

Congress of the New Urbanism

Summary

"New Urbanism is a relatively recent entry into the long-standing debate about sprawl. Beginning in 1993, the New Urbanism movement has grown to include urban designers, architects, planners, environmentalists, economists, landscape designers, traffic engineers, elected officials, sociologists, developers, and community activists, to start an incomplete list. It represents the interests of a broad coalition of environmentalists concerned with farmland preservation, habitat enhancements, and air quality as well as inner-city advocates concerned with urban reconstruction and social equity. It wedges these groups and interests with a design ethic that spans from region to building."

Key Words

density, development practice, environment, housing, neighborhood, parks, revitalization, squares, streets, urbanism



Washington, D.C. North of Massachusetts Avenue (NoMA) Plan, (Calthorpe and Fulton, 2001.)

Charter of the New Urbanism

I INTRODUCTORY COMMENT

Put simply, the New Urbanism sees physical design—regional design, urban design, architecture, landscape design, and environmental design—as critical to the future of our communities. While recognizing that economic, social, and political issues are critical, the movement advocates attention to design. The belief is that design can play a critical role in resolving problems that governmental programs and money alone cannot.

The “new” in New Urbanism has several aspects. It is the attempt to apply the age-old principles of urbanism—diversity, street life, and human scale—to the suburb in the twenty-first century. It is also an attempt to resolve the apparent conflict between the fine grain of traditional urban environments and the large-scale realities of contemporary institutions and technologies. It is an attempt to update traditional urbanism to fit our modern lifestyles and increasingly complex economics.

The Charter of the New Urbanism specifically structures its principles at three telescoping scales: the region, the neighborhood, and the building. But perhaps most important is its assertion that the three scales are interconnected and interdependent. The Charter is simply

twenty-seven principles organized by these three scales. The three elements of this book—the emerging region, the maturing suburb, and the revitalized urban neighborhood—each benefit from the principles articulated in the Charter.

The regional section of the Charter posits principles similar to those described in this book as the foundation of the Regional City. Its neighborhood-scale principles go to an urban-design philosophy that reasserts mixed-use, walkable environments. Its principles of design at the scale of the street and building seek to recreate places in which continuity and public space are reestablished for the pedestrian.

Urbanism advances the fundamental policies and goals of regionalism: that the region should be bounded, that growth should occur in more compact forms, that existing towns and cities should be revitalized, that affordable housing should be fairly distributed throughout the region, that transit should be more widespread, and that local taxes should be equitably shared. Each of these strategies is elaborated in this book as fundamental to the Regional City. Each of these strategies has become central to the larger agenda of New Urbanism.

This larger agenda gives clarity to the precarious balance at the regional scale between inner-city investments, suburban redevelopment,

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and the appropriate siting of greenfield development. This balance is one of the last understood aspects of New Urbanism and one of its most important. It addresses the question of where development is appropriate at the regional scale.

New Urbanism is best known (and often stereotyped) for its work at the neighborhood and town scale. At this scale the Charter's principles describe a new way of thinking about and structuring our cities and towns. Rather than the simplistic single-use zoning of most contemporary city plans, the Charter proposes a structure of three fundamental elements—neighborhoods, districts, and corridors. The Charter does not sidestep the scale of modern business and retailing. It simply calls for their placement within special districts when they are not appropriate to the scale and character of a neighborhood. In this taxonomy, the special-use district and the corridor (natural, auto, or transit) provide complements to and connections for the basic urban tissue—complete and walkable neighborhoods.

It is at the scale of the city block, its streets, and individual buildings that the test of integrating the auto and the need for more pedestrianfriendly environments is resolved. The Charter does not call for the simplistic elimination of the car, but instead challenges us to create environments that can simultaneously support walking, biking, transit, and the car. It outlines urban design strategies that reinforce human scale at the same time that they incorporate contemporary realities. Jobs no longer need to be isolated in office parks, but their integration into mixed-use neighborhoods calls for sensitive urban design. Differing types of housing no longer need buffers to separate and isolate them, but they do need an architecture that articulates a fundamental continuity within the neighborhood. Retail and civic uses do not need special zones, but they do need block, street, and building patterns that connect them to their continuity.

The Charter calls for an architecture that respects human scale, respects regional history and ecology, and respects the need for modesty and continuity within a physical community. Traditional architectures has much to teach us about these imperatives without prescribing nostalgic forms. And these imperatives can lead to the use of historical precedents, especially in infilling and redeveloping areas that have a strong and reestablished character. On the other hand, climateresponsive design that honors the history and culture of a place, when combined with new technologies, can lead to innovative rather than imitative design. The “seamless” integration of new and old, and a respect for existing urban patterns and scale are the imperatives of the Charter.

Too often, New Urbanism is misinterpreted simply as a conservative movement to recapture the past while ignoring the issues of our time. It is not understood as a complex system of policies and design principles that operate at multiple scales. To some, New Urbanism simply means tree-lined streets, porch-front houses, and Main Street retail—the reworking of a Norman Rockwell fantasy of small-town America, primarily for the rich,

But nostalgia is not what New Urbanism is actually proposing. Its goals and breadth are much grander, more complete and challenging. Many of the misconceptions are caused by focusing only on the neighborhood-scale prescriptions of the Charter without seeing how they are embedded in regional structures or understanding that those neighborhoods are supported by design principles at the street and building scale that attend more to environmental imperatives and urban continuities than to historical precedent.

The Charter shares its central thesis with that of this book—sprawl and social inequity must be addressed comprehensively. A fundamental tenet of the Charter speaks to the critical issue of affordability and social integration through the principles of economic diversity and inclusive neighborhoods. Economic diversity calls for a broad range of housing opportunities as well as uses within each neighborhood—affordable and expensive, small and large, rental and ownership, single and family housing. This is a very radical proposition. It implies more low-income and affordable housing in the rich suburbs at the same time that it advocates more middle-class opportunities in urban neighborhoods. It advocates mixing income groups and ethnic groups in a way that is very frightening to many communities. It is a principle that is rarely realized in practice and, given the current political climate, is almost always compromised. But it is a central tenet of the Charter and *The Regional City*—and it sets a direction quite different from most new development in the suburbs and many urban renewal programs.

New Urbanism outlines a set of design and policy principles that provide the means to reintegrate the segregated geography of our cities and suburbs. In so doing, it raises a complex set of issues. When does “economic diversity” in a distressed inner-city neighborhood become gentrification? What is the appropriate mix of inclusionary housing in a suburban town? These are tough questions that only have local answers. Gentrification may be mitigated by more affordable housing at the regional level, but what of the coherence and identity of the old neighborhood and its unique culture? There are no simple solutions. Perhaps the appropriate amount of economic diversity for a low-income neighborhood is reached when success doesn't mean moving out. Perhaps the definition for a rich neighborhood is “when the schoolteacher and the fireman no longer have to drive in.”

The Charter sees the physical design of a region—like the physical design of a neighborhood—as either fostering opportunities, sustainability, and diversity or inhibiting them. Such design cannot mandate a civil and vibrant culture, but it is a necessary framework. Much like healthy soil, the coherent design of a region and its neighborhoods can nurture a more equitable and robust society—or it can stunt them. This is not environmental determination. It is simply an attempt to find a better fit between our current realities and their physical armature.

2 THE CHARTER

The Congress for the New Urbanism views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community building challenge.

We stand for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy.

We recognize that physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.

We advocate the restructuring of public policy and development practices to support the following principles: neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice.

We present a broad-based citizenry, composed of public and private sector leaders, community activists, and multidisciplinary professionals. We are committed to reestablishing the relationship between the art of building and the making of community, through citizen-based participatory planning and design.

We dedicate ourselves to reclaiming our homes, blocks, streets, parks, neighborhoods, districts, towns, cities, regions, and environment.

We assert the following principles to guide public policy, development practice, urban planning, and design.

The Region: Metropolis, City and Town

1. Metropolitan regions are finite places with geographic boundaries derived from topography, watersheds, coastlines, farmlands, regional parks, and river basins. The metropolis is made of multiple centers that are cities, towns, and villages, each with its own identifiable center and edges.
2. The metropolitan region is a fundamental economic unit of the contemporary world. Governmental cooperation, public policy, physical planning, and economic strategies must reflect this new reality.
3. The metropolis has a necessary and fragile relationship to its agrarian hinterland and natural landscapes. The relationship is environmental, economic, and cultural. Farmland and nature are as important to the metropolis as the garden is to the house.
4. Development patterns should not blur or eradicate the edges of the metropolis. Infill development within existing urban areas conserves environmental resources, economic investment, and social fabric, while reclaiming marginal and abandoned areas. Metropolitan regions should develop strategies to encourage such infill development over peripheral expansion.
5. Where appropriate, new development contiguous to urban boundaries should be organized as neighborhoods and districts, and be integrated with the existing urban pattern. Noncontiguous development should be organized as towns and villages with their own urban edges, and planned for a jobs/housing balance, not as bedroom suburbs.
6. The development and redevelopment of towns and cities should respect historical patterns, precedents, and boundaries.
7. Cities and towns should bring into proximity a broad spectrum of public and private uses to support a regional economy that benefits people of all incomes. Affordable housing should be distributed throughout the region to match job opportunities and to avoid concentrations of poverty.
8. The physical organization of the region should be supported by a framework of transportation alternatives. Transit, pedestrian, and bicycle systems should maximize access and mobility throughout the region while reducing dependence upon the automobile.
9. Revenues and resources can be shared more cooperatively among the municipalities and centers within regions to avoid destructive competition for tax base and to promote rational coordination of transportation, recreation, public services, housing, and community institutions.

The Neighborhood, the District and the Corridor

1. The neighborhood, the district, and the corridor are the essential elements of development and redevelopment in the metropolis. They form identifiable areas that encourage citizens to take responsibility for their maintenance and evolution.
2. Neighborhoods should be compact, pedestrian friendly, and mixed use. Districts generally emphasize a special single use, and should follow the principles of neighborhood design when possible. Corridors are regional connectors of neighborhoods and districts; they range from boulevards and rail lines to rivers and parkways.
3. Many activities of daily living occur within walking distance, allowing independence to those who do not drive, especially the elderly and the young. Interconnected networks of streets should be designed to encourage walking, reduce the number and length of automobile trips, and conserve energy.
4. 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.
5. Transit corridors, when properly planned and coordinated, can help organize metropolitan structure and revitalize urban centers. In contrast, highway corridors should not displace investment from existing centers.
6. Appropriate building densities and land uses should be within walking distance of transit stops, permitting public transit to become a viable alternative to the automobile.
7. Concentrations of civic, institutional, and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes. Schools should be sized and located to enable children to walk or bicycle to them.
8. The economic health and harmonious evolution of neighborhoods, districts, and corridors can be improved through graphic urban design codes that serve as predictable guides for change.
9. A range of parks, from tot-lots and village greens to ballfields and community gardens, should be distributed within neighborhoods. Conservation areas and open lands should be used to define and connect different neighborhoods and districts.

The Block, the Street, and the Building

1. A primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use.
2. Individual architectural projects should be seamlessly linked to their surroundings. This issue transcends style.
3. The revitalization of urban places depends on safety and security. The design of streets and buildings should reinforce safe environments, but not at the expense of accessibility and openness.
4. In the contemporary metropolis, development must adequately accommodate automobiles. It should do so in ways that respect the pedestrian and the form of public space.
5. Streets and squares should be safe, comfortable, and interesting to the pedestrian. Properly configured, they encourage walking and enable neighbors to know each other and protect their communities.
6. Architecture and landscape design should grow from local climate, topography, history, and building practice.
7. Civic buildings and public gathering places require important sites to reinforce community identity and the culture of democracy. They deserve distinctive form, because their role is different from that of other buildings and places that constitute the fabric of the city.
8. All buildings should provide their inhabitants with a clear sense of location, weather, and time. Natural methods of heating and cooling can be more resource-efficient than mechanical systems.
9. Preservation and renewal of historic buildings, districts, and landscapes affirm the continuity and evolution of urban society.



Washington, D.C. North of Massachusetts Avenue (NoMa) Plan. “The city and neighborhood groups recognized the value of mixed-use urban environments, the need to preserve an existing arts community, and the need to diversify the economy of the city. Programs to support housing and high-tech as were urban design controls to allow lofts in converted warehouses and artist industries were presently missing from the economic mix of the downtown area, studios in surrounding infill locations. The gateway treatment of New York Avenue as it enters the central city is enhanced by a traditional traffic circle so unique to L’Enfant’s plan of Washington. The structure of his famous radial boulevards is reinforced with new and rehabilitated buildings that orient to the streets.” (Calthorpe and Fulton, 2001.)

REFERENCES

Calthorpe, Peter and William Fulton. 2001. *The Regional City: Planning for the End of Sprawl*. Washington, DC: Island Press. pp. 269–270.

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EDITORS NOTE

Like the Athens Charter of a half-century earlier, The Charter of the New Urbanism was published without illustrations. A sizable and increasing number of built projects forms the basis of its evolving theory and practice, promulgated by the Congress of the New Urbanism, whose founding members include Peter Calthorpe, Jean Driscoll, Andres Duany, Elizabeth Moule, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Stephanos Polyoides, and Daniel Solomon.

The illustration and caption on this page illustrate application of New Urbanist principles to revitalization of an existing, and in this case renowned urban plan.