NEW URBANISM

A New Approach to the Way America Builds

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New Urbanism has been characterized as the most important phenomenon to emerge in American architecture and planning since the Modernist movement. Like any movement promoting ideas that challenge long standing practices, New Urbanism has received its share of criticism. This article focuses on the positive aspects of these movements. It provides an overview of the movement and looks into the lessons that could be learned from the application of its ideas to the design and development of cities.

Illustrative of many New Urbanism ideas are the efforts undertaken in Europe during the last decade of the twentieth century. The charter outlines a new vision of the spatial and physical form of the contemporary built environment promoted by New Urbanism and defines the principles and development policies that support that vision. Then, the Charter refers to regions as "fundamental economic units of the contemporary world" and calls for coordination of public policies, physical planning, and economic strategies to deal with this new reality.

New Urbanism brings to fore the importance of an integrated approach to rectifying the problems of urban growth and to bring about change to the unsustainable pattern of the current urban landscape. It, also, asserts that the process for effecting changes in the urban structure and public policies should be based on developing close partnerships and cooperation among various disciplines, interest groups, and citizens. There is, also, an idea on Reaffirmation of the Traditional Urbanism principles that have guided design of cities for centuries. New Urbanism, of course, does not offer solutions to all ills of the American built environment, however, it has inspired significant changes in the approaches to planning and development.

Keywords: planning, movements, application, design, integrated approach, problems, growth, built environment, coordination.

New Urbanism has been characterized as the most important phenomenon to emerge in American architecture and planning since the Modernist movement (New York Times, 1996, 27). This movement boldly challenges American planning policies and development practices and offers a compelling alternative to the current urban landscape of sprawling developments. The results have been a renewed interest in the fundamental attributes of town planning and design, and radical changes in the way America builds and restructures its cities.

New Urbanism starts with the basic premise that the current spatial structure of the American-built environment is dysfunctional and unsustainable - socially, economically and environmentally - and must be reformed to efficiently serve the society and preserve the environment. New Urbanism advocates the reintegration of all components of community life (working, living, shopping and entertainment) into cohesive developments comprised of neighbourhoods and cities which are linked with transit and set into a regional framework. The cities and neighbourhoods should be diverse, compact, and pedestrian oriented, provide alternative transportation modes, include a mix of uses, and promote social integration. To reach this goal of social, economic, physical, and environmental unity, New Urbanism calls for the return to the timeless principles of traditional urbanism and design solutions based on traditional urban forms. These solutions should be adapted to the needs of modern institutions and technology and reflect the local historic heritage and building traditions. The implementation process would be guided by a complex set of design-based principles that operate at all scales of the urban hierarchy - from buildings, blocks and streets, to neighbourhoods, districts and corridors; and, ultimately, to cities and metropolitan regions.

The explanation offered by the movement for the complexity of today's dilemma is the assertion that government policies and Euclidian-based development regulations of the last half of the twentieth century have encouraged a sprawling pattern of the placeless and disconnected single use suburban developments. Such developments, in turn, have contributed to a myriad of ills: environmental degradation, loss of open space, social segregation, irreversible environmental costs, diminished aesthetic qualities, excessive cost of infrastructure and services, inequitable distribution of economic and social resources, and loss of community identity. The exponents of New Urbanism view these problems as "one interrelated community-building challenge".

This challenge, however, could not be resolved within the current regulatory system. The ultimate goal as stated in the Charter of New Urbanism is to "restructure public policies and development practices to support the restoration of urban centres and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfigura-
tion of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighbourhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy”.

Like any movement promoting ideas that challenge long standing practices, New Urbanism has received its share of criticism. This article focuses on the positive aspects of this movement. It provides an overview of the movement and looks into the lessons that could be learned from the application of promoted ideas to the cities’ design and development.

HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT

The ideas promoted by New Urbanism are not entirely new. Many have been an integral part of the approach to the design and development of western cities for 5,000 years. Intellectual roots of these ideas can be traced back to, among others, Plato and Aristotle and their ideas about the optimum size, layout and design of cities, Camille Cité’s valorisation of organic towns, and many twentieth century movements seeking solutions to the problems of modern cities. Among these are the movements inspired by the ideas of John Ruskin and Ebenezer Howard at the beginning of the twentieth century in England, and critical commentaries by Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford in the mid twentieth century in the United States. An equally important influence on the New Urbanism ideas formulation can be traced to the contextualism of Rob and Leon Krier and the Italian morphologists in the later part of the twentieth century.

Illustrative of many New Urbanism ideas are the efforts undertaken in Europe during the last decade of the twentieth century - The New Charter of Athens 1998, adopted by the European Association of Urbanism, and Towards the Urban Renaissance, a study prepared by the British Urban Commission in 1999. Interestingly, the Charter of Macchu Pichu, drafted by the International Association of Architects and Urban planners in 1977, was an early promotion of the principles underlying the visions espoused by the ensuing charters adopted in the late 1990s by both, the American and the European architects and urban planners.

New Urbanism first appeared on the scene of American urban planning and architecture in the early 1980s in the ideas espoused by two concurrent movements - Neo-traditional Planning and Transit Oriented Development. The two movements were initiated in different parts of the country, but employed similar design principles and shared a common premise and overall goals, Neo-traditional Planning started on the Atlantic Coast and was first popularised by the writings and projects of architects Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk of Miami, Florida. Their ideas promoted a return to the principles of traditional urbanism and the design of cities that fosters a sense of community by providing places for all aspects of community life in an aesthetically pleasing spatial structure. Transit-Oriented Development began on the Pacific Coast and was popularised by the works of a Berkeley architect and urban planner, Peter Calthorpe. Calthorpe emphasized a regional approach to urban development that promotes the integration of transit systems on a regional basis. In this regard, Calthorpe advocates the building of compact, mixed-use development surrounding transit stations.

In 1991, the followers of these two parallel movements met and formulated a set of principles that embodied the essence of their shared ideas. These principles are known as the Abwahnee Principles, named after the hotel in Yosemite National Park in California, where the meeting took place. The widespread acceptance of the Abwahnee Principles broadened the support of the two movements, and two years later, in 1993, another meeting held in Alexandria, Virginia, which led to the creation of a unified movement today known as New Urbanism. Members of this movement formed a non-profit organization - The Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) - and in 1996 adopted a set of principles, which are defined in The Charter of the New Urbanism (the Charter).

It is noteworthy to mention that the CNU is often compared to the Congres Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) even though these two organizations have diametrically opposing views on many issues. Both CNU and CIAM focus on similar issues: restructuring the existing urban environment disorder, improving community life through urban design and linking economic, social, and physical elements into the cities’ design. Furthermore, the charters of both organizations contain principles that outline their respective visions of human settlement patterns.

Unlike CIAM, however, which offers a vision of the functional city accommodating cars, as an antidote to the chaos of the early twentieth century European cities, CNU focuses on neighbourhood design and the impacts amelioration of the automobile upon urban development patterns. The two organizations promoted diametrically opposite ways of accomplishing their respective visions—CIAM advocated a break from history and traditions and mandated a strict separation of uses, while CNU advocates the respect for the history and the return to traditions believing that cities should provide a diverse mix of uses.

A further distinction between the two organizations is CNU’s efforts to use its power as a movement to broaden its base and gain support among all professional organizations that deal with the built environment, including public officials and non-design professions. Collaboration with building professionals - developers, lenders and builders- has proven to be instrumental in much of the success of New Urbanism. CNU also seeks cooperation among all interest groups and solicits participation and input from local citizens. CIAM, on the other hand, excluded non-design professionals from its ranks. Both organizations enjoyed a successful relationship with government organizations. However, while CIAM’s primary leverage was “top down”, derived from large state-sponsored projects, CNU relies on a “bottom-up” approach, and focuses on the impact at the local level through restructuring codes and regulations.

CNU’s impact has also extended now into the political arena. Its underlying goals and principles defined by the Charter can be found on the list of state and national programs and political agendas of public figures. For example, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development has adopted the principles of New Urbanism as key elements of the federal program known as HOPE VI (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) whose purpose is to transform distressed residential areas into mixed-use neighbourhoods. The United States General Services Administration, Environmental Protection Agency and the Urban Land Institute have also developed collaborative efforts with the Congress for the New Urbanism.

CHAPTER OF THE NEW URBANISM

The Charter outlines a new vision of the spatial and physical form of the contemporary built environment promoted by New Urbanism, and defines the principles and development policies, which support that vision. The Charter sets out 27 principles to guide planning and
design, public policy, and development practices. These principles are organized into three categories, containing nine principles each, that address the three scales of the urban hierarchy. They start at the scale of the region (including the metropolis, cities and towns) followed by the neighbourhood (including districts and corridors) and finally the block (including streets and buildings). Now Urbanism adherents point out that these principles should be considered as a comprehensive sequence dealing with the built environment at every scale. The following is a brief description of the salient points of each set of principles.

The Region: Metropolis, City, and Town

The Charter refers to regions as "fundamental economic units of the contemporary world" and calls for the coordination of public policies, physical planning, and economic strategies to deal with this new reality. Many issues facing the metropolitan areas, such as equitable use of environmental resources, designation of land for open space and agriculture, transportation and economic development, have regional ramifications and thus cannot be effectively resolved at the local level. Since all the elements of the region are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, only a well thought out design of the region can provide parameters for growth in a way that will ensure social, economic, and environmental sustainability of its cities, neighbourhoods and districts.

The regional spatial structure should consist of multiple centres comprised of cities, towns, and villages. Each regional centre in turn has its own identifiable centre and edge. A regional transportation framework interconnects the centres and minimizes the dependence on the automobile by providing pedestrian and bicycle systems and access to transit. Public institutions and services need to be centrally located and accessible to all residents. Cities and towns within the region should support the regional economy that benefits the diverse population. At the same time, individual cities and towns must provide a wide spectrum of private and public uses that accommodate the residents’ needs for work, housing and recreation. Physical geography of the region is defined by the elements of topography, hydrology, open spaces, and farmlands.

All development and redevelopment within the regions must be integrated with the existing urban pattern and should respect the local cultural legacy and building traditions.

Neighbourhoods, Districts and Corridors

The Charter considers neighbourhoods, districts and corridors as "the fundamental elements of development." This, the middle scale of the urban hierarchy, best illustrates the key challenges of New Urbanism: the reaffirmation of urbanism’s traditional principles and the conflicts resolution between the two traditional forms and the needs of modern institutions and technology.

The focus is on the neighbourhood, which is considered to be "an essential building block" of the cities' social and physical structure. The Charter addresses two types of neighbourhoods: 1. Traditional Neighbourhood Development (TND) based on Clarence Perry’s concept of the neighbourhood unit introduced in the First Regional Plan of New York in 1929 and modified here to reflect the contemporary institutions, markets and infrastructure needs (figure 1); and 2. Transit Oriented Development (TOD) as originally formulated by Peter Calthorpe (figure 2). These two types of neighbourhood development have a common premise and share similar characteristics.

Fig.1. Traditional Neighbourhood Development
Source: Duany Plater-Zyberk

Fig.2. Transit Oriented Development
Source: Calthorpe Associates

The neighbourhood structure should be compact, incorporate mixed-use development, contain a variety of housing types, and be designed to foster social interaction. A quarter mile distance from the centre to the edge, which can be covered in a five to ten minute walk, defines the optimal size of the neighbourhood. Within this convenient walking distance is located a mass transit stop (bus or light rail) and all neighbourhood activities and services necessary to meet the daily needs of its residents. Neighbourhood streets are designed to foster pedestrian use, with tree streets, wide sidewalks, and street furniture. They also provide for street parking and accommodate cars and bicycles.

The focal point of the neighbourhood is the centre, which contains civic buildings, public gathering places, retail and entertainment establishments. The edges of the neighbourhood vary, depending on their location relative to the main urban centres. In suburban locations the edges are marked with open spaces; conversely, in dense urban settings, neighbourhoods are often bounded with wide streets or boulevards along which commercial centres are located. Neighbourhoods could be created as isolated entities, as parts of infill projects or city’s extensions. The town of Seaside in Florida designed by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk was the first development that employed the neighbourhood design principles (figure 3). A master-planned community designed by Peter Calthorpe, Laguna West, exemplifies the principles of the Transit Oriented Development (figure 4).

Block, Street and Building

Blocks, streets and buildings, the smallest scale of the urban hierarchy, are viewed as the essential elements of the traditional urban context. "A primary task of urban architecture," states the Charter, is creating "the physical definitions of streets and public spaces as places of shared uses". Integration of streets and blocks creates a fine-grained structure of public and private spaces. Neighbourhoods designed along these lines have sufficient flexibility to transform over time, building by building, as needed to accommodate change. Current suburban subdivision designs, by contrast, are not suitable for incremental transformation and can only be changed in their aggregate form.
Design of neighbourhood buildings, the street layout, and delineation of blocks reflect the local history, environmental characteristics and indigenous building practices. Attention is given to the creation of a unified whole where individual buildings and blocks are not isolated objects but contribute to the definition of public spaces and a sense of place creation.

The landscape design has also received renewed attention. It is used to span all three scales of development and ties them together with a system of public spaces including parks, open spaces, promenades, and squares.

LESSONS LEARNED

Integrated Approach

New Urbanism brings to light the importance of an integrated approach to rectifying the problems of urban growth and leads to changes in the unsustainable pattern of the current urban landscape. This approach calls for the integration of all factors shaping the built environment—social, economic, ecological and physical. As they are all interrelated, they must be addressed together to reach successful solutions.

The key element in this approach is a regional perspective. The region, as asserted in New Urbanism, is the critical factor in the life of all its integral parts—from cities, neighbourhoods, and districts, to blocks and buildings. Without the consideration of all factors effecting the entire region’s development, even developments designed to conform to the New Urbanism principles might end up being nothing more than part of faceless urban sprawl.

The application of a regional perspective was first introduced by Patrick Geddes and embraced by Ebenezer Howard at the end of the nineteenth century in England. Daniel Burnham, Lewis Mumford and the Regional Plan Association of America continued this tradition in the United States. However, while planning within the regional context remained an accepted approach to planning in Europe, it received little attention in America with the exception of the plan for Chicago in 1909 and the First New York Regional Plan in 1929.

In America, in the early 1990s, the works and writings of the CNU members, most notably Peter Calthorpe (Calthorpe, 1993), brought a renewed attention to the importance of the regional perspective. During the last decade of the twentieth century, the regional perspective has increasingly gained support among planning professionals, politicians, environmentalists and the general public for dealing with problems related to growth, environmental problems, and quality of life. In fact, the support for the regional approach has become strong enough to give impetus to an emerging movement in its own right: “New Regionalism”.

Cooperation

New Urbanism asserts that the process for effecting changes in the urban structure and public policies should be based upon developing close partnerships and cooperation among various disciplines, interest groups, and citizens. Cooperation is the key element for building support for the change and creating solutions that are responsive to local conditions and wishes of all local stakeholders. Such participatory process is now rather common in the United States. In many states, planning laws authorise citizens to become actively involved in many aspects of the planning and decision-making process. But, in contrast to many planning efforts where only completed development proposals are exposed to public review and comment, New Urbanism incorporates public participation throughout the planning and design process. The community involvement plays an important role starting with the discussions about the creation of a common vision, the formulation and selection of alternative plans, and ultimately to the creation of implementation strategies.

Professionals who employ various methods including visioning workshops, visual preference surveys and working urban design charrettes usually facilitate the participatory process. The use of visual methods—drawings, diagrams, photographs—helps clarify design concepts to laymen who are not familiar with the professional jargon and terminology. Design ideas are communicated in two-dimensional plans representation and three-dimensional representation of buildings and urban spaces to better facilitate an understanding of how the proposed plans relate to the area’s context. These techniques serve to both educate and engage the public in a meaningful dialogue about the community planning and design issues and help visualize and evaluate alternative proposals.

Reaffirmation of the Traditional Urbanism

New Urbanism has reminded American planners, public officials, and the community, that design matters. Innovative design concepts and visionary proposals are required to reflect the needs of contemporary life, and they should be integrated throughout the regional, city, neighbourhood, and site scales of development. The movement also stresses the value of traditional urbanism principles that have guided city's design for centuries and created many memorable monuments of our urban heritage. The Charter calls for “a return to our obligation to carry on the traditions of the tested craft of traditional urbanism” (CNU, 2000).
The ideal structure of cities and neighbourhoods, as described in the Charter, is achieved through the planning and design process that recognizes the need to accommodate multiple sets of activities in a physical setting of a human scale, and at the same time provides opportunities for efficient functioning of modern institutions and corresponding infrastructure systems. This view is reflected in the principles indicating how the elements of the city must be developed—from the correlation between the individual buildings and the street to the way in which local land uses and densities relate to the regional system of mass transportation. These planning and design principles are applicable in the reconstruction of the existing urban areas, renovation and development of new urban centres, development on the urban fringe, and design of new master planned communities and new towns.

Not surprisingly, New Urbanism has been criticized for the attention it gives to the physical design, which has rekindled the long-standing debate on the relationship between the built environment and human behaviour. Design alone can’t make community life flourish, critics say, but as past experiences have proven, neither can the policies downplaying design. These policies produced some of the most telling development examples that failed both aesthetically and socially, in the inner cities as well as in fringe developments. In fact, most of the American post W.W.II “faceless” and “any place USA” development is a testimony to the inadequacy of these policies. New Urbanism recognizes the limitations of one-sided development policies, and clearly relates design of places to social, economic and environmental aspects of urban life. The preamble of the Charter clarifies the New Urbanism’s stand on this point: “Physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.”

Integration of planning, design and implementation

New Urbanism emphasizes the importance of a coordinated approach to planning and development that integrates planning, design and implementation. Many urban problems, claim the New Urbanism supporters, relate to the absence of coordination between planning at different development scales and the lack of a clear correlation between planning goals and development policies. The conventional zoning system currently widely used as the basic regulatory framework in America is not promoting high-quality planning. On the contrary, it regulates out sustainable development and encourages the separation and dispersal of development. Further, the proliferation of conventional Euclidian-based codes for guiding development creates serious barriers to implementing alternatives correspondent with the current development patterns.

New Urbanism offers various alternatives to the conventional mechanisms of the regulatory system. Many new codes and regulations were developed to guide planning and project development. These codes translate the goals of the master plans into specific guidelines for planners, developers and architects. Unlike traditional zoning, these guidelines indicate building typologies appropriate for various locations within the neighbourhoods and districts, and call particular attention to the design and location of civic buildings as well as buildings and structures defining public places. These guidelines are typically presented graphically in a series of diagrams that are very easy to understand. This is yet another departure from the conventional regulations which are often presented in thick volumes and require legal experts for clarification.

New Urbanism, with its concept known as “transsect” planning, offers a very powerful alternative approach to the conventional regulations. The transect approach provides a new way of classifying development and open spaces based on the spatial distribution of urban elements along a geographic cross-section of a region. Its underlying principles are based on the ecological theory, which view rural and urban conditions as interconnected parts of a system requiring different forms depending on where the development is located.

The transect methodology involves making a horizontal cut through a landscape from the rural setting with the lowest land use intensity and continuously extending it to the urban core with the highest development level. Thus, the transect defines a sequence of environments that reflect a range of varying development intensity levels providing a comprehensive framework for defining interrelationships between all scales of the rural-to-urban continuum. Using this framework and the geographical settings characteristics along the continuum (rural, suburban and urban), appropriate development intensities can be defined for each transect zone. Each zone’s development would be guided by a set of planning and development policies that specify development plans types pertinent for each zone, development intensities and urban morphology, including the streets, buildings, and public spaces typology.

The advantage of the transect approach, New Urbanism proponents believe, is in campaigning for the creation of sustainable urban patterns with urban forms that are interconnected with rural areas and other parts of the city. Moreover, this leads to a better integration of local and regional building traditions. Equally important, transect planning integrates procedures for plan preparation with design and development policies. Consequently, another crucial advantage of this approach is that planning and design goals are reflected in the implementation devices, which is absent from the current development policies.

Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company (Duany Plater-Zyberk, 2001) recently developed a transect model code –the Smart Cod– which has been implemented on several locations in the United States (figure 5).

CONCLUSION

New Urbanism, certainly does not offer solutions to all ills of the American built environment. For example, neither does it contemplate the programs for economic development, programs for affordable health and social services, nor does it have the power to override market forces and insure housing supply that meets the needs of a diverse population. New Urbanism simply offers an alternative approach to developing solutions in respect to the growing challenges of contemporary cities with clearly defined planning policies, design principles, and implementation strategies.

At present, New Urbanism enjoys wide support in the ranks of architects, urban planners, educational institutions, academics, politicians, developers, and the general public, and has inspired significant changes in the approaches to planning and development. In many parts of the country, the regional and city plans, and development policies are undergoing change including the New Urbanism principles into their development codes. Also, the key principles of New Urbanism are now incorporated in the principles and policies of
other movements interested in finding solutions to the effect of sprawl and improving the quality of the natural and built environment. They include Smart Growth, Liveable Communities and national and state environmental organizations. The impact of New Urbanism has extended into the political arena as well—its underlying goals and principles can be found on the list of state and national programs and political agendas of public figures.

Probably the best testimonies of this movement’s importance are the numerous projects, whose planning and design are guided by the New Urbanism principles. In 1999, Time Magazine recognized the existence of more than 150 developments in the United States and other countries including Philippines, Australia and Finland complying with the New Urbanism principles, while 200 such projects were on the drawing boards (Time, August 16, 1999). They include: the redevelopment of high density residential projects in large cites, the revitalization of commercial centres in existing urban areas (grey-fields), the development of urban areas and urban fringes which were contaminated (brown-fields), the new master planned communities and new towns outside of existing urban areas (green-fields), and affordable housing developments.

The jury is still out. It is as yet early to make a reliable evaluation of the lasting impact of this movement. However, in spite of its shortcomings, the critics agree, New Urbanism is very effective in the restructuring of urban development patterns and curtailng sprawl. It is undeniable that a model which respects the regional context, creates a sense of community, advocates compact development around transit stations, promotes social integration, and calls for development of diverse neighbourhoods with mixed uses, is far more superior then the current alternative. Today’s suburbs and cities characteristics with regard to their economic prosperity, physical character and impact on the natural environment, are a good illustration of the shortcomings of the current model shaping the American built environment.

New Urbanism offers a set of ideas expressed in the charter with no real power. “But, ideas ultimately can have more power than money, profit or the political bureaucracy if enough people believe in them” (Sacramento Bee). Therein may lay the answer.

REFERENCES