

The Ironies of New Urbanism

Jill Grant, Professor of Urban Planning, Dalhousie University, 2006

While the rhetoric of new urbanism reflects planners' commitment to traditional patterns, to the public realm, to urban solutions, and to democratic communities, practice tells a different story. New urbanist theory and its approach to growth reflect modernist tactics and premises. Elitist values and expert judgement drive development agendas: cities have little room for the least powerful. Although new urbanism contributes to the development of more beautiful and valuable projects, its ability to generate communities that achieve the values and principles that it promises remains unproven. The ironies are impossible to ignore: they should stimulate planners and community designers to develop better strategies for achieving the lofty ambitions of the increasingly dominant paradigm.

Some see applying new urbanism principles to redeveloping public housing as a potential strategy for privatizing public resources (Smith 2002; Weaver 2004). Through projects like HOPE VI in the US, land held in the public domain for community purposes has been redeveloped with parts sold off to private interests. While breaking up concentrations of poverty serves one element of the public interest, reducing the community's ability to maintain long-term housing affordability undermines another element of the public interest.

Affordability, equity, and participation have sometimes proven secondary to getting new urban projects built. While new urbanism principles promise affordability and integration (Lennertz 1991), to date most projects have created expensive and exclusive enclaves. The market premium enjoyed by new urban projects is well-recognized (Eppli and Tu 1999; Song and Knaap 2003) and celebrated as a selling point by the Congress for the New Urbanism (New Urban News 2003). A relatively small proportion of new urban projects have provided significant components of affordable housing to facilitate inclusion.

In some cases applying new urbanism principles has reduced the supply of affordable housing. Infill projects in inner cities contribute to gentrification that forces poorer households out of communities as "up market" residents move in. New urbanists have argued that gentrification is good for cities: "It is the rising tide that lifts all ships ... What spokesmen for the poor insist on calling gentrification is actually the timeless urban cycle of a free society organically adjusting its habitat" (Duany 2000: online). The American public housing renewal program, HOPE VI, employed new urbanism principles to redesign projects, resulting in an expected net loss of 60,000 affordable units (Goetz 2003; Popkin et al 2004). The re-evaluation of public housing according to new urban principles is happening in many western countries. It will be ironic if rather than making cities more affordable and inclusive, new urbanism undermines the supply of affordable housing and forces the poor to the suburbs.

Proponents often justify new urbanism by claims that it can provide more affordable housing by using less land and mixing unit types. In practice to date, however, few new urbanism projects have proven affordable. In fact, several studies reveal evidence of a premium for new urbanist development in the market place. Even the organ of the Congress for the New Urbanism boasted to its readers about the \$24,000 premium on units available at Orenco Station in Portland (New Urban News 2003).

Affordable housing in New Urbanist Communities: A survey of developers

Emily Talen, Professor of Urban Planning, Arizona State University, 2008

Within neighborhoods, a broad range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, races and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community. – CNU Charter principle XIII

A recent survey of the affordability of a sample of 152 New Urbanist developments or Traditional Neighborhood Developments (TNDs) from around the country revealed that 90 percent of them would not be affordable to someone making the average teacher's salary for a given locality. This is unsurprising, as two decades of New Urbanist developments have demonstrated that providing a quality public realm, a mix of unit types, good walkability and community facilities can quickly result in housing priced out of reach of the very mix of society it was intended to foster. This situation forces all of us to confront a basic malfunction in American city design: good urban places often fail to be inclusive.

This lack of social integration in New Urbanist developments is a major problem. After all, New Urbanism was the movement that vowed to do something about concentrated poverty by creating mixed-income neighborhoods. It was this group that was pushing the idea that diversity is essential for good urbanism, and that the concentration of poverty in the inner city and the spread of affluent, homogenous suburbs at the periphery are two sides of the same coin. It was – and still is – an admirable, socially progressive idea, but now the time has come to take stock of where this idea is going and to consider whether the present situation of building walkable places that exclude low- and even middle-income groups can be turned around.

To avoid the messy debates over wealth redistribution, many New Urbanist architects and developers take the minimalist response, dreaming of a design solution to the problem – "let the market address affordability," they say. Their view is that it is enough for New Urbanism to construct the proper physical parameters of urbanism. It is, after all, a design movement. The main objective should be to prepare the "inaugural condition" (a term used often by Andrés Duany), a condition that will eventually, it is hoped, evolve into diversity by virtue of its having laid down the proper forms and patterns believed to be most conducive to it.

New Urbanists cannot afford to be ambiguous about achieving their affordability goals. They cannot continue to measure their success on the basis of form only. Every time there is a project bearing the name "New Urbanism," there should be an assessment of its inclusiveness. Getting the project to be inclusive will involve implementing a whole range of strategies, from the involvement of non-profit developers and community trusts to the need to cut through red tape and eliminate regulatory barriers. If New Urbanists want to adhere to their charter and its eloquent goals, they will have to break with their design-centric past and delve into the messy business of building – and getting – places that are truly inclusive. New Urbanists must come to see real diversity as essential to giving weight and substance to the beauty of their designs.

Affordable New Urbanist Housing

Emily Talen, Housing Affordability, CNU Report, 2008

How essential is social diversity as a near-term, ascertainable social reality? How far can New Urbanism—and the CNU in particular—go in its quest to promote it? New urbanists have a unique perspective on housing affordability that goes well beyond the simple provision of affordable housing as a discrete commodity; affordable housing is seen in the context of neighborhood design, where pedestrian experience, quality public spaces, and walkable access to services is an essential part of the affordability equation.

Hope VI amply demonstrated the potential of New Urbanism to foster livable, mixed income neighborhoods. There, as in most new urbanist work, the emphasis is on mix rather than any one form of housing by itself. While good design in projects that are exclusively affordable is essential, this is not really New Urbanism's primary issue. A larger issue is the elevation of the principle of urbanism within which the quality of diversity is considered essential.

How affordability, social mix, and good design can simultaneously progress has not been thoroughly worked out. Within the new urbanist camp, approaches to addressing the affordability issue range from minimalist—let the market address affordability—to interventionist, the view that New Urbanism should become more directly involved in the provision of mixed-income communities with mechanisms designed to keep them affordable.

The minimalist response takes the view that it is enough for New Urbanism to construct the proper physical parameters of urbanism. The objective should be to define the “inaugural condition”—the forms and patterns known to be conducive to diversity—intended to evolve into a place with social complexity. Furthermore, it is argued, residents of new urbanist communities should never be prevented from realizing the profits their investment in New Urbanism is likely to yield, as happens when prices and price appreciation are restricted to ensure affordability.

Others view the lack of affordability in new urbanist developments as a missed opportunity. They envision the delivery of affordable units within the context of walkable, mixed income, quality environments as a primary objective that should be pursued from multiple directions. The New Urbanism, they argue, was the movement that was going to do something about concentrated poverty by leveraging innovation in community design. Failure to deliver on this ideal in both the near and long-term is therefore highly problematic.

Two empirical conditions fuel the debate within New Urbanism over the issue of affordability. First, affordable housing is generally believed to be in a state of “crisis” in the U.S., based on the twin facts that the number of families with “critical” housing needs has increased, and the number of available affordable units has decreased. The 2005 Housing Affordability Report released by the National Low Income Housing Coalition states that “the vast majority of American renter families (81%) live in counties where a two-bedroom apartment at the Fair Market Rent is unaffordable to a family with two full-time minimum wage earners” (www.nlihc.org).

Second, new urbanist communities are widely perceived as being unaffordable to people of modest means. What percentage of new urbanist projects this applies to is unknown, but the perception that new urbanism largely caters to white, middle and upper-middle class residents is real.

New Urbanism is great, if you're rich

Anonymous / April 2, 2007

So I went to see two new New Urbanist communities this weekend - Warwick Grove in the Mid-Hudson Valley, about 50 miles from NYC, and Plainsboro Village Center in central N.J.

I haven't generally drank the New Urbanist Kool-Aid - I'm a bit too fond of both the Old Urbanism and many of those things they love to hate (like those cool four-level freeway interchanges). But I gotta hand it to the developers of these two communities (Leyland Alliance and Sharbell Development, respectively) - these communities are about ten times better than what's being developed around them. You can walk to (some) shops, they are at impressively high densities, and they just look great, at least as great as a brand-new retro place can. I think these places are going to develop real character over time.

But you've gotta have big bucks to live there. At Warwick, a 2BR/2BA condo will set you back over \$400k (and you'd better be over 55 - no kids, because, of course, kids = school taxes). At Plainsboro, prices start in the \$530s for a townhouse.

I thought New Urbanism was supposed to help create a wider range of housing choices - with accessory apartments, starter homes, etc., combining with the higher densities to make things more affordable. Is it actually doing this anywhere? I'd love to hear from anyone who can describe a New Urbanist development that someone besides the wealthy can afford (and HOPE VI doesn't count - I'm talking about something that isn't publicly subsidized).

If these two developments are typical, then New Urbanism seems a bit more like nice looking houses for rich people than the revolution in development that its supporters proclaim.

Affordable living, not just affordable housing

Public Square, A CNU Journal, July 1, 2006

Viewed in isolation, housing affordability is a tough challenge for new urbanists. That's because new urbanists are in the business of planning and developing amenities close to housing. Land values within walking distance of transit stations, shops, parks, schools, and other facilities — all other things being equal — will always be higher than where people have to drive everywhere, notes Jennifer Hurley, a Philadelphia planner.

Given that dynamic, how can the goal of healthy, diverse, mixed-income, and mixed-use neighborhoods be achieved? **Hurley and other new urbanists are recognizing that housing affordability should not be an end in itself — a better goal is affordable living.** The truth is that anyone can achieve housing affordability in any metro area — if you live far enough away from where the action is. But then your transportation costs probably will rise or your income fall, neither of which is a bargain.

The Affordability Paradox

New urbanism is great in concept, but can it be affordable?

Ruth Walker, The Town Paper, October 2007

Call it the affordability paradox.

Diversity, including income diversity, is essential to new urbanism. To be authentic communities, and not just yuppie theme parks, traditional neighborhood developments (TNDs) have to include a mix of people -- of various ages and incomes.

One of the new urbanist principles reads: "Within neighborhoods, a broad range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.

And yet the charge of elitism often clings to new urbanism. "Can We Afford New Urbanism?" *Pine Magazine* asked in a much-noticed article last year.

Emily Talen of Arizona State University in Tempe, co-chair of the Affordable Housing Initiative of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), has done a study of greenfield TNDs and found them "incredibly unaffordable," she says.

She surveyed 234 completed market-rate TNDs built without public subsidies or inclusionary zoning requirements and found that only about 15 percent included units affordable for those with the local area median income.

The evidence suggests to her that it is a "delusion" to think that market forces and a variety of price points will suffice to make a TND a truly diverse community.

Part of the issue is that buyers into new urbanist developments are paying a premium for the design itself -- even for small units. "Bad design is the only known technique to keep housing affordable," Andrés Duany remarked provocatively at one point during CNU XV in Philadelphia this past May. Indeed -- would any development, new urbanist or otherwise -- be seen as a success if its prices did not rise?

How Land Trusts Can Counter New Urbanism's Gentrifying Tendencies

Cat Johnson, Shareable, September 11, 2014

The principles of New Urbanism, which include walkability, mixed-use neighborhoods, and human-scale design, hold a lot of promise for fostering healthy communities. But there are serious downsides to New Urbanism — the most pressing of which is the displacement of historic communities that get priced out of their own neighborhoods as New Urbanism moves in.

White City: The New Urban Blight Is Rich People

Alexander Nazaryan, Newsweek Magazine, April 2, 2016

In the 14 years since Richard Florida published *The Rise of the Creative Class*, certain convictions have become religious dogma to the New Urbanist clan: that density is better than sprawl; that young people working on laptops in coffee shops is better than middle-aged people working in cubicles in office parks; that bikes are very good, while cars are very, very bad. ...

But any intellectual movement must encounter a backlash, and the one to the New Urbanism is only growing, in part because it's now mature enough for us to see its effects. On the face of it, the New Urbanism is very pretty ...

Problem is, surfacing is usually whitening: Gentrification by any other name would taste as hoppy, with the same notes of citrus peel. There is really only one strike against the New Urbanism, but it's a strike thrown by Nolan Ryan: It turns cities into playgrounds for moneyed, childless whites while pushing out the poor, the working-class, immigrants, seniors and anyone else not plugged into "the knowledge economy." ...

Affordable Housing and Zoning Techniques

Erie County, Pennsylvania, 2012

New Urbanism / Form Based Codes

Form based codes do not directly relate to affordable housing, and in most cases, they have been applied in areas where property values tend to be high. However, because form base codes offer greater flexibility in use, they can promote developments that offer a wider range of options. Form based codes encourage a mix of uses, including mixed uses within a structure, making it easier to get around without the expense of a car. They also support a greater variety of unit types, since all uses are allowed if properly designed, and creative approaches such as attached housing, live-work units, and accessory units are easier to accomplish.

It has been noted that shifting to a form based approach tends to increase the development value of land, since it provides predictability to the development process and allows greater creativity and flexibility. This increased value is the direct result of the significant public investment required to develop the code, through community input, visioning and designing the regulating plan, the building form standards, the public space standards and other provisions guiding future development. The Florida Housing Coalition has argued that communities should look to recoup this community investment by requiring that a certain proportion of new units in future residential projects be designated as affordable units.

Can We Afford New Urbanism?

Jeremy M.W. Kelly, Pine Magazine, September 7, 2006

The American people have embraced New Urbanism as a healthy alternative to suburban sprawl, according to Phyllis Bleiweis, executive director at the Seaside Institute, a non-profit organization promoting community development in urban areas through design and the arts. “Over four hundred developments exist across the country and all are doing very well,” she said.

How New Urbanism has embraced the American people, however, depends on who you ask. Affordability has complicated the New Urbanist theory, but that hasn’t stopped architects and planners from moving forward with developments that seem to bend or completely disregard some of the principles stated in the Charter drafted by the Congress for the New Urbanism, or CNU, a Chicago-based organization that works with developers on implementing the principles of New Urbanism. The Charter for the New Urbanism states those principles that guide public policy, urban planning and design.

Form-based codes can turn land use policy into affordable housing strategy

Robert Hickey, Center for Housing Policy, December 17, 2013

Arlington County provides an exciting new example of land value capture in action. Just before Thanksgiving, the county adopted a new form-based zoning code for residential neighborhoods along the Columbia Pike corridor. Like many form-based codes, Arlington’s new form-based overlay increases residential development potential through greater heights and densities. What’s distinctive is that it includes both affordability requirements and affordability incentives.

Developers seeking to redevelop residential properties along Columbia Pike are required to set aside between 20 and 35 percent of net new units for affordable housing. The exact affordability requirement is tied to the additional development potential provided at a given site. In addition, the code provides parking and height bonuses for developers that volunteer additional affordable housing.

Balanced Residential Communities: Including Affordable Housing in Smart Growth and New Urbanist Development

Jaimie Ross, Affordable Housing Director, 1000 Friends of Florida

Growth management and smart growth principles can result in historic and open space preservation, and new towns built with traditional neighborhood design, complete with mixed uses and new schools. Smart growth and new urbanism advocates avow affordable housing integral to their models of development. According to the Smart Growth Network and the National Neighborhood Coalition, “smart growth is not achieved if new developments feature a town square, mixed uses, grid street networks, and front porches in the “new urbanist” tradition, but fail to plan for affordable housing opportunities.” Unfortunately, the reality is that Florida’s large scale developments and new urbanist communities can boast little or no affordable housing

Large scale developers and the developers of new urbanist communities assure local government elected officials, staff, and the public, that the entire spectrum of income groups will be able to live in the new community. They intend to do this by including residential units that range from luxury single-family homes to modest townhouses and apartments. But those smaller detached homes, townhomes, and apartments that started out as “affordable” become unaffordable in short order due to rapidly appreciating land values.

New urbanism and traditional neighborhood design have been a marketing success story. This is a win for smart growth—open space is preserved, less land is used per family, and pedestrian friendly neighborhoods are created where families are in walking or biking distance to shopping, parks, and schools. But the very success of traditional neighborhood design and its desirability results in the failure to meet its stated goal of providing affordable housing.

There is no doubt that land development regulations that permit smart growth and new urbanist communities is a good and positive thing. Developers are creating beautiful built environments that emphasize old fashioned neighborhoods with a mix of uses, built around parks and pedestrian friendly spaces. But their promise to include affordable housing in these lovely new communities is not being realized.

New Urbanism

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

New Urbanists support: regional planning for open space; context-appropriate architecture and planning; adequate provision of infrastructure such as sporting facilities, libraries and community centers; and the balanced development of jobs and housing. They believe their strategies can reduce traffic congestion by encouraging the population to ride bikes, walk, or take the train. They also hope that this set up will increase the supply of affordable housing and rein in suburban sprawl. The *Charter of the New Urbanism* also covers issues such as historic preservation, safe streets, green building, and the re-development of brownfield land. The ten Principles of Intelligent Urbanism also phrase guidelines for new urbanist approaches.

Perverting New Urbanism for Fun and Profit

The Healy Project, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving the architectural legacy of Minneapolis.

In promoting their new projects, developers repeatedly trot out claims based on the tenets of New Urbanism: affordability, diversity, easy access, and sustainability.

Let's look at the claims of the Lander Group for its proposal at 2316-2320 Colfax Avenue South and see how they square with the aims noted above. Lander wants to wreck the Orth House at 2320 to clear the site for a 45-unit apartment building. The Lander website says that the 2320 project is "geared to more affordable budgets with the smaller sizing, and real transportation options." To be cost-effective for the developer, the rents in new units need to be set at least at market rate. Currently, rents for 500-square-foot studios in new Wedge buildings start at \$1200 per month. This is not "affordable" housing by any stretch of the imagination.

The fact is that the older rental units are the affordable ones. New apartment construction, to be cost effective for the developer, must have rents set higher than for existing structures. The result is what we now have in the Wedge Greenway: 1800+ units built or under construction that are inhabited largely by young, affluent white people. The aim of the marketing campaigns for these Greenway apartments is to attract young suburbanites to the city for a few years before they settle down in neighborhoods of mostly single-family homes: "Don't get hitched until you enjoy your year at Lime", "I don't remember her name, but her apartment" (Elan). This kind of marketing and pricing does not produce a racially, socially or economically diverse community, but an enclave of privileged "urban tourists," slumming in the Wedge for a few years. So much for developers adhering to the "diversity" and "affordable" parts of New Urbanist planning.