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Authors

Duany, Andres
Shiffman, Ron
Torre, Susana

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The New Urbanism, The Newer, and the Old

The following comments are excerpted from the transcript of a panel discussion, “The New Urbanism: What Does it Mean for Center Cities?” held May 25 in New York City at the Municipal Art Society.

Susana Torre: The New Urbanists, with all of their different stripes, share on the one hand a reliance on and admiration of precedent and on the other an emphasis on an urbanism of the center — not *the* center, but of centers.

The precedents they cite are small-scale, pedestrian-oriented places, both in suburbs and in center cities. What does not get asked is to what extent those precedents involve ideas about society that have changed. Some of the neighborhoods the New Urbanists look to as exemplars were, in fact, exclusive places and segregated, whether they were black villages in the south or exclusively upper-class residential neighborhoods in London or Paris.

Although America already happens to be the most multicultural society in the world, we know that the world is moving in a direction in which people will be, at least bicultural and bilingual, perhaps even poly-cultural. Therefore, the way people live and the question of separate identity, which are crucial to the formation of the neighborhoods, are not really accounted for in that a body of precedents. An important challenge is to design without the precedents, try to really envision how one needs to invent, not the new urbanism, but the newer urbanism.

In regard to centers, they are where communities come together to feel

comfortable about themselves. They are where celebrations of who we are take place. I suggest the newer urbanism should look not only at centers but also at edges, critical places of friction in our society.

Ron Shiffman: I welcome the New Urbanism because it is reintroducing into the debate on cities throughout the country a sense of place and a sense of design that has been missing. I am a bit concerned, however, because when you look beyond the surface of New Urbanism, it begins to look purely physical and architectural. It tends to ignore a lot of determinants that shape cities, such as the race, gender and class discrimination that permeates our society.

When we talk about rebuilding and rehealing our cities we must realize that one of the biggest problems we have is the destruction of civic life. People don't know each other. They don't interact anymore because they have been alienated from each other. Much of this comes about because of the way we have allowed cities to form — the way we've allowed middle-class, white and upwardly mobile families to move out to suburban areas but have not offered low-income and single-headed households and minority groups the same mobility.

A lot of what we are hearing about is not “new” urbanism because it is a direct outgrowth of the participatory movement that began in the 1960s. One tends to think that when people are engaged in participatory planning or advocacy architecture, they will forget about design. That isn't the case.

Consider the preservation movement. It wasn't started by the architecture or planning professions. It started from the preservationists and community people who set out to preserve buildings and places to which they could connect. Who has protected inner-city neighborhoods from being destroyed, from allowing the Anthony Downs and Roger Starrs to plan them out of existence? It was the communities that knew the fabric that existed there and knew what could be built. It was communities that began to fight and create the entities that would preserve and rebuild those neighborhoods and the larger society.

Recently, a raging debate has taken place in New York City about a plan in the South Bronx that emerged from an extensive dialogue among designers, planners and neighborhood residents. Out of that dialogue came a very good plan that identified elements of urban design, quality materials and interactions that could rebuild a civil society as well as the physical environment. The design standards rejected the inferior quality of housing that has been built in our cities, as well as the suburbanization of our urban fabric, which doesn't build on the qualities of either urban life or suburban life.

That plan made its way all the way up to the City Planning Commission, but then was pronounced not fundable by the new city administration. The new administration tried to unravel what many people had carefully worked out. It tried to bring the plan back to a lowest common denominator.

The fact is, the process of engaging people in the South Bronx plan was a process of creating a new middle class. Cities have always produced middle-class people, we don't have to import them. We need to rebuild the institutions and the processes that create a new middle class.

Andres Duany: After being a rigorous practitioner of the public process, I have lost some confidence in it. When given the chance to make decisions, more often than not, citizens will make palpably wrong ones. They are usually against mixed use. They are always against higher density; they love five-acre zoning. For example, we have shown inner-city people town houses that they could afford, but instead they wanted single-family houses that we warned them would cost much more. The houses are built now, and people are protesting that their community cannot afford them!

The public process is not the answer. Things will not change until planners serve their cities so well that they are again trusted. People must know that most of the communities they admire, including the best of New York and many well-loved towns, did not just happen, planners shaped them. There was once a great deal of confidence in the planning profession. Planners were permitted to do the right things, quickly and efficiently.

Then in the '50s and '60s planners disgraced themselves, thanks to the influence of architectural inventions, and power was taken away from them. At public hearings now, our proposals often have less authority than the dog catcher's. Absolutely anybody can question what the planner says. Until confidence is restored by some real successes

and planners are allowed to implement the difficult decisions, a mob often decide against its best interests.

Shiffman: If we have a breakdown in our civil society, I don't care how well you design or how well egos make the final decision. That space will fail.

Duany: The New Urbanists work from a certain position of modesty: we invent nothing. We select successful models and emulate them. Urban inventions tend to fail and a city is too important to sacrifice to experiment.

Torre: One cannot really hope for a more rational and efficient and orderly process in the design of cities. The problem with that expectation is that it is utopian and undemocratic. Democratic processes that make cities are by definition inefficient because everybody has to be accounted for and things need to be sorted out. If we, as urban designers and planners, understood the messiness and complexity of the process and realized that it will lack efficiency, we would try to understand the kinds of physical forms that can respond to that kind of process, rather than long for the need or the forms that reflect ways of decision-making that are not democratic in structure.

Shiffman: To me you can't talk about utopia if you don't talk about democracy. I'm talking about a dialogue and a debate between the designer and the community. Out of that, a new level of design, a new level of thinking takes place. While citizens might want to be exclusionary, the dictators in this world do the same thing. I'd rather have a system of checks and balances that is democratic rather than a system of authoritarian decision-making. It's the dialogue and the debate that are critical.

Duany: The citizens will, in fact, close the drawbridge, oppose mixed-use and economic variety in housing, so we must fight them. I'm not the sort of

planner that does what the citizens dictate. We are not secretaries to the mob.

Planners must establish their technical superiority by truly understanding cities and gain, thereby, a certain respect. Perhaps, then, citizens overcome their instinctive fear. *Shiffman:* I always thought planners heeded what corporations told them to do. What has replaced the monopolistic tendencies of communism is not the citizens, it is the monopolistic tendencies of the Marriott chain.

Duany: One cannot do exactly what the developers say either. Planners must have their own center, their own principles that can resist both the developer and the citizen. Citizen empowerment is not the salvation. Councils were not assembled to be at the service of whatever group happens to be in attendance at a hearing to raise or lower its thumb. Our democracy is a representative form of government, there are elected officials and planning boards, and we should speak only to them. The citizens themselves are a distorting influence because they are specialists, just like traffic engineers are specialists. Their specialty is their own backyard and only rarely the community as a whole.

Andres Duany is a principal in Duany/Plater-Zyberk, architects and town planners, Miami.

Ron Shiffman is director of the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development and a member of the New York City Planning Commission.

Susana Torre is chair of the department of environmental design at Parsons Institute in New York City.