Community in the New Urbanism: Design Vision and Symbolic Crusade

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The design strategy known as “The New Urbanism” is familiar parlance to anyone who keeps abreast of urban design trends. Part of the New Urbanism’s widespread appeal has been its invocation of “community,” a term which provides little actual practical or ideological direction, yet which is vague enough to embody everybody’s hopes. This essay analyzes the use of this term, along with the terms “tradition” and “urban,” as expressions of New Urbanist theory. Through the use of such value-laden expressions and criticism of rational planning, proponents of the New Urbanism have implied that social and economic integration will result from their projects. However, the movement’s attachment to these terms is largely aesthetic and self-serving; New Urbanist designs are neither communally conceived, traditionally constructed, nor urban. The essay demonstrates how New Urbanism’s use of the term community to imply social and economic plurality is largely symbolic, disguising continued advocacy of conventional real estate development practices. That the movement claims to remedy complex social and economic issues without serious consideration of nonmainstream populations amounts to a willful disengagement from issues of race, ethnicity and poverty.

“Bye-Bye, Suburban Dream: 15 Ways to Fix the Suburbs” read the cover story of the May 15, 1995, issue of Newsweek (Fig. 1). Recognition in a mass-circulation publication such as Newsweek confirmed that the group of architects and physical planners espousing the New Urbanist design vision had caught the attention of a mainstream audience. Indeed, in the last ten years almost every major popular publication has reported the story of the New
Urbanism as a solution to the supposed social ills of contemporary suburbs. Concurrently, professional and academic journals have featured an astonishing number of articles, not only about the built projects, but also about the books, conferences, and workshops that have disseminated the New Urbanist design vision. That vision, proponents assert, is simple: houses built at a higher density and offered at a wider price range than in most contemporary residential developments, a commercial corridor within walking distance of residences, an interlocking street system, sidewalks, and perhaps a transit station will facilitate more vibrant neighborhoods. With a little ingenuity and common sense, the proponents claim, these features can be incorporated into new developments to correct social and economic segregation and foster the sense of community missing in contemporary suburbia.

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The New Urbanism’s widespread appeal emanates from its all-enabling invocation of “community,” a term that provides little practical or ideological direction yet which is vague enough to embody everybody’s hopes. Although a general definition of community is difficult to pin down, social theorists have agreed it encompasses three distinct characteristics: social interaction between people, one or more shared social or cultural ties, and an area or territory context. From its initial designation as neo-traditionalism to its current incarnation as the New Urbanism, New Urbanism theorists have drawn upon the legacy of rational planning critiques to imply a link between the concept of community and their new suburban developments. They have not, however, given serious consideration to the social and cultural beliefs, values and norms suggested by the concept of community, particularly a nonmainstream traditional one. Nor have their projects actually been urban. Rather, the notion of community has been used in the New Urbanism to camouflage conventional real estate developments and development practices.

This essay does not review the individual physical developments of New Urbanism practitioners. Rather, it examines the New Urbanist vision through structured qualitative and quantitative analysis of language content. Content-analysis procedures create quantitative indicators to assess the degree of attention or concern devoted to particular issues. Inferences can then be drawn about the senders of a message and the message itself. Certainly, all perspectives and methods are representative of one’s own biases. Physical analyses are limited to physical phenomena and the reviewer’s inferences, and ethnographic analyses are limited to observed behaviors and the observer’s inferences. Similarly, any analysis involving media will be influenced not only by the reviewer but by the media’s presentation of the message. While it is true that editorial decisions have shaped the delivery of the New Urbanist vision, it is also true that this edited form is what audiences understand and value about the movement.

No doubt, many proponents of the New Urbanism would argue that any analysis of the movement should consider its built projects. Indeed, figure-ground, architectural, historical, or ethnographic analyses are very informative and useful. But the analysis presented in this essay focuses more narrowly on the content of the New Urbanist vision and the dissemination of that vision. Just as the idea of the New Urbanism has resulted in physical developments, so has it resulted in numerous articles, workshops, conferences, and modifications to local development policy. Although this form of analysis may not be entirely acceptable to proponents of the New Urbanism, its purpose is not to be antagonistic, but to assess critically the role of New Urbanist theory in the process of real estate development.

In this essay, the term “community” and its relation to the terms “tradition” and “urban” will be analyzed as expressions of New Urbanist theory. First, the meaning of community will be analyzed from the perspective of architects, planners, and real estate developers, as expressed in their respective trade journals. Articles in these journals have often inferred a link between the idea of traditional developments and the social and cultural promises of community that is ultimately self-serving to the professions involved. Second, a word-in-context analysis of the term community will be used to reveal the exclusionary nature of New Urbanist ideology.
Detailed study of the use of the term in the four principal New Urbanist books reveals that the primary focus of the movement is on physical aspects of project development, targeted to mainstream home-buyers. The emphasis on physical design provides a role for architects, acceptable to their professional peers, in the process of suburban development. The movement’s attachment to the notion of community is thus shown to be largely aesthetic and self-serving. In fact, New Urbanist designs are not communally conceived or traditionally constructed; nor are they truly urban. They stem from conventional development practices, not from social or cultural beliefs, values, or norms.

NEW URBANIST THEORY AS A CRITIQUE OF RATIONAL PLANNING

New Urbanist theory has depended on a criticism of planners and planning — particularly rational planning. Rational planning theory specifies that a planner should become aware of a problem, propose a goal, carefully weigh all alternative means of achieving it and their consequences, and then select among the means according to estimates of their merit. Once a strategy is implemented, unanticipated consequences may be dealt with through a feedback process to inform a new goal or modify the old one. Rationalist models tend to posit a high degree of control over the decision-making situation on the part of the decision-maker or planner. Direction comes from the top, and planners, by implication, wield a great deal of expertise and authority.1

Criticism of rational planning theory has tended to be directed at the limited human capacity for anticipating all alternative goals, means and consequences.2 Critics have also pointed to the inadequacy of the model in addressing the needs of disenfranchised populations. The rise of interest in traditional building forms and settlements stemmed from a critique of development theory, a derivative of rational planning.3 Roughly thirty years ago, with an eye toward the relationship between the social and physical position of minority populations, social activists and cultural geographers began to point out that oppressive social phenomena were being physically mapped on the landscape, and they identified the totalitarian ideals of top-down, centralized planning as one of the causes. Eminent domain, slum clearance, and single-land-use zoning — practical tools aimed, in part, at segregating populations by class, race and income — were criticized by sociologists and advocacy planners in the United States for fueling suburban flight at the expense of urban, often minority, neighborhoods.4 Similarly, in developing countries, planners were criticized as working for the state to advance the interests of elites, while paying little attention to the needs and beliefs of native or indigenous populations and traditional settlements.5 Critics pointed to the inability of rational processes of Western science to provide the kind of knowledge necessary to build and maintain culture and community in developing countries.6 Observers of urban neighborhoods and traditional settlements stressed the intricate and often supportive social relationships beneath the drab and sometimes violent exterior of these areas in order to emphasize the legitimacy and complexity of the workings of community among disenfranchised populations.

In imitation of these critiques, New Urbanism theorists have blamed rational planning for creating a deficient contemporary landscape. They claim that post-war suburban planning left a legacy of monotonous, suburban “sprawl” which segregated suburban dwellers economically and socially. The movement’s theorists further argue that contemporary planning methods such as building codes, single-land-use zoning, and hierarchical street design were the direct outcome of a rational ideology, the physical effects of which now appear as wide streets, cul-de-sacs, segregated land uses, and minimal public space. The social isolation many suburban dwellers experience, the theorists claim, has worked against the development of a sense of community. New Urbanism seeks a remedy by counteracting the physical imprint of rational planning.

In short, New Urbanism theorists have co-opted the expressions of previous socially oriented critiques of rational planning and turned them inside out. Rather than pointing out that the destruction of community has occurred through the destruction of traditional settlements or urban neighborhoods, they have argued for creating community through the design of new developments they describe as traditional or urban. Their use of certain words and phrases readily associated with pluralist perspectives has led many to infer that the movement is founded on concern for incorporating a variety of social and cultural needs, beliefs and values into these new developments. But the key to the New Urbanist strategy has been to rely on creating only the appearance of these values through the use of imagery described as traditional or urban. Along the way, the expression “community” has been used to obfuscate the centralized, top-down methods required to implement New Urbanist projects and the inability of New Urbanist theory to accommodate a pluralist perspective.

NEO-TRADITIONALISM: JOURNAL DISCOURSES AND THE THEORETICAL GENESIS OF NEW URBANISM

Articles on the neo-traditionalist design movement first appeared in professional journals serving architects, developers and planners. Early on, observers of the movement associated with these journals inferred a link between the idea of traditional developments and the social implications of community, and they sought to pinpoint the relevance of the New Urbanism for their professions. Analysis of how the notion of community was viewed through the lens of these specialized professional journals demonstrates how the movement served the interests of each group and later shaped the presentation of the movement by mainstream publications.
Architectural Journals

Among architecture publications, the first use of the expression “neo-traditional” to describe a type of development occurred in a 1984 article in the British journal Architectural Design by architectural critic Charles Jencks. In its original context, the term was primarily concerned with building form and architectural style, with little regard for questions of social pluralism and multiculturalism. When Jencks originally described the concept of neo-traditionalism, he categorized it as a subset of the Post-Modern Architecture movement. The varied, old-fashioned aesthetic of neo-traditional projects appeared at the time to present an alternative to the much-maligned totalitarian image of Modern Architecture. But through the presentation of neo–traditionalism as the opposite of Modernism, neo-traditional design soon also came to con-note community in architectural trade magazines.

The association between neo–traditionalism and community was also assisted by the presentation of an Urban Planning Citation to the Seaside development, designed by the architectural firm of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (DPZ), from the now-defunct journal Progressive Architecture (P/A) (Fig. 2). The architects described their design intention as “refo-cusing on traditional American urban typologies, specifically that of a small Southern town before World War II.” DPZ proposed a strategy involving a mixture of building uses, organized on a street grid around a central public space. Such a mix of residential, retail and office space, the architects claimed, would allow people to walk to work and facilitate a population mix resembling that of a traditional small American town. However, the article gave no explanation from the architects as to exactly how this population mixing would occur. Rather, the jury seemed to accept the social processes suggested by the architects as part of the expression of the traditional aesthetic.

The architectural press applauded DPZ’s ability to control future building form, and by implication “community,” through their building design codes in Seaside and subsequent projects. Architecture journals reported that Seaside’s design codes and site plan assured that the neo-traditional image would be maintained by discouraging “mediocre suburban building” and “encouraging architecture.” They supported this point of view by featuring houses built at Seaside and designed by famous architects. Other projects designed by DPZ, such as the Kentlands in Maryland, Windsor in Florida, and the commercial development of Mashpee Commons in Massachusetts, also appeared in feature-length articles. Several articles mentioned that design workshops allowed local residents to determine design guidelines and provide input about project appearance. Although the articles discussed building codes, the photographs and drawings emphasized building appearance (Fig. 3). In May 1989 P/A’s cover story, “Reordering the Suburbs,” featured DPZ’s Traditional Neighborhood District prototype development model with Peter Calthorpe’s similar Transit Oriented Development. Both models were described as providing “a benevolent form of social engineering,” and so reiterated the idea that social interaction and behavior would result from the design codes.

Since the role of an architecture journal is to present architectural design, particularly buildings designed by archi-
tects, it follows that DPZ’s use of design codes to shape new developments was the primary interest of the journals. But the early attention to the neo-traditional concept by architecture magazines also suggested that the profession saw potential in the movement in other regards. Control over the design of buildings and site plans for subdivisions excited a profession that had long dismissed suburban development as a realm of developer-built mediocrity and blandness. In addition, since neo-traditional expression began as a subset of the Post-Modern style in architecture, its vaguely historical image served as a counterpoint to the streamlined and functional images of Modernism. Architects’ identification of Modernism as a totalitarian controller and oppressor of community allowed architecture journals to present the neo-traditional image and the notion of community as interrelated.

Real Estate Journals

The second group of journals examined in relation to the rise of neo-traditionalism were those serving the residential development industry. Here, neo-traditionalism was seen first as a promising real estate development concept in an increasingly competitive market. Two years after Progressive Architecture presented its Urban Citation to Seaside, Builder magazine, in its 1986 award issue, featured Seaside as “The New Town Built The Old Ways.” The journal praised the project for its high level of construction and design detail and pointed out the financial success of its developer, Robert Davis. In 1988 the journal also featured the DPZ-designed Kentlands development as an example of how to apply the Seaside “neo-traditional” concept to a truly suburban environment (FIG. 4). Then, in January 1990 Builder featured several projects that were then under construction, designed by the architecture firms of DPZ and Calthorpe Associates. The article outlined five characteristics common to neo-traditional proposals: a mixed-use core within “walking distance” for most residents; employment centers providing residents the opportunity both to live and work within the development; street life created by pedestrian-friendly environments with narrow streets, wide sidewalks, and many street trees; a sense of community created by building public spaces and civic centers; and a sense of tradition created through building design guidelines requiring front porches, detached and setback garages, and “granny” flats. The reviewer described each physical characteristic as being necessary to bring about an imagined behavior or social action. Not surprisingly, however, the journal focused attention entirely on issues concerning project development, rather than social reforms.

In subsequent articles, both Builder and another widely circulated development journal, Urban Land, presented the potential pros and cons of the neo-traditional concept. Urban Land claimed that the neo-traditional ingredient of higher-density residential development could offer a palatable strategy on both coasts to offset the high costs of land, infrastructure, social services, and environmental mitigation. It also pointed

![FIGURE 3. These representations of the Town of Windsor, a vacation development in Florida, demonstrate the connection that architecture journals anticipated between building design guidelines and building appearance. Reviewers in the architecture journals applauded the architects’ use of building design guidelines to assure their “traditional” design vision and, by implication, their vision of “community.” (Source: Progressive Architecture, June 1992.)](image-url)

![FIGURE 4. The reviewer described the Kentlands development, pictured here, as breaking “every code in the book” to successfully achieve community through mixed building types and traditionally styled architecture. When finally built, however, the Kentlands development did not include commercial buildings adjacent to residential development, and the housing types were not as varied as originally intended. (Reprinted from the September 1988 issue of Builder magazine. Copyright Hanley-Wood, Inc. Reprinted by permission.)](image-url)
out that in a slow real estate market, the neo-traditional concept might appeal to discriminating home-buyers looking for a lifestyle component to their investment. From this point of view, the neo-traditional concept could be aimed either at a clientele who preferred older neighborhoods and small towns or at home-buyers uncomfortable with the image of suburban life. Concerns over the neo-traditional premise of mixing housing types, densities and prices, however, was reinforced when Builder presented results from a consumer survey suggesting that a mixed neighborhood was not desirable to about two-thirds of home-buyers. Urban Land confirmed the industry’s skepticism of the neo-traditionalist claim that the suburban dream of large lots and detached houses was fatally flawed by pointing out that houses on cul-de-sacs still sold well.

Although Seaside sent the hopeful message to the home-building industry of an untapped customer market, reviewers were hesitant to endorse the neo-traditionalist movement wholeheartedly. The development trade journals instead focused on the physical differences between the neo-traditional concept and conventional subdivisions. Although developers were intrigued by the mixed-use component of neo-traditional design, market studies suggested that home-buyers primarily considered cost and size when making home-purchase decisions. Thus, the journals’ uneasy presentation of neo-traditional developments reflected a “wait-and-see” attitude. The journals did, however, identify a potential target market: suburban home-buyers looking for a lifestyle component to their housing purchases. And although they did not explicitly question the validity of the relationship between social interaction and physical form, they did recognize the beneficial social implications of the term community as an important enticement to home-buyers.

Planning Journals

Among the third group of journals studied, those devoted to planning, neo-traditional design was not featured in an article for more than five years after the first article in an architecture journal. Perhaps the late entrance of a planning voice to the neo-traditional conversation can be attributed to the neo-traditionalists’ harsh criticism of planners and post-war rational planning. From the point of view of the planning journals, the criticism that rational planning had destroyed community tapped into a long-standing professional insecurity. The subsequent defensive tone of articles reporting on neo-traditional developments can thus be seen as reflecting a guilty conscience on the part of planners who had for years been accused of facilitating mediocre suburban development.

The title of the August 1989 article in the American Institute of City Planners journal, Planning, “Repent, Ye Sinners, Repent,” reflected these harsh criticisms (FIG. 5). Although the article adopted a tongue-in-cheek tone to defend against the allegations of neo-traditionalists, the story elicited a barrage of letters from readers, debating the validity of neo-traditionalist accusations. Zoning and the rigid dictates of traffic engineers constituted the most frequently cited issues. Many readers agreed with the neo-traditionalist critique that single-land-use zoning had caused segregation by class and income. But one letter claimed developers and traffic engineers, not planners, were to blame for the appearance of suburbs. Overall, readers did not question the underlying premise that social factors could be addressed by physical solutions. Both the journal’s editors and the authors of the letters it published presumed a connection could exist between community and neo-traditional design, and they concentrated on defending the institution of planning from further attack.

After the initial appearance of the neo-traditional concept on the pages of Planning in 1989, related articles soon followed on “converting the traffic engineers,” street design, mixed-use zoning, and individual neo-traditional developments then under construction. Several articles presented the pros and cons of specific features of neo-traditional projects, such as design controls and street layout. Others discussed planning issues raised in the process of neo-traditional projects. Such “reports” described zoning variances, density bonuses, and other special procedures required to implement neo-traditional projects. They maintained a procedural, apolitical tone, never questioning the implied social premise of community behind the neo-traditional concept.

As practitioners of a profession born out of social reform, planners imagine that their activities further the public good. However, the neo-traditionalists’ accusation that planning had destroyed community in the suburbs echoed earlier accusations of rational planning by socially minded critics. Planners were
thus drawn to the neo-traditionalist idea both out of a sense of guilt over past practice and a belief that planning could still play an important role in addressing social ills. Moreover, a strategy that claimed to create community simply through physical alterations to subdivision street layout and building density offered a new rationale for the use of existing professional tools such as zoning variances and density bonuses. In short, the belief that community could be achieved through neo-traditional developments offered planners a way to expunge their guilt over previous suburban development without requiring them fundamentally to change their role in the development process.

The brief review of architecture, real estate development, and planning journals above shows how each of these professional groups accepted the neo-traditionalist inference that the social or cultural benefits of community would emerge from new development patterns. However, it also shows that all three groups were primarily concerned not with developing new communitarian values, but with the physical appearance of the neo-traditionalist product. This overconcern for the physical aspects of community formation points to one of the main shortcomings of the neo-traditional concept: its lack of engagement with the idea of settlement as a social and cultural process.

CRITICISING THE NEO-TRADITIONAL CONCEPT

Criticism of neo-traditionalism's shortcomings began to emerge in the early 1990s when some observers questioned the validity of applying the term traditional to new residential subdivisions. Some scholars pointed out that the tradition invoked in the neo-traditional projects reflected a presumption of physical determinism. Others emphasized that the entire neo-traditional concept could not exist without the geographic "otherness" of the suburb. Critics also noticed that neo-traditionalists appeared to be as convinced of a singular ideological solution to urban planning as had been the Modern architects they panned. Several planning columnists, wary of architectural treatises, echoed such criticisms, warning against universal solutions, and calling instead for proposals tailored to their social and environmental contexts.

The harshest critique of the use of the term traditional, ironically, came from within professional architectural circles. In July 1993 an entire issue of *Architecture New York (ANY)* was devoted to a roundtable discussion among well-known architects, critics, historians and theorists entitled "Seaside and the Real World: A Debate on American Urbanism." As part of the discussion, questions were raised as to whether it was possible to extrapolate the development of Seaside, a resort, to more general suburban conditions. Architect Peter Eisenman argued that the neo-traditional movement was most interested in design ideology and style. He and fellow attendees critiqued neo-traditional planners by observing that architecture and design alone could not change social conditions, and that any claim of returning to "good old design" was paternalistic and simplistic.

By the 1990s it was also becoming apparent that neo-traditional developments were proving difficult to build. In particular, developers' difficulty providing a mix of residential and commercial land uses placed one of the crucial, defining features of the movement in jeopardy. Once-hopeful developers kept a tentative eye on the movement, as the developers of two projects, The Kentlands in Maryland and Laguna West in California, went bankrupt, confirming the concerns of many real estate analysts that the neo-traditional concept was not appealing to home-buyers.

Criticism of neo-traditional imagery as nostalgic, much of it from within architectural circles, also played a part in a retreat from the use of the term traditional. And while neo-traditionalist advocates claimed they only wanted to "give the middle class what it wants," scholars and critics accused the group of appealing to a concept of tradition held only by upper-middle-class whites. Meanwhile, skeptical developers came to believe that the financial problems of the neo-traditional developments then underway proved that the middle-class was not as enamored of the concept as were the advocates themselves. Under attack, proponents of neo-traditionalism reaffirmed their commitment to bringing community to the suburbs. But they evaded further debate on the issue of tradition by emphasizing their anti-suburban mission and focusing instead on the terms "urban" and "urbanism." Although the movement's semantics changed, actual project content did not.

THE NEW URBANISM: EVOLUTION OF A CONCEPT AND DEVELOPMENT OF A PRACTICE

In 1994 publication of the book *The New Urbanism: Towards an Architecture of Community* helped rebut a growing number of accusations that the movement was based on a narrowly defined interpretation of tradition. In this defining work, editor Peter Katz described the movement's change in terminology as a way to create common ground between DPZ's traditional developments and similar projects by other architects such as Peter Calthorpe. By invoking phrases such as "urban villages" and "urban communities," made famous by sociologist Herbert Gans and journalist Jane Jacobs, New Urbanism theorists were also able to associate the concept of urban with the word community in a context familiar to architects and planners.

However, acceptance of the expression "The New Urbanism" among professional journals and mainstream periodicals was uneven. Architecture journals accepted the change, and continued to present the New Urbanism as a design solution to the suburbs. But planning journals did not respond to the name change until more than a year later. And development and real estate journals continued to refer to the move-
ment as neo-traditional planning. For their part, mainstream periodicals used both the neo-traditional and new urban nomenclature and emphasized the idea of restoring community to the suburbs. The uneven acceptance of the new terminology suggested the uneven appeal of urban connotations.

Some educated guesses can be made as to why certain journals resisted the change in semantics. First, developers and planners knew quite well that New Urbanist developments were actually suburbs. Although street layouts and widths were modified and houses were built closer together, the developments still required a developer and a builder and were marketed through existing real estate channels. Thus, articles in developer journals still focused on buyer appeal and the difficulties of guiding such projects through the development process. And planning journals continued to review neo-traditional projects as they passed through the planning approval process. And planning journals continued to review neo-traditional projects as they passed through the planning approval process. But from a developer’s or a planner’s point of view, neo-traditional developments, by any name, remained new residential subdivisions. A second reason for resisting the change in name may have been that developers, in particular, understood that the term urban did not have favorable connotations for many potential home-buyers. Unlike architects and planners, who sympathized with commentaries such as that of Jane Jacobs on the need for a mixture of building types and uses within a truly urban community, developers understood that many home-buyers sought out suburban settings precisely to escape perceptions of street crime and uncertain property values associated with urban neighborhoods. Coupled with this, they feared that the mixed-use requirement for neo-traditional developments was not necessarily a desirable feature for many home-buyers. Thus, commercial development generally remained unfeasible, and even though some developers offered a modest range of house prices in their neo-traditional developments, the vast majority of these houses were still single-family detached units for sale, not for rent (FIG.6). Despite their resistance to certain aspects of the New Urbanist vision, however, developer and real estate journals did continue to refine the life-style component of the neo-traditional concept, placing great emphasis on the idea of building a community — just not an urban one. That mainstream periodicals and newspapers also continued to use the name neo-traditional only reinforced the resistance to switch terminology. As recently as December 1997, the New York Times Magazine was still referring to New Urbanist planning as a “new traditionalism.” Concurrently, however, articles appeared in Time, Newsweek, Wilson Quarterly, and The Atlantic Monthly, among other sources, that referred to the movement as the New Urbanism.” It seems that although mainstream publications have chosen to refer to the movement as the New Urbanism, they have described its buildings and projects as neo-traditional. Despite this confusion in terminology, almost all mainstream articles have presented New Urbanism as working against powerful forces of planning-and-zoning law to infuse suburban developments with community (FIG.7). More recently, however, as developments designed by New Urbanism practitioners have reached fruition, a few commentaries have managed to focus on the new residents to determine if this community actually exists. And a few articles have pointed to the emergence of political tensions, raising the question of whether New Urbanism practitioners have been capable of...
delivering the sense of community they promised.

To spread their movement, proponents of the New Urbanism have engaged in many activities beyond merely publishing books and articles. In 1994 New Urbanist architects and theorists formed the nonprofit Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU). CNU outreach now consists of facilitating large annual congresses, fielding press inquiries, and disseminating information to financial decision-makers, developers, builders, governments, and professional associations. Toward this latter goal, CNU holds workshops and information sessions to inform developers and planners of New Urbanist design goals. Attendees at these events are encouraged to promote new developments as communities rather than mere houses. Workshop participants have included developers, planners, architects, and local-government employees, many of whom control the reins of future development or are potential clients.

The New Urbanist promise of community is now embedded at all levels of the development process. Architecture journals have used the promise of community through design guidelines to justify the services of architecture firms to planners and developers. The Congress for a New Urbanism has augmented this effort by disseminating the group’s strategy through marketing and development workshops. Planning journals have used the social implications of facilitating community through New Urbanist planning to expunge planners’ previous unease over aiding suburban development. All the while, such a stance has allowed planners to maintain their existing role in the development process. And developers have used the appeal of community to target the neo-traditional concept to suburban homebuyers looking for life-style amenities. Finally, as recent articles have pointed out, the concept of community has succeeded in attracting a self-selected group of residents to New Urbanist developments. But nowhere have the real issues of social or economic segregation that New Urbanism theorists claim to be solving really been addressed.

THE THREAD OF COMMUNITY

As New Urbanism theorists have attempted to shift their focus away from the concept of neo-traditionalism and toward an emphasis on urbanism, their invocation of the term community has increased. The acceptance of the term has much to do with the nature of the expression itself. Social theorist Raymond Williams once pointed out that suspicion should attend any use of a term, such as community, whose meaning is rarely negative. Certainly, no one would ever want to be known as speaking or acting against the community. Yet, because the term carries so many meanings, its intended usage often passes unquestioned.

The concept of community has been one of the primary concerns of social theorists since the industrial revolution began to change fundamental social relationships. Part of the problem stems from nostalgic attachment to an idealized notion of community embodied in a village or small town. Here, human associations are often characterized as gemeinschaft — that is, intimate, familiar, sympathetic, mutually interdependent, and reflective of shared social consciousness. Such a condition is often contrasted to relationships that are gesellschaft — that is, casual, transitory, without emotional investment, and based on self-interest. According to the nostalgic notion of community, the requirements of communal existence can be met only within the confines of a limited, shared physical territory.

An alternative, less restrictive conception of community does exist, which can accommodate the persistence of community in highly mobile, urbanized societies. It argues that community can be achieved independent of physical arrangements when social networks exist that are sufficient to sustain a quality of interaction and association. In a 1955 content analysis of 94 definitions of community in sociological literature, Hillary discovered basic consensus on only three definitive elements: social interaction between people, one or more shared ties, and an area context. Of these three elements, area or territory was the least necessary to achieve a high level of consistency among definitions of community. Although many other definitions of community have been advanced in the decades since this analysis, the dominant discriminating element and point of debate remains the role of territorial and physical arrangements.

By examining the four principal books written by New Urbanism theorists, the term community can be isolated in context to draw attention to the variation or consistency in its meaning and identify how it has been used to structure the
vision of the New Urbanism. The books examined were those written and edited by Douglas Kelbaugh, Alex Krieger, Peter Calthorpe, and Peter Katz. Three of the four are edited collections of essays written by proponents of the movement. Those by Kelbaugh and Krieger were published during the early, neo-traditional, period; those by Calthorpe and Katz were published after the Congress for a New Urbanism was formed. All four books were intended for architects and architecture buffs — readers generally more interested in the visual aspects of architecture as art than the more technical or financial aspects of building and construction. The publications should be considered examples of architectural culture, not academic texts. They should also be understood as manifestos, or collections of ideals and beliefs, rather than critical analyses or histories of suburban development.

In conducting the review of the use of the term, each appearance of the word community in the four books was categorized according to the three definitions identified by Hillary: physical territory, social interaction, and common bonds. Such categorization revealed that the New Urbanist vision is highly exclusionary, focused largely on the physical aspects of settlement. One might infer from this that New Urbanist theory uses the concept of community to distract attention from what are, in effect, conventional development practices. That the frequency of the term increases in each volume indicates that New Urbanism theorists have discovered that this expression resonates with a variety of interest groups, including architects, planners, developers, and potential home-buyers (FIG. 8).

**Community as Physical Territory**

The contextual definition of community which appears most frequently in the four books is that of a physical locality, specific territory, built development, or building type.

“Members of its planning team are committed to building a community that is ecologically and economically viable within a framework of strict controls” is one example of how the term may be used in this sense. As an adjective, the term may also be used in the books to describe buildings or shared facilities: as in “community building,” “community center,” or “community clubhouse.” The widespread appearance of the term in this contextual definition stresses the purely physical and architectural concerns of New Urbanist theory.

In terms of implied value, while community as a territory does in a few instances carry a neutral or slightly negative connotation — such as “bedroom community” — it is almost always used positively. The terms suburb, suburbia and subdivision, on the other hand, almost always appear in the pejorative. In fact, the two terms are often used in direct contrast to one another. In general, use of the term community, rather than suburb or subdivision, serves to differentiate New Urbanist developments from conventional suburbia, and to reiterate the CNU’s efforts to sell communities rather than merely houses.

**Community as Social Interaction**

The second definition of community is that of social interaction, best described as fellowship or a sense of belonging. Although this use tends to be more variable than other definitions, some very informative contextual patterns emerged from the analysis of the term’s use in this sense in the four books. Generally, when New Urbanism theorists use community to describe social interaction, the word acts as a dependent variable to physical surroundings. Either community is caused by New Urbanist design requirements, or it is destroyed by conventional development. Such usage highlights the logical fallacy of physical determinism in New Urbanist theory.

The following quotations illustrate the dependence of community, construed in this sense, on physical requirements. The first shows how New Urbanism theorists often claim that physical guidelines alone — in this case narrower streets — will create social interaction or a sense of belonging:

> Today, such streets would be practical, not merely nostalgic: practical for single parents in need of some mobility for their kids; for the elderly without a car; for the single person looking for accessibility; and for the working family looking for a stronger community.⁵⁵

In addition to highlighting the stark physical determinism of the New Urbanism, such uses (which imply that belonging will materialize from built features such as narrower streets) assure New Urbanist designers a role in future development. The second example shows how the theorists often claim that contemporary physical development and building has threatened social values:

> The result of this growth and development has been a wholesale transformation of American metropolitan life, in which traditional concepts of community, civic place...
...and neighborhood have been either overrun or severely threatened."

Such a singular emphasis on physical growth and development as the agent of change in metropolitan life leaves little room for the effects of social, economic or technological change. In fact, the quotation suggests that physical growth and development alone changed social values. Again, by pointing to the physical imprint of development as the sole culprit behind the demise of community, proponents of the New Urbanism have positioned themselves as the providers of expertise for future development. This usage further demonstrates how New Urbanist theory allows its supporters — architects and physical planners — to justify the need for their services in the design of future subdivisions.

Community as Common Bonds

The final definition of community is indicated by phrases such as “the architecture community,” “the larger community,” or “the preservationist community.” It denotes a socially defined or interconnected group associated through interest, profession or culture. Considering that the New Urbanism’s primary concern is physical design, it should come as no surprise that this definition occurs least frequently in the four books. Examination of the type of imagined shared ties, however, does provide insight into the nature of the groups about which the New Urbanism is concerned. Shared professions (“the planning community”), shared culture (“the American community”), and shared demographics (“the elderly community”) are several representative examples of how the term is used in this category. There is almost no mention of ethnic or minority groups or low-income populations. Such a use occurs only three times across the four publications. Despite such lack of attention, however, New Urbanism theorists regularly speak as if their developments will integrate various types of residents, as illustrated by the following quotations:

All of these proven options from the past [referring to physical elements of New Urbanist projects] seem again suited to the needs of a diverse society."

We must find regional and neighborhood forms which can honor the needs of our diverse population, while safeguarding the environment."  

The full range of housing types and workplaces helps to integrate all age groups and economic classes."  

Theorists of the New Urbanism clearly intend to imply that their developments will accommodate a wide range of social and economic populations. But the lack of specific attention to such groups undermines the credibility of their claims that New Urbanist communities will accommodate a diverse population. Particular words or idioms that might indicate specific attention to social or cultural needs, such as race or ethnicity, occur only rarely. In addition, the idiom “affordable housing” is frequently correlated with the terms elderly and senior, as if to assure readers that New Urbanist communities will contain only a nonthreatening form of low-income population. The following quotation highlights the identity of people New Urbanism theorists imagine will live in their developments:

The neighborhood’s fine-grained mix of activities includes a range of housing types for a variety of incomes, from the wealthy business owner to the school teacher and the gardener. Suburban areas, which are most commonly segregated by income, do not provide for the full range of society."

New Urbanist theory may thus be seen as accommodating a “full range of society” that is firmly rooted in the educated, employed, middle to upper-middle class. Such a definition of community indicates that the vision of the New Urbanism is far from all-inclusive. In fact, New Urbanism theorists tend to direct their attention to their own peer group and to others with like-minded, mainstream values. Their vision makes little effort to accommodate non-mainstream cultural perspectives, values or beliefs, and would appear to undermine their claims of social and economic integration.

The above word–in–context analysis of the use of the term community in the four major books by New Urbanism theorists reveals how the movement’s use of the term is overwhelmingly concerned with community as physical area or territory. Considering that the movement grew out of an architectural background, this is hardly surprising. But the stark physical determinism of New Urbanist theory can also be read as serving to justify a professional role for New Urbanist designers in future development. And analysis of the use of the term community as a set of shared bonds or common ties in the books demonstrates how the New Urbanist vision simply leaves out groups with social and cultural beliefs, values and norms that differ from those of the New Urbanism theorists and their anticipated audiences.

Given that the New Urbanism is primarily concerned with the physical appearance of community, it thus becomes clear how icons such as gridded street layouts, small lot sizes, eclectic building styles, and a commercial center are intended to communicate a particular image of the city and city life to a target audience. This audience has been identified by developers as home-buyers looking for the life-style associated with community. The presentation of suburbia as a mediocre, monotonous, cultural wasteland further reinforces the physical alternative New Urbanism refers to as community. Based on the use of the term community in the four books, it is possible to see how the New Urbanist vision is primarily a reflection of what New Urbanism theorists think suburban
development should look like. Their heavily illustrated books serve as marketing brochures to disseminate this vision and promote their architectural design services to implement it.

COMMUNITY IN THE NEW URBANISM

The New Urbanism’s imagery of traditional forms and urban streetscapes, combined with a lack of attention to social and cultural processes, has resulted in a highly codified expression of community. As this essay has tried to demonstrate, the New Urbanism’s concern with community, tradition, and urban values is aesthetic and self-serving. New Urbanist designs are neither communally conceived, nor traditionally constructed through shared social or cultural processes; neither are they cities. New Urbanism theory, as presented by the proponents of the movement and recycled through the media, simply assures a role for architects and physical planners in future suburban development. This role is to create palliative and politically feasible designs acceptable to others with values like theirs.

But is the New Urbanism really only a marketing ploy for suburban development? Certainly, New Urbanism theorists believe they are offering a new and valuable approach to development. Would it not be more appropriate to accuse them of being well-intentioned idealists? To its credit, the New Urbanism has succeeded in bringing the issue of suburban design to the table for discussion among architects, a group which long ago dismissed suburban development as a sea of mediocrity. In this regard, developments featuring small building clusters, organized around common spaces and an interlocking street system, undoubtedly represent the type of image many architects find appealing: distinctive forms and site designs that suggest the aesthetic of settlement formation over time. But as an expression to describe this aesthetic, the term community has been used indiscriminately by New Urbanists. Just because proponents of the New Urbanism can draw an image that might suggest the existence of community does not mean that the social and cultural processes implied by the term will follow. As more New Urbanist projects are built, the disjunction between what the New Urbanist vision expresses (a socially and economically diverse community) and what the projects actually achieve (artfully designed developments) will become more apparent.

Is it important that New Urbanism theorists have succeeded in using the word community as a marketing sound bite for their developments? Why should it matter how they position their development concept in the real estate market? One reason is that, through its linkage between community and simplistic images of traditional or urban forms, the New Urbanism has co-opted the important critique of the top-down, centralized control involved in rationalist planning. In its place have been installed the values of the New Urbanism theorists, their peer group, and others with personal stakes in real estate development. Thus, while New Urbanism design workshops may allow participants to determine certain physical planning guidelines, fundamental decisions about development have already been made. Community workshops are offered as a cost-effective way to mitigate potential opposition to developers and real estate investors. Poor and minority populations, many with their own traditions and who live in real urban areas, have no identity in New Urbanist theory. These are noncommunities in the New Urbanist vision.

As New Urbanism practitioners and the CNU have begun to shape housing policy-making at the local and federal level and export their design services abroad, it should also be of concern that the New Urbanist vision is starting to become a physical reality. Outside the U.S., in developing countries, the New Urbanism developments are simplistic traditional forms, which imply community while disguising the global extension of American-style suburban development. In the U.S., physical codification of community in the New Urbanist mold presents a politically effective symbol of tradition and urban values to opponents of large-scale suburban developments. The U.S. Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development recently adopted New Urbanist design guidelines to build new housing on the sites of demolished public housing. The single-family homes, row houses, and duplexes built in place of high-rises will accommodate fewer housing units and serve a higher-income population. In this case, the New Urbanist aesthetic has been used to whitewash the displacement of the poorest tenants in the name of bringing community back to urban neighborhoods.

The New Urbanist view that social and economic diversity can be brought about by physical design represents a symbolic crusade, behind which the continued development of suburbs and disinvestment in cities are disguised and the interests of disenfranchised populations continue to be ignored. If new housing projects look like urban communities, American society will find it easy to continue to ignore pressing issues of urban poverty and homelessness. If new developments look like “traditional American towns,” American society may avoid confronting important challenges of growing social polarization and the silencing of minority populations. The New Urbanism represents an insidious form of that same design totalitarianism that critics of rational planning pointed to more than thirty years ago. The fact that the movement claims to address the major issues facing cities today without rigorous consideration of major demographic and social change represents a willful disengagement with issues of race, ethnicity and poverty.

Such an analysis raises difficult questions. How should conventional suburban tract development be built in the global era? What does the New Urbanist vision reflect about society’s priorities when addressing complicated social questions? Does it principally facilitate an avoidance of difficult socioeconomic dilemmas by cloaking conventional development behind the veneer of community? As a movement, New Urbanism is still young. One can only hope that as it matures, it will be able to answer these questions.
REFERENCE NOTES

Much of the research for this article was originally completed as part of a Master of Architecture thesis under the supervision of committee members Nezar AlSayyad, Galen Cranz, and Michael Southworth.


9. For a cogent analysis of the conflict between the political use of urban design and the needs of impoverished, local settlements in the plan for a new Venezuela town in the early 1960s, see: L. Peattie, Planning Reshifting Ciudad Guayana (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1987).

10. V. Shiva, “The Violence of Reductionistic Science,” Alternatives, Vol.10 No.2 (1987), pp.243-61. The journals used for this analysis were selected based on their coverage of “neo-traditional” planning or New Urbanism. All of the journals are published in the United States and therefore represent a Western, U.S.-based perspective. The architecture journals were Architecture, Architectural Record, and Progressive Architecture. Journals representing the development and real estate trade were Builder, Land Development (the journal of the National Association of Home Builders), and Urban Land (the journal of the Urban Land Institute, the research arm of the National Association of Real Estate Brokers). Planning, the journal of the American Institute of City Planners, was considered representative of the planning perspective. A variety of academic journals were also reviewed as noted, particularly for scholarly analysis and criticism of the movement.

12. C. Jencks, “Post-Modern Classicism — The Synthesis,” Architectural Design, Vol.54 No.34 (1984), pp.66-63. As of this writing, this quote is the earliest found where the term “neo-traditionalism” is used to describe a sub-set of Post-Modern architecture. Given Krier’s drawings of traditional forms in the 1970s and Jencks’ previous writings on Post-Modernism, it is certainly possible that the term appeared earlier.


29. K. Till, “Neotraditional Towns and Urban
32. “Seaside and the Real World: A Debate on American Urbanism,” ANY (July/August 1993).
34. From a series of interviews with Peter Katz in San Francisco (March 1996).
42. Although CNU began with a core group of six architects, it now boasts a dues-paying membership of well over 1,000. CNU’s board of directors consists of the original six architect-founders.
44. For example, on February 23, 1996, “The New Urbanism: Making it Work in the Marketplace,” a one-day workshop was held through the University of California, Davis, University Extension, as part of its Land Use and Natural Resources series. The cost was $235 per participant.
47. For critiques of the decline-of-community hypothesis, see: R. Warren, The Community in America (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1978); and T. Bender, Community and Social Change in America (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978).
51. All of the coding was done by the author, and although coder reliability was not formally calculated, it is estimated at approximately 90 percent. The definitions of community are reviewed in order of their frequency.
54. Ibid., p.116.
57. Calthorpe, Next American Metropolis, p.12.
Bozdogan describes how an architectural form — in this case the traditional Turkish House — can be enframed within very different cultural and political agendas, a condition undermining the New Urbanist supposition that democratic community will be born from the use of supposedly democratic forms.
63. Displaced tenants will receive housing vouchers to be renewed annually pending HUD’s budget adjustments.
64. This view is supported by Verecgey in “Traditional Environments and the New Urbanism,” pp.59-60. Here, she asserts that, “In its exclusion of temporal change and cultural diversity, ‘the traditional American town’ model implicitly speaks of New Urbanism’s basis as a response to widely held fears current among the property-owning class about neighborhood deterioration and the growing presence of populations of non-European origin.”