life” and that a growing number of expressways were “cutting up residential areas into small islands separated from each other by raging streams of traffic,” and so the design of the neighborhood unit plan ensured that the automobile remained largely at the neighborhood edge. While Perry’s neighborhood unit sought to exclude the automobile, the automobile, in effect, supplied the long-awaited rationale for neighborhood-focused planning that he advocated. The New

Urbanist traditional neighborhood development inherited the automobile-induced sprawl (and transit-less cities) and like the neighborhood unit plan used this as a rationale for a new model. Yet while fundamentally opposed to automobile sprawl, virtually all new urbanist projects have been designed around the automobile. Even Calthorpe's transit-oriented neighborhood model did not preclude reliance upon automobiles, and could function just as well without mass transit. From Seaside to Celebration, Florida, and Kentland, Maryland to Laguna West, California, the New Urbanist operated predominantly in an auto-center, upscale suburban environment. (Fulton 1996) While these important projects advanced new model of neighborhood development, they have largely been confined to expanding the options available to suburbanites rather than fostering the diversity and sustainability of the compact metropolis.

Critical Lessons from History

Despite the central place of Perry's neighborhood unit plan in the New Urbanist lexicon, it is remarkable that the core literature of Perry and his proponents (Perry 1939; Dahir 1947) as well as the critiques that dogged the neighborhood unit plan throughout the post-World War II era, are missing from the New Urbanist writings. What is also missing is a critical assessment of the social implications of the neighborhood unit plan. Perry's social agenda was not only aimed at protecting residents from the deleterious effects of the automobile but also from the social diversity inherent in dynamic urban environments. Through the federal Housing and Home Finance Agency the neighborhood unit became a neighborhood prototype that was "an instrument for segregation of ethnic and economic groups," according to Chicago planner and activist, Reginald Isaacs in 1948. Isaac astutely recognized, as Perry himself had stated in earlier writings, the self-contained neighborhood was desirable only so long as it protected "widely different classes and races" from living side by side. Perry's neighborhood unit would safeguard social homogeneity in a number of ways, by preventing the increase of classes that are beyond the reach of housing reform, by providing a physical barrier against the encroachment of deteriorated neighborhoods, and by providing an object lesson in improved housing that could be modeled throughout the metropolis.

Besides failing to recognize how the neighborhood unit plan reinforced social and economic segregation in the American city, New Urbanism falls into the trap that so effectively negated the virtues of Radburn and Perry's neighborhood unit plan, namely concentrating on design as an end in itself to create liveable and cohesive communities. The environmental determinism of the New Urbanism is a direct descendant of the neighborhood unit plan proponents, although it is tempered somewhat by statements that proclaim more inclusive social and economic objectives. But those places that have been the recipients of New Urbanism approaches are virtually all in greenfield locations in middle and upper income markets where the likelihood of achieving inclusionary objectives is minimal. The history of Garden cities, new towns, new communities, urban renewal and suburban building in American cities over the course of the twentieth century should have pointed out to New Urbanists how new self-contained community developments often fall far short of their social and economic objectives. The history of participatory community development, neighborhood-based planning and an array of housing and social reform movements is also missing. Unfortunately, there appears to be little attention by New Urbanists to the abundant planning history that demonstrates the fragility of their enterprise.

The real challenge to New Urbanism is not to redesign the suburbs but to tackle of the problems of the old urbanism, and to reintroduce viable community forms in existing urban

areas. In its current mode, New Urbanism reinforces the basic components of sprawl. William Fulton notes that some New Urbanist have recognized that there needs to be more to the movement than designing better suburban neighborhoods. Those New Urbanists point to key inner city redevelopment projects, such as Battery Park City in New York, Ghent Square in Norfolk, Virginia and Seattle Commons in Seattle, Washington as models of desirable infill developments, as well as the successful projects to revamp public housing along New Urbanist lines, such as in Digg Town in Norfolk. Accordingly, New Urbanism principles can and should be applied across a broad spectrum of situations not just emerging suburbs, but also in underutilized and abandoned industrial sites, struggling inner-ring suburbs, and small towns outside the metropolis altogether.

Understanding the narrow and somewhat misused historical legacy may explain why New Urbanism has not succeeded in combating sprawl, or in creating the broader vision of the humane metropolis that they espouse. This is the essential message of this paper. But the other is the power of history, which has been Professor John Reps' message throughout his scholarly career. There are histories that can make a difference, and it is hopeful as we create new urban futures that we draw upon a broader segment of that planning past as our guide.

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