

The architectural academy has finally noticed that devastating offspring of Modernism, suburban sprawl. In their awakening fog, they have aimed their critical apparatus at New Urbanism, thus attacking not the problem, but its solution. Alex Krieger, an illustrious representative of the academy, has marshalled a collection of the usual critiques (ARCHITECTURE, November 1998, pages 73-77). These share one thing: They are based on fallacies.

The fallacy of sprawl. The argument against New Urbanism can be summarized in the bumper-sticker slogan that it merely replaces suburban sprawl with New Urban sprawl. In fact, since its founding in 1992, New Urbanism has been the antithesis of sprawl, because it designs communities that are balanced in function; creates inclusive housing; supports home-based business; spatially defines the public realm; facilitates pedestrian accessibility; minimizes use of the car; supports transit; and builds on infill as well as greenfield sites.

The fallacy of infill. This critique states that New Urbanists should direct all their efforts toward the reconstruction of existing urban fabric; that to build on greenfield sites, even if creating authentic urbanism, undermines the city. New Urbanists do work in the inner city, and very effectively, but 95 percent of what is built in this country is built on greenfield sites.

California grows at the rate of one Pasadena every year, and one Massachusetts every decade. Infill alone cannot accommodate this rate of growth. Even if the public process did not limit infill projects, the price differential between urban land and an immediately adjacent greenfield would undermine any controls. If the New Urbanists abdicate the urban edge, sprawl will have lost its most effective bridle.

The fallacy of density. It is a misstatement that New Urbanism cannot deliver adequate densities. Dan Solomon habitually reaches 50 housing units to the acre and Moule & Polyzoides at Playa Vista, California, approach 40. These urban densities are comparable to those of Commonwealth Avenue in Boston.

However, Krieger is correct that typical New Urbanist projects have a lower density. The reason is not the abdication of principle, but the more complex criteria of diversity - a variety of human needs and desires, some fulfilled by an urban apartment and others by a house with a yard. New Urbanism requires inclusive housing, the full range of choices provided in close proximity within each neighborhood. Although this can reach very high net densities in localized areas, inclusive housing averages about eight units per acre. A lesser gross density is probable, as open spaces and commercial and civic buildings in a New Urbanist community can consume a substantial area.

Even if the preference of the non-nuclear family is for the single family house (and it is), New Urbanism proposes that these houses be assembled into a neighborhood and a regional structure that supports transit. That transit is gaining national credibility is due in part to New Urbanists Peter Calthorpe, Douglas Kelbaugh, and Bill Lieberman's conceptualization of transit-oriented development.

The behavioral fallacy. Critics accuse New Urbanists of erroneously claiming that physical design can affect human behavior, then that "social engineering" is dangerous, and when utopian, a short step from the Holocaust. The built environment's potential to affect human behavior was one of the defining premises of the Modern movement, and was discredited only in the wake of the 1973 demolition of Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis. The correct conclusion from the failure of Pruitt-Igoe should have been that design has such a powerful affect on human behavior that it could transform, in very short order, a viable neighborhood society into a self-destructive one. This power, ably documented by sociologists Oscar Newman and William Whyte, was thus abdicated to the mall developers. Accepting this power and wielding it responsibly is a key to New Urbanism's success. Skeptics should study the astounding turnarounds of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) housing in Diggs Town, Norfolk, Virginia, retrofitted by Ray Gindroz. These are successful field tests of the HUD's Principles for Designing and Planning Homeownership Zones, commissioned from the Congress of the New Urbanism (CNU) by former Secretary Henry Cisneros.

The fallacy of controls. Many architects find New Urbanism's widespread use of codes noxious, even fascist. Yet codes are categorically democratic, in the sense that the rule of law and orderly processes are as essential as the vote. To a New Urbanist, codes are necessary because architectural harmony allows mixed use to be acceptable. When buildings share a common vernacular, it is possible to integrate them in great variety: Apartment buildings, offices, and shops can be adjacent without raising hackles.

In addition to establishing a shared syntax, New Urbanism's codes limit the expressive range of some buildings. Only civic buildings are uncoded in New Urbanist practice. The modicum of visual silence required of the private buildings that constitute the urban fabric allows the public buildings to be noticed. They are encouraged to express the aspirations of the institutions they embody and the creative intent of their designers. The need for this dialectic is evident if one were to imagine Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao framed, not by the existing avenue of self-effacing buildings, but by the hyperactive work of his followers. It would be a ridiculous scene.

The ethical fallacy. There is a fundamental difference between a critical architecture and an architecture of reform. Critical design clarifies or expresses a condition. But New Urbanism has an ethic, put forth in its charter. There are important problems of environmental degradation and social equity that inform the New Urbanist position. Take for example the new drive-through restaurant by Machado and Silvetti (Architecture, May 1998, pages 104-107). At no time was it noted in the article that, for something as ordinary as lunch, this typology requires access to a car. Never mind that a car is an environmentally noxious device, or that this restaurant is intrinsically inaccessible to that 50% of the American population that is unable to drive. This class-based segregation should be at least as repugnant to critics as a building that is inaccessible to the

disabled would be. The critical apparatus is attuned only to the esthetic of the object, missing its potentially negative social or ecological implications.

The fallacy of governance. The notion of "private government," a brilliantly conceived term of accusation, is laden with irony and paranoia. The implication is that New Urbanist communities, by being so administered, are permitted to withdraw from the travails of the Republic. There are actually over 160,000 such associations in the United States, ranging from the co-ops of urban apartment buildings to the tough new improvement districts of New York City.

New Urbanists take these governments seriously. Communities such as Kentlands, Maryland, are equipped with association documents that foster a sophisticated participatory democracy. They include not only the vote, but the possibility of individual leadership, and provide avenues to appeal decisions. Such associations can be more fair and more responsive than the incompetent bureaucracies and tyrannical politics of many municipal governments.

The elitist fallacy. Minorities are living in New Urbanist communities, but it would take more than behavioral science to affect the integrated resettlement demanded by some critics. A more realistic discussion would acknowledge that ethnic groups prefer to live with their own kind. One can encourage all types of minorities to live in any New Urbanist community, but only a Stalinist would hold this as an attainable ideal.

The accusation that many New Urbanist communities are more expensive is true, but this is not intrinsic. While they do not necessarily cost more to build, they do usually sell for more. Laws of supply and demand drive up the prices of commodities that are better and scarce.

The common suggestion that the resale price of affordable housing must be controlled is unfair. Why should the poor not reap the benefit of an investment as the wealthy do without limit? The only permanent solution to the problem of high value is to make New Urbanist communities common. Only then will the pressure on prices be relieved.

The fallacy of nostalgia. Architectural criticism seems unable to discern anything beyond the surface of form. What could be more modern than the current nationwide industrial-distribution complex that delivers building elements as an open prefabrication system? How does one compare the archaic, elitist, painstaking drawing to create a single building, when New Urbanism has hundreds of sets of construction documents ready for overnight delivery? These buildings are good, typical housing available for less than one-hundredth the cost of the current master's fee. The architecture of New Urbanism is well suited to Sigfried Giedion's "problem of large numbers" - one of Modernism's constituent facts. The fussy arts-and-crafts tectonics of the current avant-garde are more Luddite than John Ruskin was in his time.

What is Krieger's proposal other than refurbishment and preservation? Where is anything remotely as challenging as the syncretic New Urbanist proposal that Krieger describes sardonically as "the best of everything"? Why should the human environment settle for less?

Krieger is right, we are allergic to nostalgia. The CNU is prepared to engage the mass culture of the American middle class and damn the kitsch. It is learning the brutally modern techniques of marketing, communication, and financing. The only thing nostalgic about the CNU is the holding of principles and nurturing of the possibility of attaining them.

The fallacy of style. At the heart of the academy's contempt for New Urbanism is what Krieger calls its "retrograde" architectural syntax. But this variable is not under the control of New Urbanists. It is the consumer's choice - the determinant of a mass-produced product's design, exercised through selective purchase. There is a common confusion among critics regarding the housing consumer. There are actually four classes: the patron, the client, the customer, and the victim.

The patron is the architectural sophisticate who knowingly commissions a building as a work of art. The second type of consumer is the client, who is not so much sophisticated as savvy by making himself available for contact with architects during the design process. The client underwrites most of the decent buildings in America.

Third is the customer, the most common consumer, and the stock-in-trade of New Urbanism. The customer has no contact with the designer. She (usually) arrives at a decision to purchase housing in a state of innocence at best. Only lightly attuned to the rigors of architecture, a customer is vulnerable to kitsch, and since this option is usually provided competitively somewhere in the vicinity, it drives out serious architecture. The fourth kind of consumer is the victim, the one with no choice in housing. Due to limited income or a very tight housing market, the victim will accept good or bad housing.

The patron, the client, and at times the victim are the consumers of decent architecture, but New Urbanist practice, being by definition about mass housing, must take on the difficult and problematic customer. The language of traditional architecture integrally communicates to the increasingly assertive democracy of the marketplace. That this vernacular must still be studied regionally, be made energy-efficient and liberated from kitsch, the CNU is preparing to affect.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the criticisms raised by the academy is that they hardly coincide with the economic, security, and other concerns typically evinced by the development industry, a group no less opposed to New Urbanism. Since the real power lies on the side of the developers, why should the CNU even bother to engage the academy in debate? There would be no reason to do so were the academy not so overtly plying its students with its ill disposition towards New Urbanism. In doing so, they actively cull design talent away from some of the most important issues of our time. This must not continue unchallenged.

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