

Book Reviews

Editor
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Book Reviews

Charter of the New Urbanism, Congress of the New Urbanism, Edited by Michael Leccese and Kathleen McCormick, McGraw-Hill, 1999, 180 pages.

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Style and Moral Design

Had he lived a few decades beyond his thirty-seven years, Andrew Jackson Downing would have had the satisfaction of seeing how pervasively influential his books had been. He would have visited places like Evanston, Illinois or the Hill District of St. Paul, where streets perpetually bloom with the kind of houses described and drawn in *The Cottage Style* and *The Architecture of Country Houses*. Within a surprisingly short time, his books, published from 1837 to 1850, revolutionized the design of the American house and how Americans would expect to live.

For a time that lacked a massive real estate industry that could fill sections of a metropolitan Sunday newspaper with *homes for sale*, that most single-family houses built for the next four to five decades were in the Italianate, Gothic and Queen Anne forms that would today all be called Victorian testifies to the power of Downing's persuasive argument that the Greek Revival or neoclassical house was obsolete.

Strung along the old two-lane highways in the Atlantic and Midwest states, the white, framed, neoclassical house identifies farmsteads and defines the antebellum character of many small towns. But, after the Civil War, few would be built again as the Victorian house now dominated house development. Yet, two generations after Downing, Victorian houses would be ridiculed for their florid excesses and give way in the early twentieth century to simpler, craftsman style dwellings. And again about two generations later, these craftsman dwellings would fade into a collection of post World War II forms called modern. Now, two generations later, pure and adulterated modern forms are be challenged by the New Urbanism.

More than others, American cities show the outward accretions of style signaling the character of streets, neighborhoods and subdivisions as they sprawl into the countryside. Within each successive style is a covertly packaged moral design movement that defines a new way to live formed by the arrangement of interior and exterior spaces.

Downing's was not merely an appeal for housing that was safer, better built, more sanitary or more spacious. It was a moral revolution; a call for a new way of living that he was convinced could not be accommodated by the neoclassical style house, the ideal since the American Revolution. That the ideal of this earlier generation of houses would be Greek Revival, not the Georgian or medieval English built during the

colonial period, indicates the American nation's desire to express its heroic democracy and underlying Athenian ideals. Yet, in Downing's view, these simple classical symmetries were ill-shaped to meet the needs of families and their relationship to the beauties and bounties that inhered in America's natural environment.

Just like Downing, the advocates of each successive domestic building style made their appeals based on a moral principle, that the housing that was being built—especially in terms of floor plans and the relation of the interior to the exterior—could no longer sustain a way of life that was *specifically American*, and that a new form of housing was a moral necessity. Why these moral design movements seem to arrive about every other generation and whether the New Urbanism will be equally influential are separate questions. But that the New Urbanism is as authentically American as the other moral design movements preceding it there is little doubt.

No Professional Courtesy

The New Urbanism is largely an architectural reaction to the planning profession's abandonment of interest in urban and built form. As post-war American urban planning turned toward policy, it turned away from a decades-long interest in civic design and no longer involved itself in questions of the physical form of places. While post-modern architecture was all about form but drained of social substance, post-modern planning had social substance, but was formless.

Like its failed predecessor, postmodernism, the New Urbanism seeks a more popular presence for architecture, to give it a more pervasive everyday role. Vincent Scully, an early advocate of the New Urbanism, was a great early advocate of postmodernism, which turned out to be a mocking and trivializing fad. One of Christopher Alexander's early books, *Community and Privacy*, called for all the things that turned streets away from buildings and made them the sole province of traffic engineers. If the New Urbanism had appeared 35 years ago, Alexander would likely have opposed it.

But is the New Urbanism a new design movement, the fad *du jour*? There are reasons to be distrustful of a new design movement or theory of architecture. Architectural theory is notoriously anti-empirical. If the built environment created with modernist thinking is as pervasively problematic as the New Urbanists claim, then it makes sense to understand how this happened. Was it simply philosophical, as New Urbanists appear to claim, or was there something more fundamental that lies in the very heart of architectural thinking? Those who believed in Modernism were no less passionate than the New Urbanists.

The *Charter* may turn out to be as influential as an earlier charter, which it seeks to emulate and simultaneously to discredit and replace. Its approach and many social goals are similar to that of the CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*), which transformed modernism into the architectural movement that New Urbanists believe is the cause of many problems, while consciously avoiding the modernist patronizing position that so provoked Tom Wolfe in *From Bauhaus to Our*

House. But in the end, it is fundamentally the same in the lead role it gives to architects and architecture.

Although some voices in the New Urbanism have been stridently anti-modernist, the New Urbanists agree with the early Modernists on one important thing: that physical form of settlements affects society. The New Urbanism endorses the idea that the relationship between physical form and social life is, if not directly deterministic, then much stronger than what sociologist Herbert Gans suggested in “Urban Vitality and the Fallacy of Physical Determinism.”

But many American architects are ambivalent about architecture’s social role. Their interest is visual. Many architects, unreconstructed modernists as well as those who subscribe to whatever is currently *avant garde*, regard the New Urbanism as formulaic and a constraint on creativity. That’s not all bad.

The Joy of Planning

Although the New Urbanism is barely a decade old, it has spawned a small library of publications. Those who wish to be aware of its principles and the form of development they articulate should read the *Charter of the New Urbanism*. While the *Charter* is a very useful cookbook, it is also a very comprehensive and cogent agenda that will influence not simply the form of new housing developments but a range of real estate decisions from highest and best use to strategic investment.

The twenty-seven chapters of the *Charter of the New Urbanism* are brief, graphically and pictorially annotated discourses on the twenty-seven principles of the New Urbanism arranged neatly into understandable recipes that can be translated into public policy at all levels of government. It is a clear policy guide and should be read, debated and understood.

In keeping with the catholicity of the movement, chapter authors are from a variety of disciplines: conservation, traffic engineering, housing, government, real estate, politics, planning and mostly architecture. The chapters are clustered into three sections of nine. The first section addresses the region—metropolis, city and town; the second: neighborhood, district and corridor; the third: block, street and building.

The agenda at the regional level seems at first glance to be the most difficult to implement. Addressing regional issues—urban growth boundaries, the metropolitan tax-base, housing opportunities, education balances, transportation and transit, economic development and jobs—will require creating intergovernmental cooperation measures heretofore unseen and frequently unimagined by those elected local officials with the power to act. But it is not simply a matter of waiting for local or state government. Regional issues are functionally linked to many established federal policies and programs, tax and transportation among the most pervasive.

The three sections differ not only in scope of design strategy but in client strategy. The New Urbanism is about community, a word developers love. And New Urbanist

architects are busy. Because land ownership on urban fringes is in large chunks and because real estate developers are always interested in new product, the New Urbanism's most visible impact is at the level of the block, street and building. By tying itself to the preservation of historic buildings (even if they just look historic) and to the remembered pleasures of pedestrian and public places (even if you had to drive as a tourist to memory lane), the New Urbanism is in the process of positioning itself effectively in the real estate developer's pro forma.

The trouble is at the middle level—in the neighborhood. For example, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk regards a district as something at the same level as a neighborhood but with special uses—a college campus, a theater district. Her definition is compatible with the real estate use of the term. On the other hand, Jonathan Barnett sees a district as a large grouping of mutually compatible activities. In his thinking, a residential district is a level higher or a superset of neighborhoods. So it's here where confusion sets in. The American idea of neighboring has mythic qualities not always consonant with the reality of the next-door neighbors. It has been reified in ways that make Clarence Perry's neighborhood concept hard to distinguish from gated enclaves, which share a similar motivation for enclosure and differentiation. There's also the idea that neighborhoods are urban villages, constituting an otherwise lacking sense of community. And another that they are the building blocks of urban places. Scant evidence from decades of research supports these notions.

What becomes apparent is that the relationship between approaches described in each chapter of the *Charter* and the principles that they intend to articulate is not a necessary one but contingent on each author's particular notion of which built forms embody or implement the principles. The *Charter's* flaws are like so many others in architecture that overreach toward universality. To suggest that New Urbanist principles are inherent in a continuous thread of 5,000 years of settlement building with the only variation being the post-war suburbs is potted history. Or consider a flat statement like "Throughout history, codes and ordinances have been responsible for maintaining a consistently high quality in the architecture of the street, despite periods of change." It's misleading because many zoning practices encouraged the ruining of old neighborhoods by allowing out-of-character development. It would not be difficult to find other arguable statements.

Yet despite its flaws, the Charter could be, and should be, influential. The New Urbanist move to constitute zoning codes with graphic representations is an immensely positive step that could reduce both nimbyism and developer risk. Another is that it forms the basis for a compendium of best practices. For example, grid and quasi-grid street patterns are recognized as having multiple beneficial functions in the New Urbanism. As the problems with suburban traffic, sprawl and brownfields show, the benefits of the grid were ignored for most of the past fifty years. In his authoritative history of planning, *The Making of Urban America*, John Reps abhors the grid as an exploitive tool of real estate speculators, as though curvilinear streets and *cul de sacs* would not be exploited by developers, as in fact they have. While there may be a fine line between nostalgia and best practices, the unwitting abandonment of almost two

centuries of American settlement design practices after WWII shows that good practices need to be codified. That's one thing that New Urbanists are doing.

Politics

It's not just *avant garde* architects who do not like the New Urbanism. Those who subscribe to the modernist social agenda call it 'scary' and see the New Urbanism as putting us all in a Truman Show. It's this antipathy to social engineering for the middle classes that puts them on common ground with the neo-conservatives and libertarians who, despite an *American Enterprise* 1996 issue all but endorsing New Urbanist design, also do not like it.

Because community is a term the developers love to use, the creation of most new physical 'communities' is directly linked to sprawl. Nobody minds it when developers say they're creating communities because everyone knows this is just sales talk. But when designers talk about it, the idea gets attention—not simply because they might be successful but because it seems like a forced intervention—social engineering. It does not matter that social engineering has been equally present in the fifty-year-old post WWII suburban settlement pattern.

Despite the largely suburban context of its application, the New Urbanism arouses and confronts a deep American distrust of urban life. The containment of sprawl and the creation of community are regarded by those lacking the interest in or skills to cope with contemporary social life as attempts by a privileged elite to confine their opportunities. Although market studies show it appeals to a significant segment of the market, the oft-spoken neo-conservative view is that the New Urbanism does not provide a choice, that it inhibits social mobility.

Almost from its beginnings, the United States has had a tradition of using land for social mobility, buying allegiance to the Republic by selling cheap land whether it's out West or out of the way at the end of a *cul de sac*. What sprawl and the westward expansion have in common is the opportunity for limited social contact. The American suburban settlement pattern has always differed from its European antecedents and Latin American counterpart. This 'exceptionalist' and heavily subsidized real estate pattern no doubt contributes to America's unusual social and economic energy. New Urbanists would argue that the old suburban settlement pattern consumes more socioeconomic energy than it produces. They may be right.

Conclusion

Although it seems like it just appeared, the New Urbanism has been germinating for two to three decades. Intellectual precursors include the works of Jane Jacobs and Richard Sennett (who do not seem to like the New Urbanism). Peter Katz's *The New Urbanism* and Phillip Langdon's *A Better Place to Live* are recent antecedents. *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, by Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck, came out shortly after the

Charter. The preservation movement has been influential and its economic impact is already being analyzed, for example, in *Valuing the New Urbanism: The Impact of the New Urbanism on Prices of Single-Family Homes*, by Mark Eppli and Charles Tu.

If it is to have an everyday role as pervasive as modernism, it will infiltrate many aspects of development and building practices. Indeed, it is succeeding in this. Many principles in the *Charter* are being incorporated into new comprehensive plans for cities, Denver for one. The New Urbanism has already received the attention if not the endorsement of The Urban Land Institute, which publishes materials and holds conferences promoting New Urbanist development. Like those before, New Urbanist developments may similarly define the character of streets and neighborhoods to be built over the next fifty years.

The New Urbanism is changing more than residential densities and house elevations. These are by-products of more fundamental changes in morphological patterns that are occurring at two levels—in the arrangement of streets and their relationship to each other and in the arrangement of houses and their relationship to the street. Streets in New Urbanist developments are laid out in a pre WWII pattern—more grid like, with traditional detached sidewalks, alleys and small village greens. Gone are the cul-de-sacs and the dendritic street pattern they sprout from.

Other changes are in the works. Street-side retail and hybrid street-mall retail developments are already gradually replacing post war malls (many of which are already functionally marginal). Mass transit, especially light rail and transit-oriented development (TOD), is a major component of the New Urbanist agenda. Among the most important changes on the horizon is a likely change from the Euclidean-based, hierarchically segmented zoning and planned unit development (PUD) practices to zoning and development approaches that will articulate aims in terms of form rather than floor area ratio (FAR). Multi-use zoning will change highest and best use analysis. All of this will change the relationship of home to workplace, to schools, to transportation, to services, to entertainment.

As Witold Rybczynski pointed out in *City Life*, the dawning of America's 150-year romance with suburban living began partly in response to the beginnings of the factory system of production and increased immigration from non-Protestant regions of Europe. The post-Civil War appeal of Downing's asymmetric, picturesque houses can not be understood outside their context. The same for the New Urbanism. It makes sense to view the New Urbanism in terms of the emerging information system of production and the dramatically changing demographics of America. With so many other changes afoot, some change in settlement pattern is inevitable. This happens to be it.