

Sprawled out: Rules for community building

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What kind of towns do people want to live in? It might seem like a vast, imposing question, but the answer is no great mystery to the New Urbanists, an impressive group of environmentalists, architects, designers and town planners who have been trying to teach developers what features of the built environment make a community attractive, livable and, well, a community.

For starters, the New Urbanists recommend “mixed use” developments. They want to revise zoning laws so as to allow some stores, offices and restaurants to be located close to residential areas. This enables people to walk to a coffee shop or grocery store. They also want a mix of housing (apartments as well as single-family homes, and residences for people of different incomes) so the community can include people at different stages of life—students and retired people as well as families. They want narrow, tree-lined, geometric streets, which are inviting to pedestrians and which serve to slow the speed of automobiles. And they want regular and predictable public transit.

What the New Urbanists abhor is the ambience of the typical subdivision that is populated exclusively by single-family homes built for people in the same income bracket. In such suburbs, they point out, homes are usually set well back from the curb and are invariably placed on curving (and disorienting) streets, which seek vainly to be picturesque and end up merely being hostile to pedestrians. These streets are linked by “collector roads” to the nearest highway. Such suburbs assume and enforce dependency on the car; they are designed to be driven through (sidewalks often don’t exist). These suburbs offer nothing interesting to walk through or to—no cafe, corner store or neighborhood library. Residents are forced to drive virtually everywhere they want to go, even if they are simply in search of a gallon of milk. Their errands take them to the collector roads, which inevitably become clogged with traffic as people escape their neighborhoods for the strip malls out on the highway.

The New Urbanist agenda is complex, as are the many elements that make up a neighborhood, but it is artfully spelled out in the recent book *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, by Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck. The subtitle carries the main point: the New Urbanists hate sprawl. But they are not issuing yet another lament about suburbia. In fact, the New Urbanists admire many suburbs. Their contention, rather, is that successful suburbs share many of the characteristics of small towns and urban neighborhoods: a certain density of population, an appealing integration of commercial and residential uses, reliable public transit, and interesting public spaces that invite pedestrians.

For the New Urbanists, the problems presented by the typical modern suburb are not only aesthetic ones, though the ugliness of sprawl deserves to be analyzed. Nor are they only environmental problems, though the way sprawl gobbles up land and demands ever-more highways and fuel-burning cars is a serious matter. The deepest problem with the sprawling suburbs is that they undermine community itself by isolating people by age and class and by offering so little opportunity for satisfying public interaction.

The message of the New Urbanists should be heard, especially in a time when there is much concern about the excessive privatization of our lives and about the declining rates of civic engagement (as in the “bowling alone” syndrome discussed in the previous issue of the Century). It is neither idle nor elitist to recognize that the built environment both reflects and shapes our sense of community.

Churches are not merely bystanders amid the suburban sprawl. Over the past few decades the physical location of churches in the landscape has reflected (and perhaps exacerbated) the increasing privatization of religious life. Whereas churches once stood alongside squares or parks or at vital community intersections, visibly confirming their central place in public life, they are likely now to resemble just another office building along the suburban highway. Zoned away from residential areas, they appear like one more commercial establishment, surrounded by its own parking lots, collector roads and quasi-pastoral landscaping.

Of course, churches must go where the people are. But insofar as they seek to be shapers of community, churches must care about how their physical presence supports, directly and symbolically, a vital public life.