The New Urbanism
Toward an Architecture of Community

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McGraw-Hill, Inc.
New York San Francisco Washington, D.C.
Auckland Bogota Caracas Lisbon London Madrid
Mexico City Milan Montreal New Delhi San Juan
Preface

Peter Katz

By the summer of 1991, when I began this project, it seemed evident that a new urban design movement was taking shape. Publications as diverse as The Atlantic, Travel & Leisure, People and Smithsonian had all featured what was then being called "Neo-traditional" planning. Several television networks had covered it as well. The architectural press was slower to come around; this story didn’t fit neatly into their well established celebrity system.

For me, an extensive article in Time Magazine on the work of Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Peter Calthorpe was the clincher. A new architecture and urban design movement had already gone mainstream, yet few of the architects that I knew were even aware of it. This book had to be done.

The New Urbanism is a movement that I feel will be of great relevance to future planning efforts in this country. It addresses many of the ills of our current sprawl development pattern while returning to a cherished American icon: that of a compact, close-knit community.

For most of human history, people have banded together for mutual security or to be close to critical resources—water, food and, more recently, posts, rail hubs and employment centers. The advent of the automobile and a host of other factors provided an opportunity to disperse—to go beyond the limits of one’s own sprawling, crime and disease which plagued center cities in the past offered reasons enough to leave. In the postwar era, suburbs became the lifestyle of choice for most Americans.

While this new way of living had many advantages, it also fragmented our society—separating us from friends and relatives and breaking down the bonds of community that had served our nation so well in earlier times. Despite the increasing sophistication of our physical and electronic networks (highways, telephones, television, etc.), we remain today a fragmented society. Networks, alas, are no substitute for true community.

In my view, the New Urbanism couldn’t have come at a better time. There is a growing sense that the suburban paradigm, which has dominated since the 1940s and 1950s, cannot sustain another generation of growth. The costs of suburban sprawl are all around us: they’re visible in the creeping deterioration of once proud neighborhoods, the increasing alienation of large segments of society, a constantly rising crime rate and widespread environmental degradation. Though gradual, and for that reason unnoticed by many, these changes have altered our world in ways that we are just now starting to understand.

The Geography of Nowhere, an excellent book by James Howard Kunstler, provides a comple-
suburbs. Kunstler finds no shortage of causes—the auto and petroleum interests, the greed of developers and the shortsightedness of civic officials among them. The “joyride” that he feels we’ve been on since the 1940s has devastated our built environment. Now that the ride is over, we must deal with its consequences.

The New Urbanism addresses that challenge. It may not be the American Dream as it was constituted in our parents’ generation, but it could ultimately offer a better option for those of my own—the baby-boom generation. We’ve been teased by the promise, yet denied the benefits of this so-called “dream.”

The proposals of the New Urbanism, for example, include several forms of housing that haven’t been built since my grandfather’s time. Since then, they’ve been systematically eliminated. I’m referring to truly high-quality apartments and townhouses, boarding houses that were respectable places to live; also accessory units, duplexes and quadruplexes of every kind. All of these proven options from the past seem again suited to the needs of a diverse society.

The New Urbanism, though, is not just a revival. While it borrows heavily from traditional city planning concepts—particularly those of the years 1900–1920 (now coming to be regarded as a watershed era in the history of urban design)—the New Urbanists acknowledge that many realities of modern life must be dealt with: automobiles and “big-box” stores, to mention just a few.

Far from suggesting we turn our backs on the benefits of modern living, the return to community that they advocate may, in fact, be empowered by new technology. Telecommuting with the aid of computers and modems from a home office or neighborhood work center is one such example. The advantages of time and money saved by not driving long distances to work and having increased time available for family and friends are evident. Where pilot programs have been started (Washington State sponsored one such effort), employees jumped at the chance to work closer to home.

In his book Penturbia, economist Jack Lesinger predicts that such changing work patterns will make suburbs obsolete and trigger a boom in the rural areas where people now vacation or retire. A recent article in The New York Times suggests that such a shift may well be occurring: It cites reports of population growth in some rural areas for the first time in 60 years.

While the effects of such rural dispersion could be even more catastrophic than the recent suburban exodus, one hopes that land-efficient New Urbanism planning methods could help avert such a fate. On this point, it is important to note a major philosophical division among the practitioners of the New Urbanism that is reflected in this book’s two-part structure:

Some believe that land at the region’s edge shouldn’t be developed until all infill possibilities have been exhausted; others feel that since current economic and political realities favor growth at the edge, it is better to mold such new growth into a more sustainable development pattern that will not drain the vitality of nearby established urban centers.

These two approaches are mentioned here, not to precipitate divisiveness but rather to illustrate how the principles of the New Urbanism, articulated in the three essays which follow, can be applied to a variety of situations—both new development and infill—at a range of densities and scales and in all areas of the country.

The prospect of a new century raises serious concerns about the quality of life that can be expected in a future era of diminished global resources. In that light, all of the strategies in this book should be examined, tested and tested again in relation to prevailing development models. If the New Urbanism can indeed be shown to deliver a higher, more sustainable quality of life to a majority of this nation’s citizens, we can only hope that it will be embraced as the next paradigm for the shaping of America’s communities.
The New Urbanism is concerned with both the pieces and the whole. It applies principles of urban design to the region in two ways. First, urbanism—defined by its diversity, pedestrian scale, public space and structure of bounded neighborhoods—should be applied throughout a metropolitan region regardless of location: in suburbs and new growth areas as well as within the city. And second, the entire region should be "designed" according to similar urban principles. It should, like a neighborhood, be structured by public space, its circulation system should support the pedestrian, it should be both diverse and hierarchical and it should have discernible edges.

The first application is a simple but unique contribution of this movement. Urbanism is now well understood in the city, but rarely applied to the suburb. Although there have been many transgressions over the post-war period, the principles of urbanism have clearly reemerged since Jane Jacobs, Vincent Scully, Aldo Rossi, Leon Krier and many others have articulated the traditions. What is new is the application of these principles in suburbia and beyond. Too often we think of these aesthetic, spatial and programmatic principles in terms of density and the inner-city context. But the New Urbanism demonstrates how such ideas can be realized in the contemporary suburban context that the relationship between architecture and public space can be "urban" regardless of building height or mass; that spatial hierarchy and connectedness can be rendered regardless of land-use intensity; and that pedestrian life can exist in single-family neighborhoods as well as on tenement streets. Applying these principles in the unlikely areas of the modern suburb, while coping with its economic and social imperatives, is one important contribution of the New Urbanism.

The second application acknowledges that the city, its suburbs and their natural environment should be treated as a whole—socially, economically and ecologically. Treating them separately is endemic to many of the problems we now face, and our lack of governance at this scale is a direct manifestation of this disaggregation. Seen as a whole, the American metropolis should be designed with much the same attitude as we design a neighborhood: There should be defined edges (i.e., Urban Growth Boundaries), the circulation system should function for the pedestrian (i.e., supported by regional transit systems), public space should be formative rather than residual (i.e., preservation of major open-space networks), civic and private domains should form a complementary hierarchy (i.e., related cultural centers, commercial districts and residential neighborhoods) and
created by adequate affordable housing and a jobs/housing balance). Developing such an architecture of the region creates the context for a healthy urbanism in neighborhoods, districts and at the city center. The two forms of urbanism work together.

The Crisis of Growth
To understand how the New Urbanism works in a regional context, the evolution of the modern American metropolis must be understood (even if in sketch form as it must be here). For the last 40 years growth has been largely directed by suburban flight, highway capacity and federal government mortgage policy. The typical development cycle started with bedroom communities pioneering the most remote sectors of the metropolitan region. With federal and state highway investments, such seemingly remote suburbs and small towns became commute-accessible to the existing major job centers. They offered low-cost land and affordable housing for the regional workforce. Retail, services, recreation and civic uses followed in proportion to the demand created by the housing. When they reached critical mass, the new suburban areas began to attract jobs. "Edge Cities," as author Joel Garreau calls them, were soon formed. As these new decentralized job centers grew, the process began again-creating another layer of sprawl extending out from the decentralized job centers. Today, the suburb-to-suburb commute represents 40 percent of total commute trips while suburb-to-city comprises only 20 percent.

Out of this evolution of the modern metropolis there has grown a profound sense of frustration and placelessness. A homogeneous quality overlays the unique nature of each place with chain-store architecture, scaleless office parks and monotonous subdivisions. Even these qualities are easily blunted by the speed at which we move and the isolation we feel in our cars and in our dwellings. At their extreme, the new forms seem to have an empty feeling, reinforcing our mobile state and the instability of our families. Moving at a speed which allows only generic symbols to be recognized, we cannot wonder that the man-made environment seems trite and overstated.

Americans initially moved to the suburbs for privacy, mobility, security and homeownership. What we now have is isolation, congestion, rising crime, pollution and overwhelming costs—costs that ultimately must be paid by taxpayers, businesses and the environment. This sprawling pattern of growth at the edge now produces conditions which frustrate rather than enhance daily life. Meanwhile, our city centers have deteriorated because much of their economic vitality has decanted to the suburbs.

Ironically, the American Dream is now increasingly out of sync with today's culture. Our household makeup has changed dramatically; the workplace and work force have been transformed, family wealth is shrinking and grave environmental concerns have surfaced. But we continue to build post-World War II suburbs as if families were large and had only one breadwinner, the jobs were all downtown, land and energy were plentiful and another lane on the freeway would end traffic congestion.

Settlement patterns are the physical foundation of our society and, like our society, they are becoming more and more fractured. Development patterns and local zoning laws segregate age groups, income groups, ethnic groups and family types. They isolate people and activities in an inefficient network of congestion and pollution, rather than joining them in diverse and human-scaled communities. Our faith in government and the fundamental sense of commonality at the center of any viable democracy is seeping away in suburbs designed more for cars than people, more for market segments than real communities. Special interest groups now replace the larger community within our political landscape, just as gated subdivisions have replaced neighborhoods.

Our communities historically were embedded in nature, helping set both the unique identity of each place and the physical limits of
the community. Local climate, plants, vistas, harbors and ridge lands once defined the special qualities of every memorable place. Today, smog, pavement, toxic soil, receding natural habitats and polluted water contribute to the destruction of neighborhood and home in the largest sense.

We threaten nature and nature now threatens us in return: sunlight causes cancer, air threatens our lungs, rain burns the trees, streams are polluted and soils are toxic. Understanding the qualities of nature in each place, expressing it in the design of communities, integrating it within our towns and respecting its balance are critical to making the human place sustainable and spiritually nourishing.

A Taxonomy of Growth

The problems of growth are not to be solved by limiting the scope, program or location of development. They must be resolved by rethinking the nature and quality of growth itself, in every context. People argue heatedly about growth: where, how much, what type, what density and if it is really necessary at all. Sprawl is bad, infill is good (if it is not in our neighborhood), new towns destroy open space, master-planned communities are sterile and urban redevelopment is fine for "other people." Any region with a high growth demand has several 2) let the towns and suburbs surrounding the metropolitan center grow uncontrollably until they become a continuous mass; 3) attempt to accommodate growth in redevelopment and infill locations; or 4) plan new towns and new growth areas within reasonable transit proximity of the city center.

Every region needs to find an appropriate mix of these very different options. Each strategy has inherent advantages and problems, which need to be understood.

Limiting growth on a local level without the appropriate regional controls often spreads development into remote areas that are more receptive to sprawl. This increases commuting distances and creates our well known hopscotch land-use patterns.

Sometimes called "managed" or "slow" growth, this strategy is often used by a jurisdiction seeking to avoid its fair share of affordable housing or the expansion of transit. Unless there is a strategy for limiting growth at a regional level, local attempts will only extend and displace the problem.

At the other extreme, allowing the uncontrolled growth of existing suburbs and towns is our most common growth strategy. It has the most familiar results: sprawl, traffic and a loss of the identity for what historically may have been distinct neighborhoods, villages and towns. And to powerful citizens' no-growth movements and growth limitations, thus fueling the cycle of regional sprawl.

Infill and Redevelopment

The best utilization of existing infrastructure and the best opportunity to preserve our open space will come from infill and redevelopment. Therefore it should always be a central part of a region's growth policy. But to expect infill sites to absorb all or even most new development is unrealistic. This is sometimes because there are not enough sites to accommodate the demand, and partly because no-growth neighborhood groups often resist such infill. Once again, without a political force to balance the larger economic and environmental needs of a region against the anti-infill tendency of individual communities, there is little hope such growth will reach even its limited potential.

Both urban and suburban infill sites have special concerns and constraints beyond the generic and widespread political problems of NIMBYism (not in my backyard syndrome).

Over the last 30 years, urban infill and redevelopment has been a prime objective for most cities. There have been some successes but many failures. The list of problems and constraints is long: racial tension, gentrification, economic stagnation, bureaucratism, deterioration
To answer these questions it is useful to understand the history of new town planning. At the turn of the century and during the great depression the theory of new towns evolved in several directions. Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City movement defined a Luddite’s vision of small towns built for workers surrounded by a greenbelt, combining the best of city and country. These towns were formed around rail stations and formally configured with a combination of the Romantic and Beaux Arts urban traditions: powerful civic spaces surrounded by village-scaled neighborhoods. In the same period Tony Garnier developed the first Modernist approach to town planning, segregating industry, isolating different uses and freeing buildings from the street. His was the first such vision of the 20th century city. During the depression Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright expanded this vision in the urban and suburban context while retaining fundamental Modernist principles: segregation of use, love of the auto and dominance of private over public space. In these utopias (which after World War II came to guide our development patterns) the street as the community’s habitable common ground disintegrated. Even in the most progressive of the post-War new towns and master-planned communities, these basic Modernist concepts have compartmentalized, if not completely destroyed, their ability to evolve into vital communities. The task of the New Urbanism is to learn from these failures, avoiding their sterile and suburban character while defining a form of growth which can help mend the metropolis.

Urbanism of the Pieces

The specific nature of a metropolitan region will dictate which growth strategies are necessary and useful. Some regions with a very slow growth rate may only need incremental infill. Some regions with fast growth and much undeveloped suburban land may benefit from both infill and new growth area projects. Other regions may require all three strategies, including satellite towns, to absorb massive growth without destroying the identity of existing places. One thing is certain: With any blend of these forms, it is the quality of development, not just its location or size, that is the principal problem and opportunity of growth.

Sprawl is destructive in any growth strategy. Contemporary suburbs have failed because they lack, as do many of the so-called “modern” new towns and edge cities, the fundamental qualities of real towns: pedestrian scale, an identifiable center and edge, integrated diversity of use and population and defined public space. They may have diversity in use and user, but these diverse elements are segregated by the car. They have none of the places for casual and spontaneous interaction which create vital neighborhoods, quarters or towns. Unless urban infill sites, suburban new development areas and satellite towns embody the qualities of the New Urbanism, they will fail too. In every context, therefore, the quality of new development in a region should follow towns-like principles—housing for a diverse population, a full mix of uses, walkable streets, positive public space, integrated civic and commercial centers, transit orientation and accessible open space.

Urban infill often succeeds because those urban qualities pre-exist and need only be preserved, not necessarily created. Nevertheless we see many urban infill projects which succeed in destroying these desirable pre-existing qualities. For smaller parcels in existing urban neighborhoods the task is to complete the mix of a community while honoring the unique qualities of the place. For suburban sites, even with the political constraints, mixed-use neighborhoods can be infilled. Far from being blank slates, these suburban infill sites sometimes offer rich histories to build on as well as debilitating sprawl to overcome.

Satellite towns at the outer edge of the metropolitan region can easily afford features that more expensive areas cannot provide—greenbelts, transit and affordable housing to name a few. At the same time they buffer their own edges with greenbelts, they can help...