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# Toward an Integrated Paradigm: Further Thoughts on the Three Urbanisms

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It is an article of faith that we design the built environment in an ever-changing social, cultural, economic, technological and ecological milieu. Contemporary urban development has responded to these changing factors in ways that might loosely be called “market urbanism.” This term is used here to refer to current conventions and modes of land acquisition, professional planning and design services, government regulation, financing, and construction for the thousands of real estate development projects that spring up in places and at times determined by macro and micro market forces and by the decisions of private developers.

Most of these projects are small or unremarkable, or both. However, their accumulation inevitably changes the

face of America in ways that are not planned, organized or self-conscious. Thus, the recent conversion of downtown office buildings into hotels and condominiums, or factories and warehouses into residential lofts, has transformed many urban centers. Post-World War II suburbia has likewise been transformed by a tsunami of subdivisions, gated communities, arterial strips, and retail malls.<sup>1</sup>

There are, however, three contemporary paradigms of urbanism that *are* self-conscious: New Urbanism, Everyday Urbanism, and, to a lesser extent, what I call Post-Urbanism. These three approaches or attitudes (other than New Urbanism, it is hard to call them movements) represent the cutting edge of theoretical and professional activity in Western architecture and urbanism.<sup>2</sup>

I contend that all three paradigms are basic and somewhat inevitable. Each has its merits and demerits, but not in equal proportion—at least for most American cities at this point in their evolution. This essay examines their overlaps and oppositions, methodologies and modalities, strengths and weaknesses, in the hope of sketching the outline of a more integrated position.

**Above:** Mixed-use buildings at Stapleton are designed in a background, but contemporary architectural style, and are built to the sidewalk to define a continuous street wall, with residential and office uses above retail shops—a traditional but still compelling, if elusive, urban configuration. Photo courtesy of Calthorpe Associates.



### The Formal/Classical Paradigm

New Urbanism is by far the best known of these three paradigms. It is the most organized, having established the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) to promote and defend its tenets.<sup>3</sup> It is also the one with which I am most aligned, albeit with reservations and criticisms.

The Charter of the New Urbanism, ratified in 1996, aspires to truly utopian goals. They are an explicit combination of noble ends and practical means: to equitably mix people of varied income, ethnicity, race and age; to build public architecture and public space that makes citizens feel they are part of, and proud of, a common culture; to weave a tighter urban fabric that mixes uses and architectural types; to sponsor and integrate transit, revenue sharing, planning and governance at the metropolitan scale; and to be economically sound and ecologically responsible at the scale of the building, neighborhood and region. Rarely, it must be said, are its ideals fully achieved, especially in a single project or community.

As these ambitious, lofty principles indicate, New Urbanism seeks to counter the physical fragmentation,

social dislocation and polarization, and functional compartmentalization of the modern city. It envisions a structural relationship between social behavior and physical form, and it maintains that good design can have a measurably positive effect on city dwellers' sense of place and community. Its basic model is a compact, mixed-use, diverse, transit-friendly, walkable city with a hierarchy of buildings and places that promote face-to-face social interaction.

In more specific terms, New Urbanism's Charter advocates mixed-use centers where low- and midrise buildings form a continuous street wall, and where offices and affordable housing can be located above retail shops. The city envisioned by New Urbanism is not dense by European or Asian standards, but it is denser than conventional American sprawl. Its idealized urban hierarchy runs the gamut from background housing and private yards to foreground

**Above:** Denver's former Stapleton Airport is being converted into a 4,700-acre New Urbanist community with 12,000 homes, master-planned by Calthorpe Associates. Photo courtesy of Calthorpe Associates.





civic and institutional buildings, with public squares and parks. The built environment is organized along the urban “transect,” which, like the ecological transect, subdivides and codifies a prototypical cross-section of development, from natural countryside to urban core. The continuum has six zones of gradually increasing building density and height, with a seventh zone for special districts.<sup>4</sup>

**Above:** Parking lots, sidewalks, and vacant lots are temporarily but productively taken over by informal markets in Everyday Urbanism. Photo courtesy of Margaret Crawford.

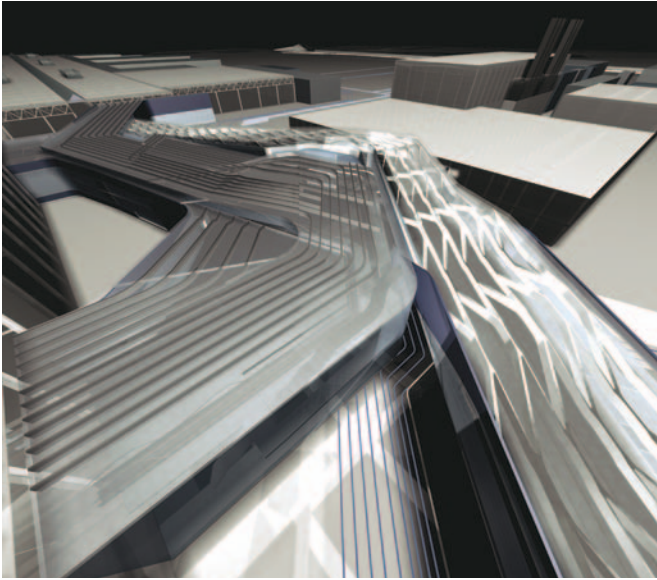
**Opposite left:** The BMW plant by Zaha Hadid not only embodies but expresses the laminar flows of industrial assembly. Its Post-Urbanist architecture is visually dynamic, with forms streaming around existing buildings like solidified lava. Photo of BMW Central Building © Zaha Hadid Architects.

**Opposite right:** Los Angeles, a city not known for a vibrant, walkable downtown, is attempting to establish a 24/7 mixed-use district, including almost 2,500 residential units, on Grand Avenue. Frank Gehry, who designed the popular Disney Concert Hall, across this major street, has proposed an informal mix of low- and highrise buildings (already jumbled and fractured, as if by an earthquake), a project that is pedestrian oriented if not street oriented. Rendering courtesy of Gehry Partners, LLP.

To engage with these ideas, the CNU has popularized a set of alternative principles and practices throughout North America, Australia, and parts of Europe. Among these are models for Transit Oriented Development (TOD) to reduce auto-dependency, and Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) to encourage mixed-use.

In terms of historical antecedents, New Urbanism is reminiscent of the City Beautiful movement, and it embraces open spaces and housing typologies that recall the Garden City tradition. Typically, its architecture is also historically derivative—in a style that is, in a word of its own coinage, Neotraditional.

The New Urbanist vision also seeks to influence society beyond physical planning and design. For instance, its adherents have sought to reform contemporary financial and banking practices that encourage developers to build and “flip” projects for quick profits. They seek the patient capital of investors who would stay in a project for the long haul. And they lament the way Wall Street, through real estate investment trusts, has restricted the architectural palette to a limited number of standard “product” types.<sup>5</sup>



### The Informal/Vernacular Paradigm

By comparison, Everyday Urbanism is not as tidy, doctrinaire or utopian as New Urbanism. Nor is it even an established movement. Nevertheless, it has a body of literature and a clearly stated goal: to celebrate and build on ordinary life, with little pretense of creating an ideal environment. Its proponents argue for “elements that remain elusive: ephemerality, cacophony, multiplicity and simultaneity.”<sup>6</sup>

Everyday Urbanism is informal and bottom-up, as opposed to formal and top-down; and unlike New Urbanism, it downplays, and even denies, the relationship between physical form and social behavior. Its advocates frequently celebrate the ability of indigenous and migrant groups to respond in resourceful and imaginative ways to ad hoc conditions and marginal spaces. Its aim is to help people adapt and improvise, often *in spite of* physical design and planning.

In practical terms, proponents of Everyday Urbanism support such activities as the appropriation of space on sidewalks and in parking lots (as well as on vacant lots and in private driveways) for informal commerce and festivities. It champions the vernacular architecture, street life, and art of vibrant, ethnic neighborhoods such as those of Los Angeles. An international example might be Curitiba, Brazil, with its populist ethic and low-tech bus transit system.

Despite its grassroots quality, however, Everyday Urbanism should not be confused with conventional real estate development. It is more personal, political and democratic than the standard “product” built and financed

by mainstream developers and banks. Its very abilities to fly below the organized financial radar and work in the gaps and on the margins have allowed it to empower disadvantaged people and disenfranchised communities.

### The Avant-Garde/Inventive Paradigm

It must be said that no one formally labels himself a Post-Urbanist; Post-Urbanism is not even a widely used term. Nevertheless, I use it here to refer to the avant-garde paradigm that has grown out of what has been called the poststructuralist or critical architectural project of the last several decades. In its embrace of dynamic global information and capital flows, this urbanism is critical of most traditional norms and conventions, although sometimes in a playful, satiric way. Relativistic, predictably unpredictable, and without formal orthodoxies or principles, it favors bold form—either broken and fractal, or continuous and flowing.

At its purest, Post-Urbanism argues that shared values or metanarratives are no longer possible in a world increasingly fragmented and composed of heterotopian ghettos of the “other” (e.g., the homeless, the poor, minorities) and mainstream zones of fantasy commerce, information exchange, and free-range tourism. Indeed, liminal zones of taboo and fantasy and twenty-four/seven zones of unfettered consumerism are viewed as liberating because they allow “for new forms of knowledge, new hybrid possibilities, new unpredictable forms of freedom.”<sup>7</sup>

Espousing ever wilder and more provocative designs, Post-Urbanism also aspires to engage an increasingly

sophisticated, celebrity-conscious consumer of the built environment. Urban works born of these ideas include the mega-forms of Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, and some less strident proposals of Steven Holl. Frank Gehry's proposals for Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn and Grand Avenue in Los Angeles, as well as Daniel Libeskind's Denver Art Museum complex, are other examples.

In formal terms, the abstract architectural language and topological explorations of Post-Urbanism are often ones of surface and skin. There is little direct reference to the physical context, even when it is contemporary. A variety of avant-gardist shock tactics may also be deployed, no matter how modest the building program or unimportant the site. However, it is sometimes difficult to know if a project is neo-avant-garde or truly avant-garde—that is, whether surprise and spectacle is employed for its own sake, or whether the principal motive is to inspire genuine belief in the possibility of change.

Nevertheless, Post-Urbanists have described their discordant and exceptional insertions into the city as examples of open, democratic urbanism. And they criticize New Urbanist communities as stultifying and irrelevant in light of modern lifestyles and technology, especially digital media and what I call the Electronic Now. For them, New Urbanism's desire for orderliness embodies nostalgia for a romanticized past that never existed. Meanwhile, they see the ad hoc liveliness of Everyday Urbanism, while less scenographic and predictable, as lacking aesthetic ambition and cohesiveness.

Despite their theoretical and aesthetic sophistication, however, it is questionable whether Post-Urbanist works give back as much as they take from the city around them. Its projects are typically self-contained, if not self-centered, with little faith in the work of others to complete a fragmented urban fabric. Meanwhile, sprawling auto-centric cities like Atlanta, Houston and Las Vegas are sometimes held up as models of a liberating mobility.

### **Methodologies and Modalities**

Underlying these paradigms are three very different methodologies. New Urbanism is clearly the most precedent based. It aims to extrapolate from enduring architectural principles and typologies, as well as historical examples and traditions as they intersect contemporary environmental, technological, social and economic practices. It is also the most normative, with its goals and principles carefully inscribed in the CNU Charter, and adapted to local conditions through the relatively standardized tool of the community design charrette.

Politically active, the CNU has also built coalitions with movements such as Smart Growth, and other organizations such as the Urban Land Institute, US Green Building Council, and the AIA. These links have given it traction and clout as a national organization, as evident from the post-Katrina replanning of the Gulf Coast.

New Urbanists believe that a coherent hierarchy of architectural forms, street types, and public spaces can best sort out and make legible the complex mixture of land uses and buildings that cities have always possessed and still require. New Urbanists have thus lambasted the post-World War II zoning that separated and compartmentalized land uses, as if, in Ken Greenberg's words, it could juggle only one ball at a time.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, mixed-use urbanism, with its walkability and chance encounters, is now the only approach that everyone, from Leon Krier to Rem Koolhaas, seems to embrace. This is a major, pervasive, positive sea change. However, as single-use zoning is phased out, a new way to create urban order is needed. A new appreciation for architectural typology, New Urbanists believe, can provide this foundation. Thus, in place of zoning codes that focus on function and bulk, they advocate form- and typology-based codes that promote normative architectural and urban forms.<sup>9</sup>

New Urbanist emphasis on typology partly derives from a desire to dignify the many background buildings needed to make a coherent city. Builders and designers are thus freed to refine details and forms rather than overhaul or reinvent them. A typology also provides familiar architectural vessels into which new functions can be poured, helping to preserve the memory of the city. And it makes future architectural and urban form more predictable. Indeed, without agreed-upon formal types, the effective practice of urban design and planning is almost impossible.<sup>10</sup>

Everyday Urbanism is far less normative and doctrinaire. Where New Urbanism grew out of concern for precedent and typology, it emerged from the community design movement that has stubbornly survived since the 1970s in a few cities, and that has recently been revived in others. It views the design professional as a student of the popular and the quotidian rather than the ideal and elite, and more a participant in than a leader of public dialogue.

Everyday Urbanism's concern for citizen control makes it the most open-ended and populist of the three approaches. And because it is about celebrating the ordinary rather than starting over with a new and presumably more sophisticated model, it is also the most modest, incremental and compassionate of the paradigms, demon-



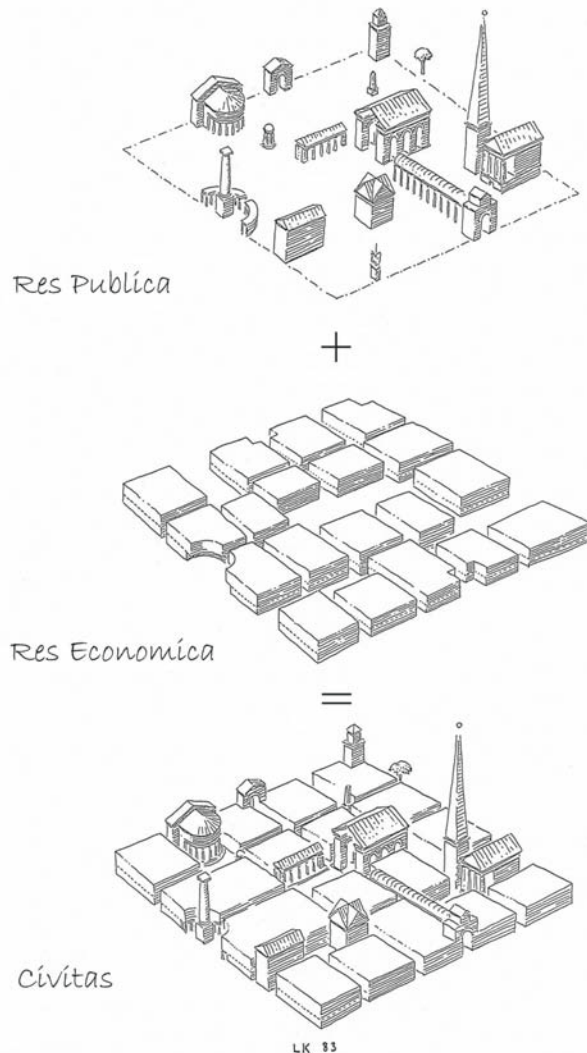
strating the strongest commitment to social and economic justice. However, if the New Urbanist romanticizes the past, the Everyday Urbanist overestimates the power of the commonplace.

These are flaws that Post-Urbanism seeks to take on directly by accepting, and seeking to express, the powerful techno-flow of a global world, both real and virtual. Instead of seeking accommodation, its projects are bold and experimental rather than normative, and its practitioners often relish the chance to violate design guidelines, zoning codes, and existing typologies. Post-Urbanists also tend not to engage the public as directly in open dialogue—perhaps because they feel the traditional “polis” is increasingly obsolete, and its civic institutions too calcified to promote new possibilities. Celebrated in the media as solo artists or lone geniuses, they cultivate Howard Roarkish personas, despite the large multidisciplinary teams needed to realize their designs.

Perhaps the quintessential Post-Urbanist is Rem Koolhaas, the vanguard Dutch designer and brilliant provocateur. He has proclaimed—perhaps as a trope, but irresponsibly in any case—that urbanism is dead, that there is no longer any hope of achieving urban coherence or unity. Like the talented and less nihilistic Steven Holl, he has dropped typology in favor of topology.<sup>11</sup>

Rigorously consistent within their own architectural vocabularies and sites, Post-Urbanist projects often seem to have been designed within an invisible envelope, with almost zero attention to off-site relationships.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, they tend to be perceived as confrontational, even brazen. Like mid-twentieth-century Modernist works, they want to make a radically new start and are comfortable with, and even depend on, being at odds with their surroundings. But unlike those Modernist projects, their forms are now increasingly untethered from a sense of common, shared value—free to be arbitrary, even bizarre. Yet, in spite of their hubris, many a Post-Urbanist building is a spatial and formal *tour de force*. They can be sophisticated foreground architecture of great formal skill and elegance—however convoluted, enigmatic or haunting their shapes.

However, if New Urbanists are overly optimistic about urban centers and neighborhoods as aesthetically consistent wholes—beautiful in the traditional Viennese or Parisian sense—Post-Urbanists may be too willing to settle for cities of internally unified but disparate fragments. Where New Urbanists want to be *normative* at too many scales, Post-Urbanists want to be *free* at too many scales—from the baluster to the building to the bioregion.<sup>13</sup> And, if New



Urbanism tends to hold too high the best practices of the past and Everyday Urbanism overrates a prosaic present, the Post-Urbanist is overinvested in endlessly exciting topology and an audacious future.

**Above:** Leon Krier’s well-known diagram illustrates the clarity of a typological urbanism, albeit in a Neo-Classical idiom, with elaborate foreground and simple background buildings. The former are reserved for civic and institutional uses, the latter for residential and commercial uses, which typically make up 80 percent of an American city. With the network of small blocks of lowrise, street-oriented structures, New Urbanism strives to be more human scaled and pedestrian friendly.

It must be said that the differing clienteles for the three paradigms may explain some of these proclivities. Everyday Urbanists often work for nonprofit community groups with limited resources and political power. Thus, their commissions are more modest, sometimes built with volunteer labor. New Urbanists often work for land developers, especially on the suburban greenfield projects for which they are best known. However, their lesser-known but numerous urban redevelopment projects, including Hope VI, may be sponsored by government agencies or public/private partnerships. Post-Urbanist projects typically result from prestigious competitions or are commissioned by wealthy and powerful institutions, corporations and patrons seeking high-profile, iconic buildings.

These client groups have different missions and audiences, ranging from subaltern minorities to middle-class consumers to urbane cognoscenti and glitterati. It should therefore be no surprise that the three paradigms lead to different physical outcomes. However, this is not to imply tautologically that they are solely the result of these divergent clienteles. The paradigms do seem to represent and resonate as deeper, more intrinsic modes of thought, design and production.

### Outcomes

New Urbanism, with its Latinate clarity and order, achieves the most aesthetic unity and the most coherent sense of community, in my opinion. It orchestrates a range of uses at a human scale in familiar architectural types. However, its formal harmony is usually achieved by employing historical styles that lack authenticity and tectonic integrity.

Such skin-deep pastiche is more understandable for speculative housing, which will either sell in the marketplace or bankrupt the developer/builder. It is less excusable for nonresidential buildings, especially public structures that are allowed to break the design code but all too rarely rise to first-rate design.

Many New Urbanists claim that the issue of architectural language or style is irrelevant or overblown. But clearly style *does* matter to design professionals and academics, judging from the ferocity of their debates. And if style *is* of little consequence to developers (and their public), why isn't there more contemporary architecture in their projects? Clearly, architectural style *is* important because it expresses values, meanings and attitudes that are deeper than visible form.

By contrast, Everyday Urbanism has trouble achieving any aesthetic coherence, day or night, micro or macro.

But it is egalitarian and lively. And while Post-Urbanist site plans look exciting, with their laser-like vectors, fractal geometries, jumbled fragments, and sweeping circulatory systems, when realized, they are often overscaled and empty of pedestrians. Tourists in rental cars experiencing a city through their windshields may be better served than actual residents, for whom there is less human-scale nuance and architectural detail to be revealed over the years, especially to pedestrians. Ironically, Post-Urbanism suggests that local citizens are tourists in their own cities, just as tourists have become citizens of the world.

Everyday Urbanism is, in a sense, already ubiquitous in the informal squatter settlements of global cities, where the working- and under-classes seek a stake in the urban economy. But it doesn't make much sense in the cities of Europe, where a wealthier citizenry has the luxury of punctuating a mature, dense urban fabric with Modernist commercial and institutional buildings in counterpoint to the traditional architecture. And the heavy masonry fabric of European cities sets off the new, highly glazed, gravity-defying buildings of Post-Urbanism better than North American cities, which are more spatially open and sporadic, and where glass curtain-wall designs already dominate. Because our cities lack the horizontal viscosity of European cities and are often underprogrammed and made empty by parking lots, New Urbanist infill usually adds the greatest value.

### Nagging Questions

What can be said then about the possibility of a more integrated approach to urbanism in America, one that might merge the best of these three approaches while avoiding their weaknesses? Is there any hope for combining elements of these three paradigms into a richer, more sustainable, more enduring urbanism?

Everyday Urbanism is too often a practice of default rather than design. It is a bottom-up approach, that is "too much bottom, not enough up" in Michael Speaks's words.<sup>14</sup> Can it raise its design expectations and standards as its clientele becomes more mainstream?

New Urbanism is too often formulaic, realized in banal and cloyingly historicist architecture. It often fails to deal with either regional or economic issues, such as the balance of jobs and housing. Can it move beyond "the post-modern notion of the city as solely a place to live, not to work," and embrace a more raw and potent mix of uses, including industry?<sup>15</sup>

Post-Urbanism is too often an urbanism of trophy



buildings, of which a city needs and can absorb only so many. Can it produce good but quiet background buildings that are more urbanistically sensitive and architecturally contextual?

Certainly, Americans should be able to count on a more physically ordered and architecturally ambitious commons than Everyday Urbanism offers and a more humane one than Post-Urbanism promises. Although Europe may delight in Post Urbanist avant-gardism, and the developing world may embrace the informality of Everyday Urbanism, wouldn't the typical American metropolis benefit most from New Urbanism at this point in its history? Arguably, the unevenness of American urbanism would also benefit from "some rules that prove the exceptions," just as European cities are enriched by Modernist "exceptions that prove the rule."

For most North American cities, New Urbanism represents the responsible middle path, less glamorous than Post-Urbanism and more ambitious than Everyday Urbanism. But can it learn from the other two paradigms? Despite being the most comprehensive and successful design and planning movement of its generation, New Urbanism must evolve if it is to remain responsible and responsive. Like all movements, it will ultimately ossify and lose its meaning and value as it runs the inevitable and ever faster historical course from archetype to type to stereotype.

There are a number of serious questions the New Urbanism needs to address if it is to evolve into a more integrated paradigm. Can its exemplary urban principles be realized in contemporary architecture, especially for public and institutional buildings, and can its practitioners display the kind of talent and skill evidenced by Post-Urbanist architects? Can it live up to the same egalitarian ideas of social diversity and affordability espoused by Everyday Urbanists? And can it fully address ecological challenges?

Last, is New Urbanism flexible enough to align with and harness the emerging forces of the global economy? Or will it rely too heavily on top-down formal templates, form-based codes and regulations, outdated technologies, and moral mandates? As the late Jane Jacobs pointed out in *Dark Age Ahead*, sprawl will densify and diversify, and inner cities will rebound and redevelop, only if underlying economic and social forces make it an inevitable, natural, sustainable and voluntary process.<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, New Urbanism will become another failed utopian movement, a misfortune in a field littered with broken dreams and promises.

#### Notes

The notion of "three urbanisms" was originally introduced in my book *Repairing the American Metropolis* (Seattle: UW Press, 2002). It was further developed at a series of debates in 2004 hosted by the Taubman College of Architecture at the University of Michigan. Edited transcripts of these sessions eventually provided a basis for a three-volume series of publications, "The Michigan Debates on Urbanism" series (Ann Arbor: Regents of the University of Michigan, 2005). Readers are encouraged to consult those volumes for a more complete explanation of the ideas underlying this essay.

1. Urban sports stadia and cultural venues, often the result of private/public partnerships, are other manifestations of what Robert Fishman has described as "ReUrbanism." See Robert Fishman, ed., *New Urbanism: Peter Calthorpe vs. Lars Lerup*, Vol. 2 of the "Michigan Debates on Urbanism" series.
2. There is also Landscape Urbanism, a self-named group that is more driven by dynamic environmental concerns and, for the purposes of this essay, represents more of a hybrid than a pure paradigm.
3. Indeed, the fervor of its members and its organizational prowess largely precipitated the thesis of this essay.
4. See *Places*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring 2006) for a fuller discussion of the New Urbanist rural-to-urban transect. I believe the right (urban) side of this transect needs to be expanded to include more of the messy and open land uses of industry, sports and entertainment, as well as transportation infrastructure such as depots, airports and seaports.
5. As Chris Leinberger has pointed out, REITs currently allow investment in only nineteen building types, a much more limited palette of options than when local bank lending was less standardized and more responsive to individual needs. This diminished architectural variety, coupled with an investment mentality typically blind to returns beyond the first five to seven years, has made additions to the built environment more generic. See Christopher Leinberger, "Retrofitting Real Estate Finance: Alternatives to the Nineteen Standard Product Types," *Places*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 2005).
6. J. Chase, M. Crawford, and J. Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999).
7. Ellen Dunham-Jones, personal correspondence.
8. Kenneth Greenberg, *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall 2005/Winter 2006.
9. For example, to ensure that a street wall is created and maintained, prescriptive, form-based codes typically prefer the "build-to line" to the "setback line" of conventional, proscriptive, use-based zoning codes.
10. Jonathan Barnett, personal correspondence.
11. Francesco Garofalo, ed., *Steven Holl* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003).
12. There are exceptions, of course. Frank Gehry's Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, an exfoliating figure that epitomizes the freestanding sculptural object, offers a rich and shining (literally) counterpoint to its urban context. Steven Holl's Kiasma Museum in Helsinki is a contemporary interpretation of an urban gateway that responds well to its honorific site.
13. Douglas Kelbaugh, "Urbanism and/or Architecture: Toward a Theory of Norm and Scale," *Places*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Fall 2006), pp. 42-48.
14. Rahul Mehrotra, ed., *Everyday Urbanism: Margaret Crawford vs. Michael Speaks*, Vol. 1 of the "Michigan Debates on Urbanism" series.
15. Trevor Boddy, "Siamese Cities...", *Arcade*, Summer 2007.
16. Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead* (New York: Random House, 2004).