

Planner's Digest

Traditional Urbanism Reconsidered: The 1999 Weiss Urban Livability Symposium

Charles C. Bohl

It would be impossible to discuss urban livability without confronting the concept of urbanism - its many, varied forms, historical basis, aesthetic qualities, functional performance, and urban lifestyles. The 1999 Weiss Symposium at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill campus presents a unique end-of-the-century opportunity to reflect on traditional urbanism, and to ponder the future of urbanism in a world where the importance of local communities and a sense of place are increasingly challenged by technological advances, globalism, and the commodification of urban places. Presenters and participants will consider and debate the contemporary relevance of traditional urban forms as more sustainable, livable alternatives in an age of sprawl.



Traditional Urbanism Reconsidered

There is a long overdue need to move beyond the simplistic city-versus-suburb dichotomy that has dominated discussions of metropolitan development since World War II. Proponents of traditional urbanism emphasize the need to distinguish between different types of urban forms - hamlets,

villages, neighborhoods, districts, towns, and cities of various sizes. The presenters at the symposium will help distinguish between these historical urban forms and discuss the implications they hold for contemporary metropolitan development.

There is also a need to further explore the social, civic, and symbolic functions of traditional urbanism. Previous conferences and events have invariably focused on the implications of alternative urban forms for transportation, the environment, and market and regulatory factors for housing and commercial development.

The neglect of research on social, civic, and quality of life issues is due, in part, to the difficulty in researching these issues and translating the results into effective policies. Yet quality of life issues are at the heart of efforts to promote more compact development as witnessed, for example, in New Jersey's "Communities of Place" initiative.

Weiss Symposium presenters have explored the social and cultural experiences, opportunities, and meanings associated with traditional urban settings. Their backgrounds allow for a cogent discussion of the relevance of these settings for contemporary demographic and technological trends and lifestyles.

The symposium will explore the meaning of concepts such as place identity, civic life, public realm, and sense of community in a changing world - where computers and communications technologies make it increasingly viable to work, form "communities of interest," and acquire goods, services, and knowledge without leaving the home. These two thrusts - the consideration of traditional urban forms and the social and civic functions of traditional urbanism - provide a rich intellectual tapestry for presenters and participants to consider and debate.

Urbanism: Old and New

The emphasis of the symposium is on traditional urbanism, drawing on the five millennia of experience and precedent in the creation, experience, and sustenance of urban places. However, the symposium will also be an opportunity to observe the latest reconnaissance with the theory and practice of urban place-making in the form of the new urbanism.

The reconsideration of traditional urbanism is not simply a historical or nostalgic exercise. The past decade has witnessed an explosion of interest in alternative development models based on "traditional" urbanism. What began largely as an architectural and urban design movement has blossomed into a national and international debate over growth and redevelopment involving planners, citizen groups, policy makers, and academia. Well-known paradigms being advanced include Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk's neo-traditionalism, Peter Calthorpe's pedestrian pockets and transit-oriented design, and Leon Krier's urban quarters.

Collectively these ideas have become known as the New Urbanism, an increasingly influential and controversial movement with its own charter, congress, and membership organization. The new urbanism is nothing less than this generation's answer to CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne), the modernist organization and movement which dominated the fields of planning and architecture worldwide beginning in the 1930s.

The connection between traditional urbanism and new urbanism is strong. The new urbanism clearly traces its roots back to the thought and works of Camillo Sitte, Raymond Unwin, John Nolen, Werner Hegemann, Elbert Peets, and other pre-WWII figures in architecture and planning.

The movement also identifies with, and was preceded by, pioneering research on traditional urbanism by urban morphologists, typologists, urban historians, and urban designers. These individuals have contributed greatly to the revival of interest in traditional urbanism, and include Rob and Leon Krier, Aldo Rossi, Anne Vernez-Moudon, Kevin Lynch, Vincent Scully, Jr., Allan Jacobs, George Cullen, Sam Bass Warner, Robert Stern, and William Whyte to name but a few. The new urbanism has also revived interest in the

Speakers***JAN. 29**

- John Montague Massengale, new urbanist architect
- Robert Russell, Addlestone Professor of Architectural History at the College of Charleston

FEB. 12

- Carroll William Westfall, Frank Montana Professor of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame
- Kennedy Lawson Smith, director of the National Trust's Main Street Center

MARCH 19

- Leon Krier (invited), architect and urban design theorist
- James Howard Kunstler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere* and *Home From Nowhere*

APRIL 9

- David Brain, associate professor of sociology at New College.
- Linda N. Groat, associate professor of architecture, University of Michigan.
- Charles C. Bohl, doctoral candidate at UNC-Chapel Hill Department of City and Regional Planning, Senior Fellow with The Charles & Shirley Weiss Urban Livability Program

**Events are free to the public; there may be an admission fee for off-campus guests for the March 19 lectures.*

works of Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs, both of whom decried the destruction of traditional urban forms and yet disagreed over the essential ingredients of urban life, a debate which continues amongst new urbanists with respect to the balance between civic and commercial uses.

By providing a forum for introducing and debating new urbanism concepts, the symposium's focus on traditional urbanism becomes relevant (some would say urgent) with regard to a broad array of academic and public policy areas. The advancement of new urbanist concepts for compact, mixed use, transit- and pedestrian-friendly development have found natural allies in the advocates of growth management, historic preservation, downtown redevelopment, sustainable development, environmental protection, and transit,

pedestrianism, and bicycling. New urbanists have also found natural opposition from academia -- where they are often debased as architectural determinists -- and from proponents of conventional low density, automobile-dominant, segregated land use patterns (i.e., "sprawl").

There is also a healthy divergence of opinions within the new urbanist camp over issues such as greenfield versus infill development, local vernacular architecture versus historically eclectic styles, and the potential for reconfiguring existing forms of commercial development, such as "big box" superstores. **CP**

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Editor's Note: An on-line version of this article, plus schedules, a description of speakers and other relevant information can be found at:

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/dcrpweb/events/weiss.htm>