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The New Urbanism: A better way to plan and build 21st Century communities

Author: Robert Steuteville and Philip Langdon

Through the first quarter of the 20th century, the United States developed mainly in the form of compact, mixed-use neighborhoods. The pattern began to change with the emergence of modern architecture and zoning and the ascent of the automobile. After World War II, a new system of development was implemented nationwide — one that, instead of being based on neighborhoods, was based on a rigorous separation of uses. The separate-use system has become known as sprawl or conventional suburban development (CSD). The majority of US citizens now live in suburban communities built during the last 60 years.

Although CSD has been popular, it carries a significant price. Lacking a town center or pedestrian scale, CSD spreads out to consume large areas of countryside even when the population grows relatively slowly. Automobile use per capita has soared, because a motor vehicle is required for the great majority of household and commuter trips.

Those who cannot drive are significantly restricted in their mobility. The working poor living in suburbia spend a large portion of their incomes on cars. Meanwhile, the American landscape in which most people live and work is dominated by strip malls, auto-oriented civic and commercial buildings, and subdivisions without much individuality or character.

The New Urbanism is a reaction to sprawl. A growing movement of architects, planners, developers, and others, the New Urbanism is based on principles of planning and architecture that work together to create human-scale, walkable communities. New urbanists take a wide variety of approaches — some work exclusively on infill projects, others focus on transit-oriented development, still others are attempting to transform the suburbs. Many are working in all of these categories. The New Urbanism includes traditional architects and those with modernist sensibilities. All, however, believe in the power and ability of traditional neighborhoods to restore functional, sustainable communities. The trend had its roots in the work of visionary architects, planners, and developers in the 1970s and 1980s who coalesced into a unified group in the 1990s. From modest beginnings, the trend is growing to have a substantial impact. More than 500 new towns, villages, and neighborhoods are built or under construction in the US, using principles of the New Urbanism. Additionally, hundreds more smaller-scale new urban projects are restoring the urban fabric of cities and towns by reestablishing walkable streets and blocks in communities throughout the US.

On the regional scale, the New Urbanism is having a growing

Kentlands

[\(/images/9633/kentlands\)](/images/9633/kentlands)



http://newurbannetwork.com/sites/default/files/imagecache/full-content-width/Kentlands-leveled_0.jpg

The new urbanist Addison Circle (Texas) contrasts with conventional commercial strip development, in the next image. Photo courtesy of RTKL Associates, Inc.

Conventional commercial strip development

[\(/images/9632/conventional-commercial-strip-development\)](/images/9632/conventional-commercial-strip-development)



http://newurbannetwork.com/sites/default/files/imagecache/full-content-width/shapeimage_2.jpg

Conventional commercial strip development. Photo by Robert Steuteville.

Traditional neighborhoods vs sprawl

[\(/images/9631/traditional-neighborhoods-vs-sprawl\)](/images/9631/traditional-neighborhoods-vs-sprawl)



<http://newurbannetwork.com/sites/default/files/imagecache/full-content-width/NeighborhoodSprawlweb.jpg>

The diagram compares the

On the regional scale, the New Urbanism is having a growing influence on how and where metropolitan regions choose to grow. Large-scale planning initiatives now commonly incorporate new urban planning ideas — such as walkable neighborhoods, transit-oriented development, and sociable, pedestrian-scale streets. Form-based codes and better-connected street networks are two instruments by which new urban ideas can be implemented at the scale of the region.

Principles of the New Urbanism

Let's look more closely at the core beliefs of new urbanists. Seven key principles have been identified by Richard Bernhardt, a leading new urbanist who heads the Nashville-Davidson County Planning Department in Tennessee.

1. The basic building block of a community is the neighborhood.
2. The neighborhood is limited in physical size, with a well-defined edge and a center. The size of a neighborhood is usually based on the distance that a person can walk in five minutes from the center to the edge — a quarter-mile. Neighborhoods have a fine-grained mix of land uses, providing opportunities for young and old to find places to live, work, shop, and be entertained.
3. Corridors form the boundaries between neighborhoods — both connecting and defining the neighborhoods. Corridors can incorporate natural features such as streams or canyons. They may take the form of parks, natural preserves, travel paths, railroad lines, major roads, or a combination of all these.
4. Human scale sets the standard for proportion in buildings. Buildings must be disciplined in how they relate to their lots if public space is to be successfully demarcated. Because the street is the preeminent form of public space, buildings are generally expected to honor and embellish the street.
5. Providing a range of transportation options is fundamental. For most of the second half of the 20th Century, transportation agencies focused almost exclusively on optimizing the convenience of automobile travel, and dealt with transit riders, pedestrians, and bicyclists as little more than afterthoughts. We must give equal consideration to all modes of transportation to relieve congestion and to provide people with useful, realistic choices.
6. The street pattern is conceived as a network, to create the greatest number of alternative routes from one part of the neighborhood to another. This has the effect of providing choices and relieving vehicular congestion. The streets form a hierarchy, from broad boulevards to narrow lanes and alleys.
7. Civic buildings (town halls, churches, schools, libraries, museums) belong on preferred sites such as squares or neighborhood centers, or where the view down a street terminates. Such placement helps turn civic buildings into landmarks and reinforces their symbolic and cultural importance.

New urbanist prototypes

The first full-size new urbanist community was Seaside, the 80-acre resort development that Robert Davis began building on the Florida Panhandle in the early 1980s with lead designers Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk.

Seaside is an amazing project, both in its style and in its pursuit of community interaction. Davis's pioneering project demonstrated that New Urbanism (or Neotraditional planning, as it was first called) is capable of reviving many of the best elements of small-town design.

New Urbanism has always been concerned with cities as well. At around the time that Seaside was being planned, architects like Daniel Solomon and Raymond Gindroz were applying similar ideas to revive neighborhoods in historic cities.

Solomon honed his architectural approach to building design in part by closely observing

traditional neighborhood pattern, top, to conventional suburban development (sprawl). The neighborhood is far more compact and interconnected. Its regular blocks and streets contrast with the more random pattern of sprawl, where single-use pods branch off of the arterial road. The circle in the traditional neighborhood represents a five-minute walk. Courtesy of Thomas Low, DPZ.

Del Mar Station Transit Village (/images/0630/del-mar-station-transit-village)



(<http://newurbannetwork.com/sites/default/files/imagecache/full-content-width/delmarbirdseweb.jpg>)
Del Mar Station Transit Village, featuring light rail near historic downtown Pasadena, CA. Photo courtesy of Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists, Tom Bonner Photograph

Kentlands (/images/0629/kentlands)



(<http://newurbannetwork.com/sites/default/files/imagecache/full-content-width/Kentlands-levelled.jpg>)
Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland, combines modern houses and businesses with compact, walkable public spaces. Photo courtesy of Mike Watkins.

traditional development patterns, especially those in his own city, San Francisco. Solomon recognized that the most essential elements of the old patterns could be perpetuated if new construction followed the right principles.

While Solomon was exploring how San Francisco could redevelop in a satisfying way, similar work was under way on the East Coast. In 1979 in New York, a group of architects that included Alexander Cooper and Stanton Eckstut produced a revised master plan for Battery Park City, a 92-acre endeavor that was destined to become the most significant Manhattan development in half a century. Cooper and Eckstut had seen that when street walls are interrupted too frequently — as happened during in the 1960s and 1970s, when office towers with barren plazas proliferated — the city lost some of its interesting, walkable qualities.

Battery Park City was enormously successful as a real estate venture, and was celebrated for rediscovering critical elements of effective city planning. The complex along the Hudson provided a case study in how a large, dense urban precinct, or several of them, could respect human scale and enhance the public realm.

A catalyst to this movement arrived in 1993 when leaders in urban design came together to form the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), now based in Chicago. The founders were Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Peter Calthorpe, Daniel Solomon, Stefanos Polyzoides, and Elizabeth Moule, all practicing architects and town planners. CNU has since grown to more than 2,500 members and is now the leading international organization promoting new urbanist design principles.

It did not take CNU long to have a significant impact on public policy. In the mid-1990s, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) adopted the principles of the New Urbanism in its multibillion dollar program to rebuild public housing projects nationwide. Gindroz, of Urban Design Associates in Pittsburgh, was one of the influential new urbanists who helped to set the design guidelines for public housing redevelopments.

Redesigning commercial centers

Another setting in which New Urbanism has proven useful is the single-purpose retail center. During the postwar decades, Americans threw up thousands of shopping and business centers that catered to the automobile, at the expense of pedestrians and community life. One of the first attempts to transform a suburban commercial district took place in the Town of Mashpee on Cape Cod. There, in the mid-1980s, developers Buff Chace and Douglas Storrs acquired a generic shopping center and then set about altering and adding to it — a process that has continued for over 20 years now.

The result, Mashpee Commons, is a town center serving a community that previously lacked one. At the impetus of Chace and Storrs, the sixties shopping center added a post office; a cinema complex that opens onto a public square; narrow streets and wide sidewalks comfortable for pedestrians; second-floor offices; apartments and live/work units; and civic and religious structures, including a public library and a church. The center has acquired many of the traits that made 19th-century downtowns appealing.

About half the new urbanist projects now under way in the US are on land that had previously been built upon. Many of these occupy reclaimed polluted land (“brownfields”) or fit into existing neighborhoods (“infill”) or convert failed shopping centers (“grayfields”) into sociable, mixed-use developments or renovate subpar urban buildings. Most of the early new urbanist projects were on “greenfield” sites — virgin soil.

The first large suburban greenfield project to employ New Urbanism’s principles was Kentlands, a 352-acre project in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Designed for developer Joseph Alfandre by Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company in a charrette in 1988, Kentlands demonstrated that some of the development components common to the Washington, DC, region could be assembled in a more attractive and much more convivial manner.

Alleys and accessory units

This was made possible in part by placing most residents’ parking behind the houses, along alleys. When Kentlands and other early greenfield new urbanist projects were getting under way, there was doubt that alleys would ever catch on in the suburbs; in fact, alleys have become a well-accepted part of contemporary development, helping the facades of the houses to form visually appealing streetscapes.

Another innovative feature of Kentlands is the accessory unit — small quarters above a garage or in some other portion of a single-family home. These apartments provide opportunities for homeowners to obtain some rental income, and offer relatively inexpensive housing for the renter — usually a single tenant or a couple, since the units are small. Initially (and incorrectly) viewed as an assault on the character of suburban neighborhoods, auxiliary

apartments are now common in new urbanist developments, adding to diversity, density, and affordability.

Many of the best-known examples of New Urbanism are early greenfield developments like Seaside; Celebration, Florida; Harbor Town in Memphis, Tennessee; and Kentlands. New towns on greenfield sites continue to be built — more recent examples include New Town at St. Charles in Missouri, Seabrook on the Washington coast, and The Waters in Montgomery, Alabama.

New urban infill developments in older cities and towns are proliferating as well — probably to a greater degree than greenfield developments. Redevelopments of suburban sites are also increasingly common. Some of the infill communities occupy formerly industrial properties. Others are redevelopments of public housing projects, shopping malls, apartment complexes, or even military bases. Still others consist of revitalization of underpopulated parts of cities. The diversity of new urban developments is steadily growing.

The new urbanists have taken on three other projects worth mentioning in this brief report. One is the reform of zoning codes, which were established in the first half of the 20th Century largely to separate uses and restrict density. Zoning played a major role in suburban development for the last six decades.

The problem of codes has inspired some of the most innovative work by new urbanists. A reform movement toward “form-based codes,” so-called because they regulate the three-dimensional shapes or forms of buildings and the public realm, has taken hold in recent years. These codes focus less on a property’s uses than on factors that determine the character of places — such as building frontage and placement. A substantial number of municipalities have adopted the SmartCode — which first became available in 2003 — and other form-based codes. But many more municipalities still have conventional codes.

Streets for people, not just cars

The second project is the reform of thoroughfares. Conventional street design focuses primarily on the expeditious and safe movement of automobiles. The concerns of pedestrians and mass transit are secondary. That single-minded focus is fading, due in part to the New Urbanism. Since the 1980s, new urbanists have made the following arguments that were radical in the context of late 20th Century street planning.

- Mobility is not measured primarily by automobile movement. Other modes of transportation such as walking and mass transit should be given an equally high priority on all but the highest-speed thoroughfares.
- Streets must have character as well as capacity. Streets consist not just of two-dimensional pavement, but also of building frontages, landscaping, sidewalks, lighting, and street furniture. The ensemble gives the street its character.
- Streets serve a vital social function. They are the heart of the public realm — the glue that holds communities together — and should be designed as pleasurable places to interact, to see and be seen, and just to be.
- Streets should be highly interconnected. Conventional planning employs a dendritic (tree-like) pattern, with local streets branching off of arterials and collectors. The blocks tend to be large, overall connectivity is low, and traffic is concentrated on major streets. New urbanists argue for well-connected street layouts that disperse traffic and allow for narrower, more human-scaled thoroughfares.

Finally, new urbanist designer Peter Calthorpe and others have been strong advocates for transit-oriented development (TOD). In the last five years, mixed-use, higher-density TODs have been built all across America with great success.

In terms of urban planning, we have come a long way in the last two decades. In the 1991 book *Edge City*, author Joel Garreau was able to say that Americans have not built “a single old-style downtown from raw dirt in 75 years.” Today we can see new mixed-use centers and downtowns in many places in the US, Canada, and abroad. There are strong indications that this return to urbanism will carry on well into the future. In the deep housing recession that began in 2006, urban housing has generally outperformed that of the distant suburbs. Demographic trends, such as the aging of the Baby Boomers and the emergence of the Millennial generation, promise to make urban places even more popular in the decade to come.

The looming climate and energy crises, likely to be dominant forces in the next half century, also favor the prospects of walkable, urban, mixed-use places. It appears that the 21st Century will be a new urban one.

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