

The Region

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FROM:
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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 condition and formalized at any density. It

shows 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 population and use should be diverse (i.e.,

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 work force. 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 blurred 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 home ownership. 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 endless 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 vital 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 options. It can 1) try to limit overall growth;

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 it is an approach which seems inevitably to lead

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, bureaucracy, deteriorating schools and red-line appraisals to name a few.

There are many ways to resolve or reduce the magnitude of these constraints, and they all need to be considered in future urban infill efforts. But it is clear that such strategies are falling short and additional means to advance urban infill are needed.

Portland, Oregon, is an example of a city and region which has gone beyond the traditional programs for urban infill and revitalization. It has successfully supported infill in two progressive ways: an Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) and zoning that supports a transit system that is focused on the central city. The UGB is a state-mandated limit to growth around the metropolitan region which was established in 1972. Both strategies are central to the thesis of a New Urbanism—that a regional system of open space and transit complemented with pedestrian-friendly development patterns can help revitalize an urban center at the same time it helps to order suburban growth. Downtown Portland, because of its light-rail system, sensitive urban planning and regional limits is now growing in a healthy relationship to its suburbs. Both the UGB and Portland's expanding light-rail system have helped to direct new development and economic activity back into its thriving downtown.

Suburban infill represents a different set of problems and constraints. Typically, no-growth and slow-growth neighborhood groups inhibit the density and mix of uses while driving the

cost of suburban development ever upward. The existing street systems and zoning codes stand as further blocks to creating walkable communities. Finally, the density and configurations typical of suburban sprawl make transit a heavily subsidized safety net rather than a real alternative to the car. If we are to have significant growth as suburban infill, much needs to change. Foremost, local citizens must understand that there are options beyond no-growth or sprawl. Local concerns must be tempered with regional needs—an equitable distribution of affordable housing and jobs, preservation of open space and agriculture lands and a viable transit system. This calls for policies and governance which can both educate and guide the complex interaction of economics, ecology, technology, jurisdiction and social equity.

New Growth and Satellite Towns

When urban and suburban infill cannot accommodate the quantity or rate of growth of a region, new growth areas and satellite towns may be considered.

New growth areas are the easiest to develop with transit- and pedestrian-oriented patterns. However there is one caveat: They also may spread the city's size. Satellite towns are typically larger than new growth areas and provide a complete spectrum of shopping, jobs and civic facilities. But both, if well planned and transit-

oriented, can complement infill and help to structure and revitalize the metropolitan region.

An effective transit system accomplishes many things. It can invigorate downtown, as transit invariably focuses on the central business district. Adding more sprawling suburbs to a metropolitan area only increases pressure for parking and freeways downtown, while competing with the city for jobs and retail activity.

By contrast, transit delivers people to the heart of our cities, reducing the need for parking and avoiding destructive urban freeway projects. Adding transit-oriented new growth areas and satellite towns can reinforce the city's role as the region's cultural and economic center. The transit system that is supported at the edge with new growth can also become the catalyst for redevelopment and infill at the regional center.

Recent experiences with "new towns" and new growth areas (sometimes called master-planned communities) have given such developments a bad name. In Europe, with some notable exceptions, new towns are predominantly sterile and suburban in character. In America they are sterile, suburban and—even worse—economic failures. But the questions remain: Are these qualities inherent or products of a dysfunctional design philosophy? And if new towns could be designed more intelligently, would they be justified or necessary?

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-World War II new towns and master-planned communities, these basic Modernist concepts have compromised, 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 town-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

establish permanent edges for the region. Without greenbelted satellite towns or stable Urban Growth Boundaries, a fast growing region will continually expand into and threaten close-in natural edges and open space. Additionally, satellite towns can help manage the growth of older suburbs and towns by absorbing excess development.

Urbanism of the Whole

The way these pieces are woven together into a whole is also part of the New Urbanism. Beyond resolving the balance between new growth and infill, and controlling the urban qualities of both, there is the challenge of creating a truly urban metropolitan form—oriented to public rather than private space, diverse, hierarchical and pedestrian-scaled.

Clearly, the Urban Growth Boundary is the regional equivalent of a defined neighborhood edge. These boundaries create identity for the whole and express the need to preserve nature as a limit to human habitat. Similarly, major open space within the region can be seen as a “village green” at a mega-scale. This internal commons, like the boundaries, establishes the ecological and conservation values which can help form the basis of regional character.

Urbanism at the regional scale has other parallels. Pedestrian scale translates into transit systems. Transit can order and formalize the

region in much the same way a street network orders a neighborhood. It supports the life of the pedestrian throughout the region.

Diversity is a fundamental component of urbanism at both the neighborhood and regional scale. At the regional scale it is too often taken for granted—but diversity without connections (segregated diversity) is not urban at any scale. The diverse population and functions within a region should have a connecting fabric which makes the region vital and inclusionary. Our freeway and arterial networks now seem to privatize and isolate the components of a region more than connect them.

Finally, urbanism articulates the hierarchy of public and private, of civic and commercial. At the regional scale this means that the diversity and differences throughout the region should find a complementary and grand order. By this I mean that neighborhoods and districts should not just repeat one another but, much like the private and civic buildings of a neighborhood, find appropriate locations to express relative focus and importance.

These two dimensions—urbanism within neighborhoods and urbanism as regional form givers—are meant to inform and direct interventions within the existing framework of our cities, suburbs and towns. Infill, new development or reconstruction can and inevitably will shape the principles of a New Urbanism.

The goal is to apply the best of urban design to both the region and the neighborhood—applying them to a new context and at a new scale. The New Urbanism is not just about the city or the suburb. It is about the way we conceive of community and how we form the region—it is about diversity, scale and public space in every context.