

STAINED **GLASS** Urbanism

The Untold Story of
the Church and City Renewal

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New Urbanism And The Church: An Overdue Partnership

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WHAT IS THE NEW URBANISM?

New Urbanism is a coalition of architects, developers, planners, journalists, and citizen activists who are committed to the maintenance and development of a physical form of the built environment that supports human community. Their convictions on this matter are simple and relatively straightforward:

In order to promote community, the built environment must be diverse in population, scaled for the pedestrian, and capable of supporting mass transit as well as the automobile. It must have a well-defined public realm supported by buildings reflecting the architecture and ecology of the region. (Suburban Nation, 254)

Unlike many utopian or reformist movements that have attempted to articulate a completely new model for shared human life, the New Urbanist movement is distinct in its interest in drawing most of its models from historical forms that have proven themselves viable within actual human communities. New Urbanism is also somewhat of a rarity historically because unlike reformist or utopian movements, they have managed to provide a product for which the market has responded very favorably. New Urbanist projects have been by in large both financially successful and favorably received by the communities in which they have been located.

New Urbanism should not be understood as advocating simply for an alternative set of design principles to replace those that were popular in the immediately preceding era. New Urbanism as a design (or form) oriented movement is distinct from other movements of this type in a few significant ways. In the first place, New Urbanism represents an integrated approach to place making. It is opposed to atomistic approaches to development and planning that sees each project as a self-contained whole. New Urbanists, rather are concerned with the urban fabric as a whole. For instance, they are concerned that buildings collectively form a coherent urban space, that public buildings and monuments are arraigned according to sight lines, and that parking be regulated according to district needs rather than by reference to particular buildings. Secondly, New Urbanists are committed to context sensitive urban design. They are committed to development that respects local topography, climate, as well as the tastes and values of the local community.

For this last reason, particularly, New Urbanism has tended to move forward not by selling clients a design product, but rather by helping local communities structure their own projects. By necessity, therefore, New Urbanism has been as active in teaching historic principles of urbanism as in

developing particular projects. That said, New Urbanism represents a growing number of discrete projects in North America, and it has had immeasurable influence on private developers and municipal planners.

Although New Urbanists have chosen to remain politically neutral and they have been extremely cautious about employing value-laden language in support of their advocacy of human-scaled

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communities, it is possible to discern some normative values under-girding their larger project. In the first place, the *Charter for the New Urbanism* expresses a concern for increasing racial and income separation which has been a liability of a more suburban style of development. This concern is at least partially addressed in an explicit recommendation that “affordable housing

should be distributed throughout the region to match job opportunities and to avoid concentrations of poverty.” This is an admirable goal, but it is in no way a universal conviction of those who have advocated for human-scale community throughout human history. This particular conviction expresses a normative valuing of justice among New Urbanists that is not explicitly supported from within their foundational documents.

The second normative value expressed within the *Charter for the New Urbanism* is a concern for civic life and, more specifically, for democracy. New Urbanists are in favor of a “broad range of housing types” because they can bring a cross-section of the populace “into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.” This reference to “authentic community” implies that there exists such a thing as “inauthentic community”. Part of what makes the community authentic, therefore, is the existence of personal and civic bonds. “Personal bonds” clearly refers to the informal network of individual or familial relationships that exist within communities. The reference to “civic bonds,” however, implies certain formalized mediating institutions, but the nature and form of such mediating institutions is not articulated within the document. In a similar vein, *The Charter* makes reference to “important civic buildings” that “reinforce community identity and the culture of democracy.” Again, the nature and form of such civic buildings is not made clear. Also, qualifying civic buildings as “important” suggests that the local community deems them so. As with justice, these references to civic institutions and civic buildings are somewhat vague, and the Charter does not suggest the mechanism by which such institutions are created or supported.

IS IT REASONABLE TO EXPECT THE MOVEMENT TO MEET ITS GOALS?

The goals of community enhancement through the built environment with an expressed interest in equitable justice as well as the culture of democracy are admirable goals, and ones likely to overlap with a great number of governmental bodies at all levels. In this, the New Urbanist Movement should be welcomed by governmental bodies as one of the positive forces within the private sector that is working for the common good. Having said this, it is also prudent to inquire as to the prospects and possibilities for the New Urbanist movements meeting their stated goals. This is not to question the motives or character of those within the movement, but rather to inquire as to where their goals might find broader support.

The goal of justice by way of equitable housing in decent neighborhoods and the goal of democratic participation are not ones that need explicit justification within a North American context. Since we are aware of a possible disconnect between expressed convictions and actual behavior, it is reasonable to ask whether those who buy into the New Urbanist paradigm demonstrate a commitment to the full range of goals expressed in the Charter in their practices.

At present, most New Urbanist projects are prohibitively expensive for the majority of residents of the larger municipality within which projects are located. Now, much of this reflects a normal market response to very popular projects and can't be directly attributed to the activity of any particular individuals. On the other hand, not all New Urbanist developments currently have as much affordable housing as they could absorb, and New Urbanist developers have not been immune to trying to find ways around meeting affordable housing requirements.

Furthermore, I am not aware of any significant advocacy movement for affordable housing emerging from among residents of any particular New Urbanist project. The influence of New Urbanism on older urban neighborhoods is a significant factor in the demographic trend known as gentrification. While the effects of gentrification are not altogether bad for a particular community, New Urbanist in-fill projects have caused displacement among poor and ethnic communities with historic ties to a particular neighborhood. This is not to say that many New Urbanists are not deeply committed to meeting the goal of equitable housing and may, in fact, be developing strategies to alleviate this situation. It is simply an observation that there has not been much evidence of specific action to support the philosophical commitment to justice among New Urbanists.

It should also be noted that New Urbanist thinking has had a positive influence on those who hold official responsibility for providing affordable housing. The membership roles of the *Congress for the New Urbanist* includes several governmental officials who are committed to providing affordable housing. However, the efforts of such agents have not yet been well integrated into the movement as a whole or to the various projects represented by the movement. There are significant limits to what role governmental agencies can do to provide adequate affordable housing without support from developers and community members who have a deep commitment to meeting these goals. The New Urbanist movement is not in a position to leverage the kind of moral capital that would be necessary to bring about this kind of broad 'buy-in' to the issue of affordability in housing among developers and residents.

As to the second goal of supporting mediating institutions and providing 'important' civic buildings that support the culture of democracy, it is difficult to get an accurate picture. As difficult as it may be, it is an important line of inquiry because it is the one element that could potentially substantiate the New Urbanist claim to providing "authentic community" as opposed to the lifestyle enclaves that exist in more privatized suburban development and gated communities. This issue will require further research and must be watched as New Urbanist communities mature. In general because of when these communities were established they may be at a relative disadvantage regarding the establishment of new civic institutions. Additionally, if such institutions do emerge, it is unlikely that they will have the wherewithal to develop any "important" buildings. As Robert Putnam famously noted, civic participation has gone significantly down over the last fifty years or so. Bowling leagues, service clubs, and other mediating institutions are struggling to keep membership roles from floundering. It is the rare exception to see a new group established, and we should not be too optimistic about the prospects for such mediating institutions within New Urbanist communities.

SETTLING IN: Churches and Urban Immigration

Neither of these observations are meant to be a foundational critique of New Urbanism, or even to call in to question the wisdom of including such challenging goals in their foundational document. The question I raise is: if it does turn out that the New Urbanist movement as it now stands is not meeting its own goals for supporting justice and building up a culture of democracy, what can New Urbanists do by way of redoubling their efforts towards meeting these goals? New Urbanists can and have led focused discussions about shortfalls in their ideological construal or execution of some of their larger goals. Beyond this type of discussion, New Urbanists have a limited ability to influence the behavior of the developers who build the projects or the residents who live in them.

WHAT ROLE MIGHT THE CHURCH HAVE IN MEETING NEW URBANIST GOALS?

Churches have been deeply involved in building communities from their very inception. Church congregations have significant experience in building the social networks for the health and vitality of their membership. Churches in many cities and towns have also historically played an anchoring role for the larger community. Most beloved historic towns in the United States were founded by leaders holding deep religious convictions. In some ways what requires explanation is not why municipal leaders and New Urbanists should look to churches as allies in their community building efforts, but rather why religious leaders have been conspicuously absent from the New Urbanist dialogue. It is an open question as to whether authentic community can be built from the physical form of traditional towns without under-girding social structures. Churches provide a key supporting social structure in many communities. Perhaps, the current challenges presented by the issues of economic equity and the lack of mediating institutions are early indicators of limitations in the formal aspects of the New Urbanist approach.

David Ley, urban geographer from the University of British Columbia, reminds us that the maintenance of urban stability for immigrants, refugees, and newcomers is dependent on institutions like the church. In a study based on oral histories from the 1950s to the 1990s he writes, with Laura Beattie, in *The German Immigrant Church in Vancouver: Service Provision and Identity Formation*, that:

Many of these churches presented remarkable models of stewardship, as mutual aid was collectively practiced, springing from shared spiritual belief. Recent research on volunteering, charitable giving, and civic participation has shown that religious affiliation is a very strong predictor of all three of these expressions of social capital...

If barn-raising was a foundational expression of social capital in rural faith communities, the construction of the church as a collective project has often been its urban counterpart. The church building itself was a material expression of a deeply held intersubjectivity:

Although demographics suggest that immigrants may not indefinitely identify with the faith communities they are initially aligned with, the role of these faith communities in providing stability is one highly significant. Ley and Beattie write:

The power of strong ties established through such activities, as well as shared values

and common backgrounds, provided a firm basis for trust and friendship, courtship and marriage, in short the consolidation of personal identity within a broader collective identity. These bonds were continually sustained through informal activities as well as the more organized church events...

Job referrals and recruitment were common services offered in the churches. One Baptist church member had a flourishing construction company he replenished with church newcomers. In a Mennonite church one woman took on the role of employment coordinator for immigrant women looking for work as housekeepers... A number of our respondents had provided accommodation for immigrants in their homes.

Such services and networks were crucial, for immigrants frequently arrived with almost no funds and unable to speak English. Practical assistance from church members went a long way in facilitating settlement.

Ley recounts that as prior waves of European immigration dissipated in favour of larger waves of Asian immigration, Canadian churches routinely reinvent their affiliations for immigrant and refugee sponsorship programs. His ongoing research shows, too, that many immigrant churches of Asian origin today, are providing settlement services, as well as spiritual support, continuing the model of the European-origin churches of the past.

In light of the particular shortcomings that I am suggesting within the New Urbanist movement, the church may very well offer some assistance. In the first place, as one civic institution that maintains viability in many neighborhoods, churches can provide the associational cohesion needed to encourage civic participation within the life of the New Urbanist neighborhood or project. Churches not only provide deep and meaningful ties for their members, but churches with buildings can support a variety of civic institutions and community-wide events. Churches can host a variety of meetings (from neighborhood councils to alcoholics anonymous) in their facilities, they can sponsor community-wide events, and they can partner with other institutions to advocate for larger community goals. The church building as an iconic object can serve as a visual anchor for the community and, if executed well, it can become an important civic building.

With regard to economic justice issues, New Urbanist communities face a much more difficult problem. The market is very difficult to control, and attempts to mitigate the negative effects of the market on vulnerable population groups are subject to abuse and unintended consequences. However, again, this may be an area in which the Christian community has something valuable to offer. A great many non-profit institutions that work within poor neighborhoods to provide affordable housing are based on a Christian vision for justice. *Habitat for Humanity* is just one well known example, but I could point to numerous examples scattered throughout cities and towns. This "on the ground" experience in the complexities of affordable housing and the thick network of relationships of trust built up among these institutions are invaluable assets as municipalities and New Urbanists seek to make the goal of equitable housing a

reality for residents. There is no more obvious place to turn in seeking solutions to the problem of affordable housing than to those who already have a good track record in providing affordable housing for the residents of a particular community.

FREEING THE CHURCH TO FOSTER COMMUNITY

The idea of municipalities and New Urbanists teaming up with Christian communities to meet specific communal goals seems like an appropriate and wise partnership. However, both private developers as well as public entities have good reasons for being hesitant to partner with churches in order to meet particular goals. Private developers may be cautious about working with particular churches within their developments because of concerns about religious pluralism. Neighborhood churches seemed to work better when there was a large enough church-going population that specific denominations could reasonably expect a good number of people with the same denominational background to live in the neighborhood of the church. Currently because there is a smaller total church-going population and more denominational (as well as non-denominational) choices it seems unlikely that much more than a very small percentage of the population will be served by a local neighborhood church.

**“ THE WALL OF SEPARATION BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE
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While reasonable, this perspective fails to take account of some of the current experiences of neighborhood churches. There are many more denominational choices, but a church's denominational affiliation is no longer a significant factor in people's choosing a church. People choose to live in a New Urbanist community or project because they want to walk to as many places as possible. If given the opportunity to walk to a viable and active local church, it is likely that they will attend such a church regardless of its denominational label. The churches that are currently in traditional neighborhood developments report that most of those who attend their church do not have prior experience in their denomination. While it is true that total church attendance is down since the mid-20th century, it is not down as far as many people think. In many parts of the country and among certain ethnic communities it is still rather high. Furthermore, even those who are not directly involved with the life of a neighborhood church can benefit from its existence. As mentioned above, a good neighborhood church can function as an important civic building that is valued by all of the residents of a community. It is important for the developer to seek out churches with a philosophy of ministry that understands the important role that a church can play in bringing health and vitality to a neighborhood.

Governmental agencies may be concerned about seeking partnerships with churches because of the principle of separation between church and state. It is important that governments who work within this tradition must be careful not to privilege one religious group over another, nor to give preferential treatment on the basis of a group's religious commitments. However as James Van Hemert of *The Rocky Mountain Land Use Institute* puts it, “the wall of separation between church and state doesn't mean that they cannot talk to each other.” In many communities, established churches serve as important ‘nerve centres’ for the communities in which they are situated. Church leaders and members often have a good read on what neighborhood concerns and dreams look like. They also often have significant influence on the residents of a neighborhood which can

prove very helpful when trying to put together local meetings. Too often churches are treated with suspicion and they only get impersonal information from governmental entities. It would be advisable for planners responsible for particular areas to develop relationships with religious and other institutional representatives before instigating any formal planning processes.

CONCLUSION

It has been the particular genius of the New Urbanist movement to challenge many of the orthodoxies of post-WWII development and planning. Among the most significant tenets that New Urbanists called into question was the notion that history had little to teach us about building community and that the various functions of the city could be divided up and treated as completely isolated units of development. New Urbanists re-introduced historical models for community building and an overall integrated approach to development. These very instincts which have done so much to restore a sense of health and wholeness to communities also point strongly in the direction of working with churches to help build community at a local level. Churches historically played an integral as well as a multivalent role in building up and sustaining local communities. Like a network of streets, the function of churches is misunderstood when it is understood too narrowly. Once upon a time, planners acted on the assumption that streets were primarily for moving automobile traffic quickly from one point to another. New Urbanists rediscovered that the sidewalks and streets of a community actually provide a fundamental setting for public life, and they should be designed with those wider functions in mind. From one perspective churches appear to be buildings that serve the needs of a particular worshipping community. However, churches represent an informal network of people who care deeply for their community, and church buildings are community catalysts and anchor points for the entire neighborhood. For these and many other reasons, urban planners and New Urbanists have everything to gain and nothing to lose from looking to churches as partners in their community building efforts.