

Designing the city: Reflections on the New Urbanism

by [Norman B. Bendroth](#) in the [June 20, 2001](#) issue

In the spring of 1976, I took my New Hampshire youth group to Philadelphia for the bicentennial celebrations. Not wanting to break the bank on hotels, we slept in a church hall in a suburb north of the city. There, for the first time in my life, I encountered row after row, block after block, street after street of identical beige cinderblock houses. Even the church we stayed in was beige cinderblock. I was appalled and remember telling myself, “If anyone suffers from an identity crisis, it must be these people.” I could easily imagine one of them walking into someone else’s home and thinking it was his or her own.

Today this phenomenon is described as urban sprawl and demonstrates that urban society includes both the central city and the surrounding suburbs. The Bureau of Census uses the term Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area to refer to a central city of 50,000 or more and its contiguous counties or towns. Thus, when the word urban is used it describes not only the central city but also an entire metropolitan area. Cities and suburbs are symbiotic; they rise and fall together.

Urban sprawl is a familiar concern in cities across the country, and it was an early item in Al Gore’s presidential campaign. While the suburbs have long been the target of social satire for their nondescript strip malls and cookie-cutter housing, only recently have city planners begun to look seriously at alternatives. A new breed of architects, planners and developers—known collectively as the New Urbanists—are questioning old orthodoxies. To understand why, we first need to understand the conditions that created sprawl.

After World War II, the mortgage policies of the Federal Housing Authority and the Veterans Administration focused almost entirely on the creation of 11 million new single-family homes. Most of these homes were built in suburbs, in part because the FHA did not make capital available to renovate existing structures or to construct row houses, mixed-use buildings or other types of urban housing. Furthermore, this

was the era of the automobile. Under the interstate highway program of the 1950s, 41,000 miles of new roads were created. Government subsidies were available for road improvement, while public transit was neglected. General Motors, Standard Oil and Firestone conspired to buy up many local urban transit systems, then shut them down to eliminate competition. The new highway system gave unprecedented mobility to the middle class, enabling workers to live in subdivisions on the edge of town and commute to jobs downtown.

During the 1960s and '70s, new construction became highly segmented. Following the design model of those years, shopping centers were put in one location, housing pods in another, and office parks in yet another. A matrix of collector roads connected these developments. Ironically, adjacency didn't necessarily mean accessibility. For instance, a homeowner living 50 yards from a shopping center might still have to get into a car, drive a mile to exit the subdivision, drive another half a mile on the collector road to the shopping center, park and walk to the store. What might have been a pleasant five-minute walk down a tree-lined street became a trek that used gasoline, required a roadway and took up space for parking.

Current critics of this kind of sprawl blame the engineers and the bureaucrats who codified everything—curb size, street widths and setbacks—and who zealously developed zoning laws that enforced segmented development. While it makes sense to separate heavy industry from housing, it doesn't make sense to outlaw mother-in-law apartments and corner stores in residential areas. Yet lending requirements and mortgage tax credits limited the flow of dollars to one type of housing “product.”

Thus, people used housing subdivisions strictly for residential purposes, shopping centers only for commercial uses, and office parks only for work. Instead of placing civic institutions where they would serve as magnets of social and communal activity, planners would put them on the margins. (Consider the vast regional high schools built on the edges of town, the office complexes located away from downtown, and the churches built next to freeway exits.)

The result was, and is, an inefficient use of land, segmented development that depended on an unsustainable infrastructure, and traffic congestion on the roadways needed to connect these “pods” of activity. Sprawl further exacerbated social isolation by excluding those who don't or can't drive, and created economic segregation by building housing developments according to exclusive income levels.

Taking pot shots at the burbs is as easy as shooting fish in a barrel. They are widely assumed to be, as in the movie *American Beauty*, dysfunctional, congested and socially isolating places. Urban activists blame the decay of our inner cities on “white flight,” which leaves once vital neighborhoods abandoned and siphons off tax dollars needed to solve the problems suburbanites leave behind. Environmentalists are equally critical of sprawl for gobbling up the landscape and endangering wildlife.

Just about everyone is a loser to sprawl. Children lose the opportunity to walk to the corner store, converse with the shopkeeper, make a purchase and count their change. Parents become part-time taxi drivers, and children can have difficulty developing independence. Teenagers lose opportunities to mature by interacting with diverse people and engaging new situations. Instead, they spend more time at the mall or in the car. (Traffic accidents continue to be the leading cause of death among teenagers.)

Another hidden cost of sprawl is that municipalities are often forced to underfund schools because money is diverted to maintain the infrastructure of roadways, extensive sewage and storm-drain systems, and substations. Commuters lose about 500 hours a year sitting in traffic on their way to work, school, home or the store. The poor lose too if they are car-less or there is inadequate public transportation to jobs at the perimeter of cities.

An awakened consciousness of the devastating affect the automobile has on the environment, the sheer ugliness of much of suburbia, the inefficiency of suburbs, and a growing discontent with civil coarseness and social isolation—these have combined to create a set of principles called the “New Urbanism.” The New Urbanists are not so much interested in slamming the suburbs and the suburbanites as they are in building better places to live. The enemy is not the bourgeois middle class that wishes to live outside the urban core, but a generation of short-sighted designers who discarded centuries of precedence on how to build livable, pedestrian-friendly and vibrant communities that exist in healthy relationship to the outlying countryside.

“The history of professional planning is a litany of failure,” says Andres Duany, one of the godfathers of the movement. “Since the 1950s, the planning profession has contrived to destroy our cities and consume our countryside.”

New Urbanists favor building neighborhoods (not housing developments) that contain mixed construction (residential and commercial), mixed-income housing, town centers and shared green spaces. Their principles are guided by six general rules. First, each neighborhood must have a center, a locus of activity and community identity—a gathering place where residents can rub shoulders on their daily round of activities, be it a common, a school building or a square with a drug store, market and hardware store.

A sensibly laid-out town or city would, in fact, have all of the necessities and pleasures of daily existence within a five-minute walk from one's home. You might have to use a bus or subway to go to the symphony, but you should not need to use a car to get a quart of milk, or to become a chauffeur for your children. In such a neighborhood, an automobile would be a convenience, but not a necessity. The elderly could stay in their lifelong neighborhoods by finding an apartment or smaller house once they've outgrown their single-family home. They could still have access to grocery and drug stores even when driving is no longer possible.

New Urbanists want streets to be places to walk, chat with neighbors, ride bikes and drive cars. Streets should be narrow and versatile, serving to slow down cars, not speed them up. The traditional grid pattern of most urban neighborhoods is the best way to achieve these goals. A network of straight streets at right angles gives drivers choices if the road they are on is clogged, as there are multiple paths between destinations. This is in stark contrast to the serpentine roads and cul de sacs of the typical suburban housing development, where drivers have only one route out of the development to a collector road. This same road also serves many other developments before funneling all traffic onto a main artery or highway. This kind of design limits the number of routes available and creates traffic congestion even though there is more road surface.

New Urbanists want buildings to be organized according to type and scale, not use. Thus, a coffee shop with apartments above it, a corner drug store, hardware store and grocery store can all be part of a neighborhood. Affordable, middle-income and high-income housing should be built in the same neighborhood and share a common vocabulary of building forms and materials.

New Urbanists also want special sites for special buildings. They argue that churches, libraries, town halls and schools should be the visual and actual center of public life. By having a prominent place in the neighborhood—at a terminating vista,

or at the end of a block—these buildings signal that communal space takes priority over commercial or residential places.

The New Urbanists are not without their critics. The libertarian Cato Institute has accused them of social engineering and of overregulating private property and new development. The first high-profile New Urbanist project (and also the setting for the movie *The Truman Show*) was Seaside, Florida, an 80-acre parcel designed by a Florida developer who wanted to re-create the fond memories of boyhood summers spent in quaint wooden cottages by the shore. When it opened, Seaside drew fire from liberals who viewed it as precious and contrived—another version of suburbia for the rich. They contended that the restrictions on design limited variety and encouraged the blandness they were trying to get away from. Wasn't this just a reworking of a Norman Rockwell fantasy of small-town America and an uncritical return to turn-of-the-century architectural forms?

If new Urbanism is such a good idea, ask other critics, why are so many older neighborhoods that follow its design principles in decline? And is there really a market for these kinds of mixed-use neighborhoods? Isn't the growth of segmented suburbia proof that people like suburbia?

Peter Calthorpe, a pioneer in the development of transit-oriented and “village” planning, agrees that earlier forms of the New Urbanism were largely new versions of sprawl rather than alternatives to it. They were often developed on suburban greenfields at relatively low densities and ended up being quite expensive, thus offering nothing more than another escape for the well-to-do.

But the New Urbanist movement has matured and distinguished itself, says Calthorpe, in accenting economic diversity and regionalism. Economic diversity calls for a continuum of housing styles and prices: affordable and pricey, small and spacious, rented and owned, studios and family housing. This means mixing all income groups and races by distributing affordable housing throughout all communities in a given region. In effect, wealthy suburbs would include affordable housing, and urban neighborhoods would house middle-class families. This tenet implies no more warehousing of the poor in the inner city and no more public housing projects in low-income neighborhoods. It calls instead for inclusionary zoning in the suburbs and scattered-site development of affordable housing throughout a region.

The notion of regional design has been out of fashion since Daniel Burnham's Chicago plan of the 1930s, but it is beginning to make a comeback in light of 21st-century exigencies of smog, sprawl and suburban ennui. The "Charter of the New Urbanism" describes the metropolitan region as "multiple centers that are cities, towns and villages, each with its own identifiable center and edges." A metropolis is a finite area with geographic boundaries defined by topography, watersheds, coastlines, farmlands, regional parks and river basins, otherwise seen as a connected corridor of human and natural habitation. Calthorpe argues that without attention to regional shaping tools such as urban growth boundaries, transit systems and designated urban centers, even well-designed development can flop. Without the constraints of housing diversity within neighborhoods and a regional design that navigates new investments, "the question of where new development should happen and who can afford it remains unanswered."

The notion that there is an ideal scale and shape of human community conducive to human flourishing invites theological reflection. It is linked to the biblical vision that the human community should be a likeness, however dim, of the City of God. At the root of Hebrew and Christian definitions of community is the idea of covenant. In this covenant, human beings bind themselves to God and one another, promising to make and keep obligations for the greater good of the community, not just for themselves. For this community to succeed requires self-restraint and the ability to say no to oneself for the sake of the common good. It also requires a reference point beyond the self—God, a higher good, an ideal—something that motivates self-denial and makes it worthwhile.

At the same time individual liberty cannot be so subordinated that all uniqueness is diminished. The success of communities requires balancing the human need for communal belonging and the need for individual freedom. It also requires a realistic assessment of human nature. The Christian vision reminds us that we should not become too sanguine about efforts to create the good society, nor should we be so skeptical as to never make the attempt.

That being said, one wonders at times if the New Urbanists romanticize "the old neighborhood." For every Pleasantville there is also a Hell's Kitchen and a Watts, places that do more to segregate and isolate immigrants and the underclass than they do to create community. Neighborhoods have also been places to draw sharp lines of turf to be protected.

One such example was reported in the pages of this journal a year ago. In Portland, Oregon, Sunnyside United Methodist Church, a poster child of the New Urbanist movement, held a Wednesday night dinner for the community, which including the homeless population. The purpose was to try to ease class tensions by bringing people of different income groups together for a meal. On Friday evenings the church hosted a coffeehouse for the homeless and recovering alcoholics. Programs included evangelism, anger management, Bible study and live music. Coffeehouse directors barred those who were visibly drunk or causing a public disturbance.

Apparently many residents in Sunnyside resented the presence of this population and the mess they left behind. They filed a complaint with the city, and an official stepped in, shut down the church's meal program and limited any public gathering, including worship services, to a maximum of 90 persons.

"A number of the concerns were very legitimate," said Tim Lewis, then pastor of Sunnyside. "Complaints about loitering and public disturbances had to be addressed." This was done during a large hearing before the city council, which eventually declared the city official's actions unconstitutional.

"Many of these young professionals are genuinely committed to re-urbanization until they encounter drugs and homelessness," said Lewis. "Urban reality challenges romantic notions about moving back into the city. As a culture they are very tolerant, but there was also an anti-Christian bias that would show itself at these meetings." At the end of the day, Lewis said, he was impressed by the outcome and the agreements reached between the church, the city and residents.

The vision of building mixed-income and mixed-race neighborhoods is appealing and profoundly biblical, but extremely difficult to pull off without a simultaneous educational or "consciousness-raising" project. Perhaps this project could become a place of cooperation between local churches and developers.

The New Urbanism suggests that if builders and planners proceed according to proper principles, sprawl and its attendant deformations of life would be severely diminished. On this point, the New Urbanists are perhaps a bit naïve about human nature. New Urbanism can also easily devolve into another niche for yuppies rather than becoming a new paradigm for fostering a civil society. The corrosive nature of human sin and unintended consequences always haunts such human projects.

Does good design create good people? Philip Bess, professor of architecture at Andrews University in Michigan and seminal thinker on these matters, says no and yes. Good design can foster and be an expression of community, but it cannot cause it. In the same way, good design cannot cause human happiness—but it can provide opportunities for it to flourish. A well-designed town or building creates a place for a community to recognize itself or to find itself. This process requires both time and care. In short, cities are made great because they are loved. If there is nothing particularly lovable about them—if they are ugly, poorly designed and socially isolating—then they will not foster community.

Early church leaders lifted up standards regarding the distribution of property and wealth that still have bearing on our subject. Clement of Alexandria in particular spoke of the dual principles of *autarkeia* and *koinonia*. *Autarkeia* is self-sufficiency. Because God is the owner and giver of all things (Ps. 24:1), all people should have the means to make a viable living that sustains them without dependency upon others. A viable living is not just “getting by,” but having enough to participate fully in life. Clement contended that property should be used to meet the basic needs of its owners. When those are satisfied, holding excess property while others are in need amounts to greed.

The principle of *koinonia* asserts that the purpose of property is the promotion of community. *Koinonia* puts a limit to absolute property rights. The owner’s right to determine the use of his or her property is limited by the needs of landless neighbors or those who live nearby. Without debating the best way to equitably distribute assets, the point remains that deep in the Christian tradition is the understanding that human communities exist to promote the “good life” for all, not just a few. This means allowing people to have access to the resources to create that life, as opposed to just “scraping by”—creating a community whose members take responsibility for one another.

To aspire to a new vision of the city and human community requires an eschatological hope. A vision means there must be a *telos*, something toward which we are being ineluctably drawn. The Christian understanding of the natural and cultural orders is that they are real, but unfinished and incomplete. We are restless with today’s cities and towns because they are not what they are supposed to be.

Our cities are filled with art and culture, halls of learning, gracious public gardens, stately buildings and concentrations of commerce. They are also smog-filled, traffic-

clogged, racially charged, economically segregated and aesthetically blighted. They have not yet become what they are going to be, but are a work in progress.

In the meantime, what might that city look like? Philip Bess describes the city he would like to live in as one “whose inhabitants understand and respect the cycles of nature; that in its practical pedestrian qualities is scaled to the physiology of the human person; that is economically healthy; that is more rather than less just, and more rather than less inclusive; that promotes individual human freedom, respect for the other, the life of the mind and the life of the spirit; that is beautiful.”

In the end, such a city is not the work of human ingenuity alone, but imitation of the Triune God, who is at once togetherness and particularity. We keep in communion with this God through mutual deference and love. Therein we might begin to shape a city that is both loved and lovely.