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Democracy and Urban Design: The Transect as Civic Renewal

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As urban design has attracted new interest over the last decade, critics and theorists have often warned of the dangers in overstating its power to effect social change. However, the question is rarely turned around: how could design play an intentional and active part in shaping the democratic character of the city? Since any intervention in the urban landscape has political implications, what are the possible connections between the practice of urban design and our aspirations for democracy and social justice?

On the whole, we have not done well with this question. The incorporation of citizen participation into conventional planning has had persistently paradoxical results. Since the 1960s, the proliferation of public interest and environmental groups, empowered by new mandates for public participation, has given citizens a significant role in land use and planning decisions. At the same time, participation has produced frustration, disillusionment, and cynicism on all sides, encouraging politics that are adversarial, hostile to negotiation and compromise, and frequently a significant obstacle to good planning and effective implementation of plans. As a result of the ways the current regulatory regime blends technical expertise, procedural requirements, and citizen input, the public process has reinforced some of the most socially and environmentally damaging tendencies of current development patterns while simultaneously undermining faith in government—and, more generally, in democratic process. We have created a regime that almost requires public-spirited citizens to mobilize as narrow-minded, single-issue reactionaries, and to engage in endless small battles just to ensure that whatever it is doesn't happen in their back yard.

Above: The transect can be used as the basis for a more publicly accessible planning process. These birds-eye drawings, created for a charrette in Louisville, Kentucky, by Seth Harry for Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, show the character of a typical street corner in different transect zones. Illustrations such as these may engage the public far more effectively than abstract zoning maps and charts.

In the course of six years of fieldwork that has included observing charrettes, public hearings, and other public discourse on planning and urban design, my research has revealed widespread reaction against this regime, apparent in efforts to reorient the politics of planning to concern for the quality of community life and for the preservation of the identity and character of places, and for plans that express substantive aspirations as they tame growth.[1] Much of this reaction has been catalyzed or given clear articulation by the New Urbanism, with its design-centered revival of concern for the qualitative experiences of traditional neighborhoods, streets, and public space. If we look beyond the New Urbanist imagery that critics sometimes mistake for shallow nostalgia, we can see that the manifestation of an urban ideal in popularly recognizable forms, along with the general emphasis on urban design as a practical medium in and through which we might realize collective aspirations, brings many of the central challenges of civic democracy into sharp relief. Whatever criticisms might be made of particular New Urbanist projects and proposals, the effort to revive an urban ideal can be understood as a practical version of a broader movement for civic renewal.

Popular reactions against the conventional development regime echo a wave of "civic innovation" over the last decade in connection with issues ranging from community development to regional environmental problems.[2] This movement seeks to reconfigure the connection of citizens to public life by challenging the dominant framing of key issues by political and professional elites. This civic innovation involves creating new organizational settings that engage diverse social interests on common ground, enabling them to recognize a common stake and responsibility for a shared environment. For example, "civic

environmentalism" has found alternatives to unproductive protest politics or top-down regulation by seeking solutions to complex environmental problems through extensive and substantive cooperation between partners who might otherwise find themselves caught up in an adversarial politics: citizen groups, professional experts, officials representing public administrative and regulatory bureaucracies, nonprofit organizations, and business or industry.[3] In contrast with simplistic ideas about expanding participation, theorists and activists alike emphasize the importance of a democratic capacity rooted in a pattern of civic association that bridges social differences, constitutes social capital, and provides a necessary civil counterbalance to the bureaucratic state and the effects of global markets.[4]

Planners interested in civic engagement have focused on the processes that build social capital, but often fail to realize that the problem isn't just a matter of improving engagement in the process. The problem of democracy is not just who wields power, but for what purpose. It isn't just inclusiveness that defines engagement as "civic," but a process that reflects "formative aspirations" that transcend the mere aggregation of individual interests.[5] In what ways might urban design be reconstructed as a new civic art, with an understanding of this old phrase in terms of current political challenges and in a way that engages the contemporary projects of democratic empowerment, environmental responsibility, and social justice? This is not a question that anyone seems to be asking directly.

In New Urbanist practice, the rural-urban transect has emerged both as an analytical approach to making sense of the diversity of places that make up human settlements, and as a technical framework for planning and form-based coding. This essay hopes to explicate the way a transect-based approach might integrate urban design into a more effectively democratic planning practice, avoiding some of the political pathologies of the current development regime. Because of the way form-based coding puts the transect into operation at the intersection of popular engagement, expert design, and technical/administrative rationality, it offers a practical coupling between vision and implementation, between a normative understanding of urban form and the often frustrating way that contemporary place-making relies on the contingent intertwining of private investment, market dynamics and public policy. Although it has not been explicitly linked to the politics of civic renewal, the transect may be the first step toward theorizing a practice of urban design capable of contributing to the substantive realization of a civic politics.

The Conventional Development Regime

In popular parlance, the problem is "sprawl," but this language captures only the land-consuming spread of development, not the underlying logic of a pattern of development that now affects redevelopment in the inner cities as much as new construction on the metropolitan fringe. The sprawling consumption of land is largely a side effect of the way the development industry has turned land into a commodity. In this complicated business, reduction of risk involves avoiding projects that don't fit standardized categories in an interlocking system of financing formulas, measures of market feasibility, product types, zoning categories, environmental impact assessments, and routinized planning practices. The overall logic of the conventional development regime is the unintended consequence of the way highly rationalized institutional domains are interlocked by mutually dependent decisions—each rational in its own terms, but not adding up to a solution that makes sense as a whole.[6]

Conventional zoning provides a clear example of the logic of the regulatory apparatus. In practice, as variances

and zoning changes are negotiated over time, the rational mapping of zones becomes a confusion of ad hoc adjustments in which the organization of uses and patterns of varying densities reflects the contingencies of land availability, market dynamics, and political bargaining—largely without regard to a geography that makes legible sense as an ecology of places and lived social space. From the standpoint of the administrative state, however, the abstraction of Euclidean zoning has crucial advantages. First, rules can be applied categorically, in a way that is responsive to the demands for procedural fairness crucial to a regulatory system oriented to maintaining not only property rights but real estate value. Second, the combination of single-use zoning with standardized real estate products makes impact assessments easier to render in comparable terms in a process continually under threat of litigation. Third, this method of regulation enables the coordination of public input with technical considerations in carefully structured public hearings that keep the unpredictability of public involvement within limits.

The so-called "public process," including carefully structured and legally mandated opportunities for "public input," has been incorporated into a regime that includes the organization of capital and the protocols of lending institutions, the apparatus of conventional zoning and land development regulations, and a professional division of labor between technical specialists. With the expansion of public participation since the 1960s, the balance between regulatory compliance and public process has shifted, especially in those jurisdictions where growth pressures have produced dramatic changes over the last two decades. As a result, a system of technical and administrative rules now increasingly carries the burden of channeling the mobilized political energy of popular reaction to the problems of growth. Popular mobilization latches on to legal and procedural technicalities as the only effective tactic to put the brakes on a development process that appears to be driven only by profit and private interests. Meanwhile, decision-making bodies, under tremendous fiscal pressures to support growth, find themselves operating in an intensified political atmosphere, under suspicion of influence by special interests, with the threat of litigation as a constant motivation for assiduous attention to the precise letter of the rules.

The introduction of environmental regulation into this process helps to exacerbate a displacement of politics within the regulatory apparatus. In the context of the public process, sincere and reasonable concern for the environmental impact of development is mixed with specific "not-in-my-backyard" (NIMBY) reactions, narrow self-interest, and a generalized fear of "out-of-control" development and environmental degradation. Public hearings, as one form of participation, have become a hybrid of technical expertise, legal argument, and public reaction. Each development proposal, each parcel of land, each tree can become a front-line skirmish in what often ends up being framed as a desperate battle to save the planet from greed and irresponsibility. The totalizing character of environmental rhetoric turns land use decisions into moral battles between irreconcilable opposites. An embattled planning staff, with limited personnel, resources, and narrowly defined technical expertise, often finds itself caught between the moral passions of citizens, the arguments of land use attorneys, and the testimony of dueling experts.

A process set up primarily to meet expectations of technical and administrative rationality, therefore, now provides the main institutional framing for the popular politics of land use. However, conventional planning practice tends to produce a system of regulations through lists of prohibitions and incentives. The result is that the process becomes a noncooperative game in which the players are motivated to optimize their position without regard to the broader consequences of particular tactics, undermining trust between actors and faith in the process as a whole. Even successful popular opposition to a proposal can produce a downward spiral in quality, as relatively responsible developers are replaced by the more aggressive and unscrupulous, and as the developers are driven to meet the absolute letter of the regulations in order to "meet the neighbors." Indeed, "meeting the neighbors" has become a telling euphemism for an unreasoning and intransigent opposition in a costly process where outcomes are completely unpredictable.

The intersection of the regulatory apparatus, with its particular operational needs, and the framing of land use decisions in terms of an epic conflict between environment and economy, creates a reactionary politics that often leads to political paralysis. Ultimately, this can only favor whatever passes as the status quo and spell defeat for any proposal (independent of quality or relationship to stated public goals) that does not slide easily through the routines and standardized protocols.

Stealth Democracy and Civic Design

Optimistic theorists have commonly argued that increased participation in democratic deliberation will produce better decisions, a more legitimate system, and a more sympathetic and public-spirited citizenry. However, researchers have found little evidence to support this wishful

thinking; indeed, the evidence indicates that participation in problematic processes will as easily produce cynicism, distrust, and a widespread desire to avoid being required to participate in political decision making processes at all.[7] People are most interested in what Hibbing and Theiss-Morse have called "stealth democracy," a process of governance that is usually invisible, with opportunities for imposing accountability when citizens feel the need.[8] What people really want is for participation to seem unnecessary.

The preference for stealth democracy rests on two mistaken assumptions that are often reinforced by experience with exactly the kind of participation offered by current planning. First, there is an assumption that the common good would be self-evident if only it were possible to clear away the confusion of special interests.[9] Second, there is the notion that since any specific plan for achieving a desired goal is as good as any other, dispute over the specifics is necessarily motivated by special interests.[10] Typical public hearings and forms of "public input" in the planning process tend to reinforce attitudes about the questionable motivations of politicians and the frustrating and unproductive character of the political process.

If citizens are to learn to engage in an effective democratic process of debate and compromise, they need to recognize that experts can disagree over goals and strategies in areas where there are value-driven choices to be made. They also need to be convinced that "details matter" when considering alternative approaches to important issues, and that details can matter for reasons that transcend particular interests.[11] In other words, the process of deliberation and decision making, with its detailed considerations, needs to be explicitly oriented to substantive concerns.

This is precisely one of the ways that a design-centered process can make a difference, at least in so far as the design process is a careful study of the ways that details can matter, and to the extent that the public can be engaged in this process. Discussions of the importance of design have tended to get caught up in the issue of whether design can cause changes in social behavior. This is a misleading question, however, because design is *already* social action. Places are not just containers for social life, but themselves social accomplishments—things we do together, with more or less coherence, purpose and self-consciousness.

Design matters first and foremost because it is a practice of organizing our intentions in a series of explicit decisions concerning those qualities of the world we choose to recognize as significant. Urban design may matter most to the extent that its "logic of action" is shifted from a practice of creating visual and social effects by manipulating urban form to a practice of engaging others in the cooperative game of place making.[12] Conceived in this way, urban design can link the sustained collaboration that gives coherent and meaningful form to diverse, complex places to a capacity for democratic self-government and the inclusive, vital, and open-ended quality of democratic culture.

Democracy and the Urban Ideal

An urban ideal is evident in the idealized neighborhood unit at the heart of much New Urbanist practice.[13] In contrast with the abstracted logic of Euclidean zoning, the neighborhood provides a concrete image of a combination of uses into a "balanced mix" relevant to the practical geography of everyday life. In New Urbanist practice, the neighborhood unit is not just a nostalgic image, but a paradigmatic representation of the core value of urbanism as a particular normative condition: the extent to which each house, each project built in a community, contributes to the completion of a street, neighborhood or town; to the achievement of emergent possibilities; to a history that gives the place depth and meaning; and to the richness, variety, amenity, functionality, and pleasure of a shared world. Ideally, this is to be achieved not by the hand of a single designer emulating historic cities or working scenographic effects by fiat, but as the cumulative effect of individual projects of diverse architectural type and stylistic expression—as an open conversation and not simply a scripted dialogue.[14] Even as the mix of uses in a place changes, even as unpredictable social changes take place, the distinctiveness and quality of the place can be maintained.

The imagery of the traditional neighborhood at the center of New Urbanist discourse, however, has contributed to the misperception that the New Urbanists are interested in only one scale and one kind of urbanism. In fact, the CNU charter explicitly emphasizes the importance of moving from the scale of the lot and block to the scale of the region.[15] In particular, the idea of a rural-urban transect offers a way to think analytically and systematically about neighborhoods, cities and regions as ecologies of diverse places in a way that makes explicit connections between issues of form, scale, geography, and social experience. The transect organizes empirical description of real places as built, experienced and lived, using a typological analysis that moves from the finest level of detail to the regional interlacing of human settlement and natural ecosystems. The gradient from rural to urban encompasses variations in the relationship between human settlement and natural conditions; in the articulations of public and private life; and in spatial morphology and building typolo-

gies associated with interconnected variation in managing relations of humans with each other and with nature.

As a transect-based analysis thus highlights ways that form matters at every level of scale, urban design acquires a clear purpose as a practice aimed at realizing the formative aspirations of a community. One of the key components in the production of urbanism is time—and the expectation that no planner or designer completes the process, only provides conditions for a collaboration that includes not only current stakeholders but future cohorts. Emphasis on form-based coding is one way to create a framework for the collaborative capacity necessary to sustain certain qualities of place over time, elevating common practice to a consistent level while not constraining either excellence or individualizing impulses. Any design intervention can be regarded as contributing to the history of the place, and as participating in an open-ended but still coherent, goal-oriented process. Urban design becomes a medium in which civic connection can be manifested in tangible form. At the same time, this also implies that a community has the political capacity to sustain the realization of a coherent urbanism, and come to terms with real divisions and conflicts in the community as it articulates a shared vision.

The idea of a transect thus enables urban designers to build a place-making toolkit out of precise community analysis. A transect-oriented planning process can frame the issues in terms of an articulated range of interconnected differences, establishing the ability to debate each decision in terms of principles operationalized at different scales. To put it simply, it allows us to understand each building, development project, or design decision as tied not just to individual utility but to a process for sustaining place value.

In the context of design-centered public process, such analysis can become the scaffold for effective public discourse, enabling citizens to learn what is at stake if a particular decision were to be codified. Citizens can make clear and principled decisions about what goes appropriately where, avoiding absolute prohibitions in favor of the question of where something might actually contribute to the emergent quality of a place. The combination of analytical clarity and the flexibility of a system of transformation rules enables a continually improvised urban order, reflecting not just the vagaries of the market or the randomly aggregated aspirations of individuals, but a civic sensibility that infuses each individual project with a sense of responsibility for a positive collective outcome.[16]

Refocusing on Design

In spite of the expansion of participatory opportunities over the last couple of decades, ultimately the form and character of urban development is determined by developers' ability to work through a highly politicized and unpredictable regulatory process with their bottom line intact. The conventional planning process often produces documents that are little more than summaries of vaguely defined goals, transcriptions of public comment, and broad policy recommendations—generally leaving implementation to the vagaries of negotiation between market-oriented entrepreneurs and bureaucratic regulators.[17] Meanwhile, the low-density, automobile-dominated patterns built into current zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, and conventional traffic design standards become the path of least resistance through the regulatory gauntlet. In a sense, the more "democratic" the public process seems to be, the less genuinely democratic the process of shaping the future of our communities has actually become. The conventional development regime has the effect of literally dis-placing politics, both in the sense that politics are removed from whole arenas of technical decision making, and in the sense that the politics of land use come to be increasingly about technical issues, rather than about the qualities of place.

Emphasis on a design-centered process has been reflected in the practice of allowing the public to engage the specific decisions about urban and architectural form in the context of a charrette, and broad efforts to establish a clear and collaboratively produced vision.[18] This is not to say that simply proposing an urban ideal will bring about a revival of civic life, much less resolve all the challenging issues of social justice and democratization.[19] There has not been explicit recognition of the ways that New Urbanist practice might more systematically engage the broader movement of civic innovation oriented to democratization, social justice, and environmental responsibility. Nor have the advocates of social capital and civic engagement generally recognized the potential importance of urban design.[20]

Designers and planners generally need to work with a more sophisticated understanding of the conditions and possibilities of democratic politics. We need to get past the naïve notion of democracy that makes us think that a process becomes more democratic simply by including more people in the meetings. In practical terms, communities need to build civic capacity around an understanding of the complex forms of human settlement, not simply as the reflex of market activity or the unintended consequence of regulatory policy, but as a clear and purposeful reflection

of a democratically constructed vision. Designers and planners need to face up to the political challenge implied in such a goal.

The shaping of the urban environment needs innovative solutions like those that have emerged over the last decade in connection to issues like watershed restoration and environmental justice. A design-centered and transect-based approach offers the possibility of a planning process capable of enabling effective engagement and constructing a sense of collective responsibility across even deep social and political divisions. At the same time, civic groups need to understand that cities might be made better on purpose, but that to accomplish this we need to get past the reduction of urbanism to social and economic functions apparently beyond our control and understand the ways that design can matter as a medium in which to recognize, articulate and realize civic aspirations.

Notes

1. An example of the latter would be the recent interest in "visioning" and vision-oriented planning.
2. Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America: Community Empowerment, Public Policy, and the Movement for Civic Renewal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
3. In *Civic Innovation in America*, Sirianni and Friedland provide a good summary of "civic environmentalism." See also William Shutkin, *The Land that Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty First Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).
4. Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994): and Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). For examples of this kind of civic renewal, see Robert Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).
5. Michael Sandel contrasts the "formative aspirations" of civic republicanism with the process orientation of the "procedural republic." See Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
6. For a detailed discussion of the standardization of product types in real estate, see Christopher Leinberger, "Retrofitting Real Estate Finance: Alternatives to the Nineteen Standard Product Types," *Places*, Vol.17, No.2 (Summer 2005), pp. 24-29; and "The Market and Metropolitanism," *The Brookings Review* (Fall 1998).
7. John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: American Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
8. As a result, many of the goods that we hope to come from participation—improvements in the quality of decisions, the legitimacy of government, and the character of its citizens—are not likely to result from simply expanding citizen involvement as long as the processes in which they are being asked to participate are essentially flawed.
9. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy*, p. 9. This assumption has been the underpinning of ideas about professionalized administration since the Progressive Era, and it is well entrenched in the popular imagination.
10. Hibbing and Theiss Morse, *Stealth Democracy*, p. 224.
11. This is a recognition that has been rendered increasingly difficult not only in planning processes, but by the general erosion of the discourse of "public spirited" action in American political culture. See Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
12. The phrase "program of action" comes from Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, "Don't Throw the Baby Out with the Bath School!" in Andrew Pickering, ed., *Science as Practice and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
13. For a more extended discussion of the two ideals implicit in New Urbanist practice, see David Brain, "From Good Neighborhoods to Sustainable Cities: Social Science and the Social Agenda of the New Urbanism," *International Regional Science Review*, Special Issue on Smart Growth and The New Urbanism (April, 2005), pp. 217-38.
14. It may be worth noting that this understanding of the urban public realm is an expression in built form of the classical notion of the public realm as a domain in which the individual competes for honor and recognition. See, for example, the discussion in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
15. Michael Leccese and Kathleen McCormick, eds., *The Charter of the New Urbanism* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2000).
16. It may also be a way to bring substance to vague and fragmented conceptions of "sustainability."
17. Even so-called "comprehensive planning" is typically reduced to the hammering of interested parties on a technical system that reflects no overarching vision. As one participant remarked, it suddenly occurred to him that nobody was asking the most basic question as the group went around and around in contentious discussions: "Planning for what?" Under such circumstances, the process tends to appear as a string of battles in a lost cause.
18. For an example of a regional vision, see Peter Calthorpe and William Fuller, *The Regional City: Planning for the End of Sprawl* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001). For a general discussion of the practice of the charrette, see Bill Lennertz, "The Charrette as an Agent of Change," in *New Urbanism: Comprehensive Report and Best Practices Guide* (Ithaca, NY: New Urban Publications, 2003), pp. 12-28.
19. See Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*, p. 230. The problem remains of articulating a political discourse that begins to explicate and resolve the tension between the ideal of creating a "sense of community" and a public-spirited political life, a public sphere capable of both encompassing and transcending differences. This is precisely the practical challenge posed in more theoretical terms by Iris Marion Young's revival of the idea of the city as a normative ideal in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
20. Putnam and others have recognized effects due to suburbanization, and have cited examples of urban revitalization like the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, but have not explicitly recognized the potential importance of urban design practice as a catalyst for civic spirit or a practical medium in which civic action might be realized with broad ramifications for building durable capacity as well as addressing pressing issues of social justice in the city.