

Reconsidering Traditional Urbanism

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The 1999 Weiss Symposium series assembled a dozen leading figures from the fields of planning, architecture, history, sociology, psychology, and journalism to discuss and debate *traditional urbanism* in five events held in the spring of 1999 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This special section presents the ideas of three participants: Robert Russell, James Howard Kunstler, and Carroll William Westfall.

What is Traditional Urbanism?

A recurring question throughout the symposium series concerned, “What is traditional urbanism?” People both within and outside this series have grappled with the question in discussions of *old* urbanism versus *new* urbanism, and traditional urbanism versus traditional (or vernacular) architecture. It may help to first clarify what the current discussion of traditional urbanism does *not* concern.

Critics and scholars very often reduce the notion of traditional urbanism to the urban social problems associated with overcrowded cities of the industrial era and the more recent declining inner city neighborhoods that have suffered decades of middle class flight, disinvestment, crime, and urban blight. This limited portrayal of

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urbanism is typically contrasted with an equally narrow vision of the suburbs. This is a shallow, temporal perspective on traditional urbanism and there is a long overdue need to move beyond this simplistic city-versus-suburb dichotomy that has dominated discussions of metropolitan development since the second World War.

In contrast to the city-versus-suburb dichotomy, the term "traditional urbanism" refers to the many shades of urbanism that preceded the eras of mass urbanization and mass suburbanization, that is, the hamlets, villages, towns, and small cities that were the dominant forms of "urbanism" until the industrial revolution. In light of these precedents, the contemporary notion that 50,000 or even 80,000 people might be too small a population to support a "real town" – the subject of a presentation at the 1998 Congress of the New Urbanism in Denver – seems ahistorical and preposterous. Urban culture has flourished in villages and towns of far fewer than a thousand persons for ages.

While traditional urbanism emphasizes the need to distinguish between many different types of urban settings, it also emphasizes what each of these settings share in common in terms of the physical layout and design of streets, blocks, houses, lots, public spaces, neighborhoods, and the centers and edges of urban places.

When Christopher Alexander (1979) wrote of a "timeless way of building," he was discussing a "time-honored set of practices" that had evolved during more than 5,000 years of constructing buildings, villages, towns, and cities. Thus traditional urbanism refers to what Jim Kunstler (1993) has called "the culture of good placemaking," a set of principles and practices passed down from generation to generation concerning the planning and design of human settlements.

These practices have involved the human scale design of buildings, streets and public spaces; site selection, building orientation and architecture sensitive to natural conditions of sun, wind, seasonal changes, and topography; adaptive reuse of existing structures and incremental growth of communities that blends contextually with adjacent buildings and neighborhoods; the allocation of the most central and prestigious sites within the community for buildings and spaces of public importance; and the fact that aesthetic concerns were treated as at least

of equal importance as matters of convenience, and the structural requirements of buildings and infrastructure. The majority of these practices, as Alexander reminds us, were followed unconsciously, not encoded into law.

This tradition was completely uprooted during the 20th century as a result of a variety of factors including revolutions in transportation and communications, rapid population growth and migration, changing demographics and lifestyle preferences, an unprecedented rise in the standard of living, and the introduction of mass production techniques in real estate development. While all of these were important contributing factors, the hegemony of Modernism in architecture and planning — which defined itself in opposition to prior traditions in planning and design — was by far the most instrumental ingredient in the demise of traditional urbanism.

As a result, the tradition of good placemaking (characterized by mixed uses, compactness, civic mindedness, human scale and pedestrian-orientation) was supplanted by what has been called "conventional" planning and development (characterized by segregated uses, dispersion into low-density pods, market forces, and automobile-scale and orientation), or "conventional suburban design." Like the dictionary's definition of tradition, "conventional" refers to something "conforming to established practice or accepted standards; based on or in accordance with general agreement, use, or practice." Unlike tradition, however, it also refers to something considered "devoted to or bound by conventions to the point of artificiality; unimaginative; and conformist." As such, conventional planning and development is characterized by the repetitive use of stock plans for homes, subdivisions, shopping centers, and office parks, and conformance to street design standards and zoning ordinances drafted by traffic engineers and lawyers with little, if any, training in physical planning and urban design.

Urbanism: Old and New

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, Leon Krier's urban quarters, and Anton Nelessen's small communities.

Collectively these ideas have become known as 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, the modernist organization and movement which dominated the fields of planning and architecture worldwide beginning in the 1930s.

The connection between traditional urbanism and the 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 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.

Civics, Manners and Laws

One of the most essential aspects of traditional urbanism concerns its civic nature. In the context of traditional urbanism, we are concerned with the role of public institutions, public spaces, and civic ideals in the creation and sustenance of urban places that encourage and support the civic life of our communities.

Jim Kunstler (1996) has written that civic art is "the effort we make to honor and embellish the public realm with architecture and design, in order to

make civic life possible." The public realm is important to our communities because, as Kunstler writes, it is "the manifestation of the public good." Civic life, for Kunstler, is simply "what goes on in the public realm," that combination of chance encounters, meeting and greeting, watching, protesting, gathering, strolling, and experiencing our communities of place.

Unfortunately, the term civic art has come to be misinterpreted as simply urban beautification involving the location of monuments and artistic works. As practiced and understood by the great planners and architects of the early 20th century, however, it involved the art of creating a civic realm through the arrangement, orientation, and design of both public and private buildings. As Leon Krier (1998) has noted, all buildings have a public face, and the civic character of places depends on the extent that both public and private buildings honor and contribute to the community's public realm. Going a step further, it can be argued that the quality of traditional urbanism is more about the character and experience of the spaces between buildings, rather than the buildings themselves. It's about the creation of a human scale public realm, which is where the civic life of a community takes place.

Daniel Kemmis, the Mayor of Missoula, Montana, has written that:

"(T)he word 'Civil' originally meant simply "of the city." Civility was what it took to live next to one another as cities, by definition, require people to do. But if civility is a requisite for cities to exist at all, civilization goes a stage beyond this. Civilization is not only a city that worked by allowing people to live near one another, but a good city – one that enables its inhabitants to live good lives together." (Kemmis 1995, pp. 11-12)

One person who does not misinterpret the practice of civic art, or its relationship to the civic life of cities, is Carroll William Westfall. In his article on "Civic Art, Civic Life and Urbanism," Westfall embraces the notion of the good city first articulated by Plato and Aristotle. He views urban places as settings where people willingly come together to

define what is good and just. Just as musical composition requires notes and scales, he sees traditional and classic architecture as the language of urbanism. In discarding this language, Westfall declares, the “modernists have broken the city,” and “only a rejection of modernism can fix it.”

For Jim Kunstler (1993), the break in our placemaking tradition reaches beyond the fields of architecture and planning, showing up in our failure as a culture to define “what constitutes a life worth living,” and to transform our laws and practices in order to “create places worth caring for.” In failing to address these more fundamental issues, Kunstler feels we are only dealing with symptoms when we discuss issues such as affordable housing, automobile dependency and growth management.

In “Buildings, Manners and Laws,” Robert Russell strikes a more pragmatic note in his discussion of the Charleston, South Carolina “single house.” Russell explores the single house, not simply as a historical curiosity, but as a “type” of residential building that has been successfully adapted for housing Charleston’s rich and poor, black and white, small families and large families for much of the city’s history. Russell extols the virtues of the single house “as a definer of urban form and shaper of city life.” The adaptability of the type allows it to blend together adjacent homes built in different centuries with dramatically different property values, and sized and located on lots of differing sizes. The single house also provided a tool for carrying out Charleston’s scattered site public housing program, which was implemented in part “by adapting a recognizable domestic form – the single house – to public housing purposes.” But perhaps most significant, for the creation of traditional urbanism, Russell notes that the piazza of the single house acts as “an intermediate and mediating zone between private and public aspects of living in the single house.” By articulating the transition between public and private realms through a series of transitional indoor and outdoor spaces, the single house acts as a building block of traditional urbanism, in contrast to ranch homes and subdivision products that act as a dissolvent.

Interestingly, Westfall, Kunstler and Russell all to some degree discuss language, manners and laws in relation to traditional urbanism. For the most part they confront the loss of a common language and

practice of traditional placemaking. But in the end, all three also emphasize the need to change the laws that now make the building of new Charlestons, Savannahs, and Nantuckets illegal in most of the United States. As Westfall writes, “these are American cities, embodying the principles upon which our nation was founded. They too were built according to laws and ordinances—different ones from the ones we now have, many of them implicit understandings of how the civic life ought to be conducted within a community.”

The advent of the new urbanism is showing that contemporary development can be reconfigured in the form of small villages, towns, and urban neighborhoods that adapt to modern lifestyles. Changes in Americans’ attitudes towards planning, development, and lifestyle preferences also suggest that civic life remains important for many people who see themselves both as individuals and as part of their larger communities. As dissatisfaction with sprawl and the suburban lifestyle continues to mount it is likely that even greater numbers of Americans will reconsider traditional urbanism. ☐

Editor’s Note: The “Traditional Urbanism Reconsidered” symposium was sponsored by the Charles & Shirley Weiss Urban Livability Program. Charles Bohl conceived and organized the Traditional Urbanism Reconsidered Symposium, held in the spring of 1999 at UNC-Chapel Hill.

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