The New Urbanism: Reflecting the Past and Repeating its Mistakes

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INTRODUCTION

The New Urbanism emerged in the 1980s as a new school of planning thought and application. Primarily a reaction to rapidly expanding urban sprawl, the New Urbanism strives to create urban villages, towns and cities comprised of a specific set of characteristics. Some of the key points in New Urbanist thought include the creation of a discernable city center, inclusion of mixed-use development and proximity of residential units to commercial spaces to encourage walking and other alternatives to car travel.

In many ways, the New Urbanism is a reflection of past planning efforts, and it strives to recycle good ideas that may have been overlooked due to overall failure of a planning technique. Controversial since it’s beginning, the New Urbanism has proven to be an integral part of the planning world and thus bears necessary scrutiny. This paper aims to examine how New Urbanism fits into larger 20th century planning schemes and whether it denigrates or bolsters the social and physical landscapes affected by the creation of new spaces, with a case study in Seattle.

“NEW” URBANISM: ECHOING HISTORY

Although it’s title suggests otherwise, New Urbanism appears to reflect and synthesize a range of 20th century planning initiatives. In 1993, architects Peter Calthorpe, Andrés Duany, Elizabeth Moule, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Stefanos Polyzoides, and David Solomon came together to create the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU). The CNU encouraged planning ideals such as balancing development of homes and work, creating unified architecture and retaining open spaces. Varied groups and individuals, including “planners, developers, architects, engineers, public officials, investors, and community

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activists,” are part of the CNU.² In 1996, the CNU established the Charter of the New Urbanism, laying out “principles to guide public policy, development practice, urban planning, and design.”³ The principles are laid out across three categories, the region, the neighborhood and the block. Many of the principles included in the Charter echo planning movements from years past.

One of the most noted similarities is with Garden Cities, originally conceived by Ebenezer Howard (1898) and later realized by Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker.⁴ Garden cities and suburbs were created on the ideal basis that if one were to unite both the social and economic opportunities of Victorian slum life and the “promise of fresh air and nature” of the countryside, then one could create a “town-country” that would encompass the superior qualities of both.⁵ These spaces are “admired by New Urbanists for the compact, walkable, transit oriented designs and their inclusion of diverse housing types,” as well as for their emphasis on community building.⁶ (See Figure 1.1, 1.2)

Community building and social improvements are two important ideals in New Urbanist principles. However, the assumption that communities will come together simply because community spaces are created is deficient. Groups of ‘urban redeemers’ in times past attempted the same goal with minimal success.⁷ Another community-building factor, according to New Urbanism, is the density and diversity of residents within an area. This ideal reflects the works of Jane Jacobs, who emphasized “mixed…land uses” and densely

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packed urban spaces. The Charter of New Urbanism endorses these ideals by including that “concentrations of civic, institutional, and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes.” Unfortunately, Jacobs’ goal eventually led toward gentrification of the city, a factor that also creates controversy in New Urbanist spaces. The critical difference between Jacobs and the New Urbanism is, however, that Jacobs argues for a return to the unplanned, thus inherently diverse, city, whereas New Urbanism promotes density and diversity through careful planning. The question is whether the planned spaces of New Urbanist development can achieve the ideal of a forged, diverse community.

New Urbanism reflects on the ‘City Beautiful’ and ‘City Efficient’ plans of Daniel Burnham and John Nolen, respectively. The City Beautiful ideal, rooted in admiration of 19th century European city models, proposed that beautification of a city was an “investment” that would increase civic pride and give lasting recognition to the city itself. New Urbanism reflects the City Beautiful by reasserting the necessity of a strong, recognizable urban center (See Figure 2.1, 2.2). The City Beautiful movement, however, failed due to lack of “social control, [and] neglect of housing issues.” The movement transformed into something called the City Efficient, which more or less added social conscience to its predecessor. City Efficient plans “looked very similar to City Beautiful era plans,” including a “civic center of grouped public buildings” and altogether promoting beautification of the

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city as the end goal.\(^\text{13}\) Although the City Efficient contained policies not supported by New Urbanism, like single-use zoning, “New Urbanists have now rekindled the City Efficient focus on merging art and science, beauty and efficiency.”\(^\text{14}\) New Urbanism marks a return to the artistic development of cities. New Urbanists strive to create, for example, “civic buildings and public gathering places...[in] distinctive form,” recognizing the significance of architectural style and the importance of prominent civic structures.\(^\text{15}\) New Urbanists, however, should proceed with caution, as these ‘beautification’ efforts often had “implications that perhaps should be disquieting,” as they attempted to plan the inherent ‘ugliness’ of cities out of existence.\(^\text{16}\)

It is important not to overlook the incredible similarities between planner Clarence Perry’s neighborhood unit plan, (1929; see figure 3.1) and New Urbanism. Perry believed in the creation of a neighborhood unit whose size would be set by the catchment area of the local elementary school, and so would depend on population density; its central features would be this local school and an associated playground, reachable on foot within a half a mile; local shops...could be within a quarter-mile; and a central point or common place for the encouragement of community institutions.\(^\text{17}\)

The reflection of this goal in New Urbanist ideals is unmistakable. The Charter states

> Neighborhoods should be compact, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed use...many activities of daily living should occur within walking distance...schools should be sized and located to enable children to walk or bicycle to them...[and] a range of parks...should be distributed within each neighborhood.\(^\text{18}\)

However, one of the principal failures of Perry’s design was the absence of a working class population and the exclusion of minority groups, blacks and Jews in particular.\(^\text{19}\) New

\(^\text{16}\) Peter Hall, Cities of Tomorrow (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 175.
Urbanism strives to create diversity in land use and population, but framing goals based on past efforts that have failed to do so may cause the movement to fall short of optimistic goals. Land use diversity is inhibited as many New Urban communities struggle to attract commercial business to the area. Diversity within the population is difficult to achieve and even harder to sustain, as ‘community’ is not singly defined across cultures.

The last reflection of importance is that of previous regional planning efforts developed by the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA). The Charter clearly contains an entire unit based on the region of a New Urbanist space. Within this regional outlook, the New Urbanism states concern for

geographic boundaries derived from topography, watersheds, coastlines, farmlands, regional parks, and river basins… governmental cooperation, public policy, physical planning, and economic strategies…[and] a necessary and fragile relationship to its agrarian hinterland and natural landscapes.20

The RPAA, which stemmed largely from the philosophies of planners Patrick Geddes, Benton MacKaye and Lewis Mumford, was rooted in “the new concept of the Region.”21 After failures of previous planning efforts centered on small-scale spaces, these varied planners turned to a new variety of planning that expanded the spatial agenda. Geddes explained this concept in terms of waves of migration, explaining that a new “Fourth Migration” was occurring in the United States due to technological advances.22 Mumford elaborated this message, proclaiming, “the regionalist attempts to plan such an area so that all its sites and resources…may be soundly developed, and so that the population will be distributed so as to utilize, rather than to nullify or destroy, its natural advantages.”23

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22 Ibid.
RPAA arguably constructed the beginning of the environmental movement, and its echo is heard today through New Urbanist regional principles.

New Urbanism reflects and expands upon planning techniques employed during historic time frames; the question is whether or not recycling old principles will solve future problems. The context of historic planning principles is lost when utilized for post-modern needs. Thus, many of the planning schemes described above do not apply to the post-modern city or suburbs. However, the previous failures and successes of plans that influenced the New Urbanism may issue a warning for current planners – an examination of how and where movements like Garden Cities and the City Beautiful failed can offer a starting point from which to address the realization of New Urbanism.

In certain ways, New Urbanism is very contradictory, as it employs contrasting ideals with its “quest for an urbanism that allows diversity within a system of order, control that does not impinge freedom, an appreciation of smallness and fine-grained complexity that can coexist with civic prominence, [and] a comprehensive perspective that does not ignore detail.”24 By attempting to achieve these inherently paradoxical goals, New Urbanism may actually produce incoherent, thus, failed landscapes. A case study in a new New Urbanist space, Issaquah Highlands in Washington, explores the consequences of creating New Urban spaces and whether the community has realized its New Urbanist goals.

**ISSAQUAH HIGHLANDS: LIVING GREEN**

Issaquah Highlands markets itself as providing “an urban-village lifestyle of convenience” and has been lauded in such publications as *Better Homes and Gardens* and

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The New York Times

for its innovative creation of “the Northwest’s first true urban village.” (See Figure 3.1, 3.2) The description of the community unmistakably follows New Urbanist principles, boasting “front porches to encourage social interaction” and “pedestrian and alternative transit friendliness.” (See Figure 3.3, 3.4) It also is 100% Built Green certified, meaning that overall environmental impact of the development is limited.

Issaquah Highlands celebrated its grand opening in September 2003 only one week after the new Sunset Interchange opened on Interstate 90 providing quick city commutes. The Highlands were the first stop at the top of the hill.

Although this new interstate was praised for cutting commute time up to 30 minutes, the simultaneous creation of a new highway and opening of a new ‘urban village’ should not be ignored. The highway accessibility suggests that this New Urbanist community is merely a continuation of urban sprawl, with people escaping undesirable cities yet still commuting as “growth creeps outward from Seattle into areas once considered the boondocks.” Although “the development will densely cover 30 percent of the land to minimize sprawl and preserve the natural environment,” the concept of sprawl also includes a departure from the city, and development further away from city centers.

Issaquah Highlands also promotes that

Because the homebuilders have designed a variety of home types and price ranges, including rental, market rate and affordable single- and multifamily homes, Issaquah Highlands is uniquely diverse in its demographics, attracting people of varied ages, incomes and ethnicities at every stage of life – young families, empty nesters, singles, seniors, professionals, telecommuters and stay-at-home parents.

References:

28 Ibid.
However, the definition of socioeconomic diversity in the area has changed over time. In 2004, 325 residences were to fall across three price categories: “for those with household incomes of no more than 80 percent, 100 percent and 120 percent of the King County median income.” Proposed rental housing was meant to be available for those falling under 50 percent of the median income, but this was met with much resistance from the homeowner community. In February 2004, a more upscale neighborhood named Hudson Place put homes starting at $400,000 on the market, and in June 2004 an even loftier neighborhood opened, Harrison Street, which features custom homes ranging from $1.5 to $5 million. Most recently, in March 2007, the community claimed “neighborhoods currently for sale within the community range from an intimate townhome enclave priced in the $500,000s to the grand, view homes of Harrison Street and estate-sized custom homes of Grand Ridge Drive.” This starting price suggests that over time, the price of homes has increased in Issaquah Heights, which may be preventing the community from fully realizing its New Urbanist goals of diversity.

Other amenities available in the development suggest that middle to upper class residents dominate the landscape. For instance, “a planned $600 million Microsoft campus is to anchor the office and retail complex,” suggesting that this space will become home to white-collar, business jobs instead of working-class populations. Also, in 2004, community members lobbied for a new off-leash dog park, which would be funded and fully supported by the community. The cost of creating this dog park could range from $12,000 to $15,000.

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32 Ibid.
33 Eastside Living, “Builders team up to create a true community spirit,” Issaquah Highlands, http://issaquahhighlands.com/eastside_living1-03.10.07.php
overall, with annual upkeep ranging from $3000 to $5000 in total; costs that lower income residents likely cannot afford. This example raises uncertainty as to which population this community serves, while raising questions of the integrity of praise for community building success in the development.

If this New Urbanist development serves the financially dominant community, then the case of Issaquah Heights can lead to further questioning of New Urbanism and whether it truly accomplishes its objectives. In the case of Issaquah Heights, the environmental objective is soundly achieved by only developing “Built Green” certified projects, yet the rapid development of Issaquah Heights also coincided with the construction of a new highway branch that arguably promotes and encourages car travel. The development of homes following “Built Green” standards also comes at the social consequence of breeding financial homogeneity: with less focus on providing an array of housing, affordable across all income brackets and a greater focus on building green, Issaquah Heights falls short of accomplishing diversity. Like its historical partners Garden Cities and Perry’s neighborhood unit plan, New Urbanism still lacks the resources to integrate communities across a variety of socioeconomic characteristics.

CONCLUSIONS

Although New Urbanism claims to be an innovative new method of urban and suburban planning, close examination of other 20th century planning methods show that it very closely reflects a variety of different planning movements. Synthesizing ideologies from historical periods to create a composite, all-encompassing planning technique, however, does not create flawless spaces. Rather, a mismatching of various planning methods and

movements makes New Urbanism into an inherently flawed phenomenon that cannot possibly achieve its principles. Many of the goals set by proponents of the New Urbanism are too optimistic in “hoping” for diversity rather than actively trying to engage broad types of communities with one another in a newly forged land development.

Fundamental problems of designing for diversity are discussed in detail through Kristin Day’s (2003) article about diversity in the Westside neighborhood of Costa Mesa, California. Her discussion provides insight as to how New Urbanism overlooks the fact that ‘community’ cannot be singly defined, and various cultures, races and socioeconomic classes view community changes differently from one another.\textsuperscript{35} This reading could give more insight as to why the assumption of diversity in New Urbanist spaces simply due to presence of low-income housing is essentially flawed and she proposes solutions to planning for diversity. This includes informing homeowners of the process of opening a neighborhood up to lower income residents, which could be applied to the Issaquah Highlands case. She asserts, “planners cannot simply ‘hope’ that displacement does not occur…the needs of existing residents (renters as well as homeowners)…should be central in [the] discussion, not an afterthought.”\textsuperscript{36} She furthers the argument that “if the [New Urbanism] movement means to be seriously relevant for diverse urban neighborhoods” that it must make this goal part of the hands-on city planning process.\textsuperscript{37}

New Urbanism is a viable alternative to suburban sprawl in terms of environmental sustainability. However, it is yet to be proven that New Urbanism can bring together

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“diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.”

Perhaps the problem lies within the fact that these spaces are not, in fact, authentic – they are forged and excessively planned to the point where little true authenticity remains. A New Urbanist space, once created, has little room for flexibility. These deliberately planned communities seek diversity, yet the creation and support of diversity is lost in the process of home pricing and attracting future residents. Until the New Urbanism can soundly acknowledge the accomplishment of diversity in its forged communities, it remains a set of ideals that have not yet been fully realized in practice.

Diversity can be better understood within the New Urbanism by examining the limitations that spatial planning has in relation to creating social landscapes.

Diversity, in terms of variation of race, culture and socioeconomic status, cannot be achieved by mapping out plans for a development. However, the New Urbanism does have a certain amount of control over zoning for construction and the housing types available in a community. If the majority of housing is to be owned rather than rented, then the typically lower-income population of renters will be essentially left out of the community. While the New Urbanism clearly states an objective of bringing together a broad range of economic classes, in the case of Issaquah Heights, the goal changes over time. The New Urbanism should take care to remain true to its principles if it wishes to achieve the clearly stated ideals. Again, diversity cannot simply be ‘hoped’ for; the New Urbanism does have an impact on whom it invites and whom it alienates from its communities. The New Urbanism must recognize that planning for diversity must be diligently applied at every stage of development in order to truly create diverse, sustainable communities.

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Appendix

Figure 1.1 Garden City schematic; includes centrally located park, residential units within close proximity to the center, and surrounding agricultural land. 39

Figure 1.2 Garden City: Chatham Village, Pittsburgh. Designed based on Garden City design from 1932-1936. Notice the walking path and green space connecting the house fronts – very similar to the New Urban design. 40

39 http://www.library.cornell.edu/Reps/DOCS/howard2.gif
40 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chatham_Village
Figure 2.1 Daniel Burnham’s Chicago Plan, c. 1909. Notice the prominent city center and pathways that lead easily to it.\textsuperscript{41}

Figure 2.2 New Urbanist plan: Leytham Neighborhood, Omaha, NE. Notice the structure – built around a prominent center like the City Beautiful.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{41} http://earthfirst.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/eco-bridge4.jpg
\textsuperscript{42} http://newherbanism.blogspot.com/2007/06/blog-post_23.html
Figure 3.1 Clarence Perry’s Neighborhood Unit Plan focused on creating spaces made up of one or more neighborhood units. If a neighborhood unit stood alone, it was a village; if it was placed adjacent to other neighborhoods they together made a town. The central focus was that this pattern would be repeated over and over again.⁴³

⁴³ http://noisetank.com/hugeasscity/images/Perry_Neighborhood.jpg
Figure 4.1 Issaquah Highlands plan; New Urbanist plan with neighborhoods located around one prominent center, alternative transportation pathways to promote walkability, and preserved open space.  

Figure 4.2 Aerial shot of Issaquah Highlands; notice location of homes in relation to street in lower left region – home fronts edge the street and homes share greenspace in the backyards. 

44 http://www.builtgreen.net/studies/10502.jpg
45 http://lh4.ggpht.com/_ZNkrJQputg0/Ri2Zar-Mwkl/AAAAAAAACNw/U_Wt3dkLHqU/tiger_mt_4-23-2007006.JPG
Figure 4.3 Up-close image of prominent home fronts with porches and decks facing the street to promote community-building as people come in closer contact with neighbors.  

Figure 4.4 Shared greenspace promotes neighborhood community building as well.

46 http://chicagoold.blockshopper.com/content/img/f207982/issaquah.jpg
47 http://geogroupnw.com/resl.jpg
Works Cited


