

## NEW URBAN NEWS

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### The New Urbanism: an alternative to modern, automobile-oriented planning and development

Robert Steuteville

Through the first quarter of this century, the United States was developed in the form of compact, mixed-use neighborhoods. The pattern began to change with the emergence of modern architecture and zoning and ascension of the automobile. After World War II, a new system of development was implemented nationwide, replacing neighborhoods with a rigorous separation of uses that has become known as conventional suburban development (CSD), or sprawl. The majority of US citizens now live in suburban communities built in the last 50 years.

Although CSD has been popular, it carries a significant price. Lacking a town center or pedestrian scale, CSD spreads out to consume large areas of countryside even as population grows relatively slowly. Automobile use per capita has soared, because a motor vehicle is required for nearly all human transportation.

Those who cannot drive are severely hampered in their mobility. The working poor living in suburbia spend a large portion of their incomes on cars. Meanwhile, the American landscape where most people live and work is dominated by strip malls, auto-oriented civic and commercial buildings, and subdivisions without individuality or character.

The New Urbanism is a reaction to sprawl. A growing movement of architects, planners and developers, the New Urbanism is based on the belief that a return to traditional neighborhood patterns is essential to restoring functional, sustainable communities. Still in its infancy, the trend is beginning to have an impact. More than 300 new towns, villages and neighborhoods are planned or under construction in the US, using principles of the New Urbanism. Additionally, more than 100 small-scale new urbanist "infill" projects are restoring the urban fabric of cities and towns by reestablishing walkable streets and blocks.

On the regional scale, the New Urbanism has growing influence on how and where metropolitan



**The new urbanist Redmond Town Center contrasts with the typical strip commercial development of suburbia, below.**



regions choose to grow. At least 14 large-scale planning initiatives are based on the principles of linking transportation and land-use policies and using the neighborhood as the fundamental building block of a region.

In Maryland and several other states, new urbanist principles are an integral part of smart growth legislation.

Moreover, the New Urbanism is beginning to have widespread impact on conventional development. Just as Starbucks raised the quality of coffee in competing restaurants and cafes, mainstream developers are adopting new urbanist design elements such as garages in the rear of homes, neighborhood greens and mixed-use town centers. Projects which adopt some principles of New Urbanism but remain largely conventional in design are known as hybrids.

The New Urbanism trend goes by other names, including neotraditional design, transit-oriented development, and traditional neighborhood development. Borrowing from urban design concepts throughout history, the New Urbanism does not merely replicate old communities. New houses within neighborhoods, for example, must provide modern living spaces and amenities that consumers demand (and that competing suburban tract homes offer). Stores and businesses must have adequate parking and modern floor plans. The New Urbanism offers parking on the street and to the side and rear of shops and workplaces.

With proper design, large office, light industrial and even "big box" retail buildings can be accommodated in a walkable new urbanist neighborhood.

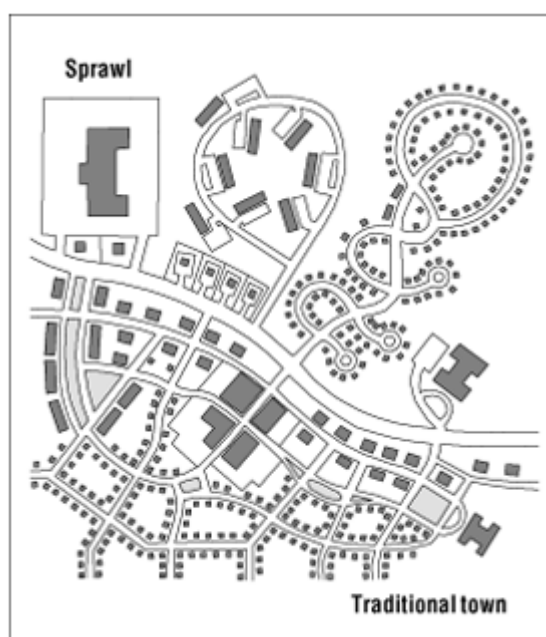
Another difference between old and new urbanism is the street grid. Historic cities and towns in the US employ a grid that is relentlessly regular. New urbanists generally use a "modified" grid, with "T" intersections and street deflections, to calm traffic and increase visual interest.

That blending of old and new is the basis of the term neotraditional, and represents what is new about the New Urbanism. Successful New Urbanism performs a difficult balancing act by maintaining the integrity of a walkable, human-scale neighborhood while offering the modern residential and commercial "product" to compete with CSD. The difficulty of this balancing act is one reason why many developers choose to build hybrids, instead of adopting all of the principles of the New Urbanism. Some new urbanists think that hybrids pose a serious threat to the movement, because they usually borrow the label and language of the New Urbanism. Other new urbanists believe that hybrids represent a positive step forward from CSD.

## Principles of the New Urbanism

The heart of the New Urbanism is in the design of neighborhoods, and there is no clearer description than the 13 points developed by town planners Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. An authentic neighborhood contains most of these elements:

- 1) The neighborhood has a discernible center. This is often a square of a green, and sometimes a busy or memorable street corner. A transit stop would be located at this center.
- 2) Most of the dwellings are within a five-minute walk of the center, an average of roughly 2,000 feet.
- 3) There is a variety of dwelling types -- usually houses, rowhouses and apartments -- so that younger and older people, singles and families, the poor and the wealthy may find places to live.



**Sprawl and traditional neighborhoods consist of identical parts, configured**

- 4) There are shops and offices at the edge of the neighborhood, of sufficiently varied types to supply the weekly needs of a household. **differently (diagram by Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company).**
- 5) A small ancillary building is permitted within the backyard of each house. It may be used as a rental unit or place to work (e.g. office or craft workshop).
- 6) An elementary school is close enough so that most children can walk from their home.
- 7) There are small playgrounds near every dwelling -- not more than a tenth of a mile away.
- 8) Streets within the neighborhood are a connected network, which disperses traffic by providing a variety of pedestrian and vehicular routes to any destination.
- 9) The streets are relatively narrow and shaded by rows of trees. This slows traffic, creating an environment suitable for pedestrians and bicycles.
- 10) Buildings in the neighborhood center are placed close to the street, creating a well-defined outdoor room.
- 11) Parking lots and garage doors rarely front the street. Parking is relegated to the rear of buildings, usually accessed by alleys.
- 12) Certain prominent sites at the termination of street vistas or in the neighborhood center are reserved for civic buildings. These provide sites for community meetings, education, religion or cultural activities.
- 13) The neighborhood is organized to be self-governing. A formal association debates and decides matters of maintenance, security and physical change. Taxation is the responsibility of the larger community.

### New urbanist prototypes

Seaside, Florida, the first new urbanist town, began development in 1981 on 80 acres of Panhandle coastline. Seaside appeared on the cover of the Atlantic Monthly in 1988 when only a few streets were completed, and it since became internationally famous for its architecture, and the quality of its streets and public spaces. Seaside proved that developments that function like traditional towns could be built in the postmodern era. Lots began selling for \$15,000 in the early 1980s and, slightly over a decade later, the last lots sold for close to \$200,000. The town is now a tourist mecca.

Seaside's influence has less to do with its economic success than a certain magic and dynamism related to its physical form. Many developers have visited Seaside and gone away determined to build something similar.

Since Seaside gained recognition, other neotraditional towns have



**Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland, above, and Haile Village Center in Gainesville, Florida, combine modern homes and businesses with compact, walkable streets and public spaces.**

been designed and substantially built -- including Haile Village Center in Gainesville, Florida; Harbor Town in Memphis, Tennessee; Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland; and Orenco Station in Hillsboro, Oregon.

Designers also are using the principles of the New Urbanism to revitalize cities and towns.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

adopted the principles of the New Urbanism in its multibillion

dollar program to rebuild public housing projects

nationwide. New urbanist projects built in historic cities and towns includes Crawford Square in Pittsburgh, Pleasant View Gardens in Baltimore, Park DuValle in Louisville, and the downtown of Port Royal, South Carolina.



Meanwhile, leaders in this design trend came together in 1993 to form the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), based in San Francisco. The founders are Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Peter Calthorpe, Daniel Solomon, Stefanos Polyzoides, and Elizabeth Moule, all practicing architects and town planners. CNU since has growth to more than 2,000 members and is now the leading international organization promoting new urbanist community design principles.

### Disney builds a town

In June of 1996, Disney unveiled its town of Celebration, near Orlando, Florida, and it has since eclipsed Seaside as the best-known new urbanist community. Celebration is big -- about 5,000 acres, and will eventually have 20,000 residents. Half of the land will remain open space.

In some respects, New Urbanism and Disney have been uncomfortable bedfellows. While using designers and principles closely associated with the New Urbanism, Disney has shunned the label, preferring to call Celebration simply a "town." Meanwhile, the movement has benefited from all of Celebration's publicity and its aesthetic and functional success -- but not without a price. Disney has come under attack for what some perceive as heavy-handed rules and management. For those who would attack New Urbanism as insipid nostalgia, Disney is a fat target.

However, Celebration's community design serves most residents well. "The entire focus of our lives has changed," says homeowner Ray Chiaramonte. "Instead of doing everything some place other than close to home, we now can eat, do errands, celebrate special occasions and just hang out near our own home. The changes are most dramatic for our children, who now have a freedom they never had in our old neighborhood."

In the book *Edge City*, author Joel Garreau wrote that Americans have not built "a single old-style downtown from raw dirt in 75 years." Celebration may be the first real estate project to break that trend, opening its substantially built downtown in October, 1996. Other projects like Seaside, Haile Village Center, Harbor Town, and Redmond Town Center are following suit.

But the new urbanists still have plenty to prove. They must design and build viable retail centers to compete with CSD nationwide -- not just in a few projects. They must capture a broad portion of the residential market. New urbanist developers must find ways to offer homes at reasonable prices. New urbanists also must prove, over time, that their ideas are superior for both revitalizing old cities and towns and building new communities.

If they can accomplish those goals -- and early projects offer hope that they can -- the New Urbanism is poised to become the dominant real estate and planning trend of the next

century.

*Robert Steuteville is editor and publisher of New Urban News. This article was updated June 28, 2000.*

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