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New Urbanism: Very Misunderstood

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Denver, June 10, 2009 -- As I flew into Denver, where the [Congress for the New Urbanism](#) (CNU) is holding its 17th annual congress, the word that came to my mind about New Urbanism was 'misunderstood.' As I attend the conference for the next three days, I am going to try to understand how and why it happened that this movement of architects and planners trying to make the places where people live better became the object of hostility and condescension.

New Urbanism, although it has antecedents in mid-century voices (such as that of Jane Jacobs) that saw that the American city was being destroyed as middle-class Americans moved out to the post-World War II suburbs and the city they left behind was bulldozed for expressways and urban renewal, is a movement that arose in the 1980s among architects upset not only with the decline of the quality of the built environment but also with the failure they perceived of the profession of architecture to pay attention to the spaces between buildings and the larger urban or regional context.

These architects -- Andrés Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Stefanos Polyzoides, Elizabeth Moule, Peter Calthorpe, and Daniel Solomon were the founders of the CNU -- based their program on the premise that the qualities of the physical spaces that people live in have an impact on their lives (although they were careful to say the physical solutions alone could not solve social and economic problems).

New Urbanism was not the first design-based movement based on this premise; the Modernists of the 1920s through 1940s believed even more strongly that society could be remade for the better by better organizing physical space. But while Modernism posited new forms, the New Urbanists, like other postmodernists of the 1980s, rejected the Modernists' cold towers and gleaming highways. They harked back to the design of cities from the time before the automobile.

Once the CNU was founded in 1993, the New Urbanists began writing up their program, which in 1996 they published as the "[Charter of the New Urbanism](#)." The Charter is an admirable document. Its principles, which include neighborhoods that are diverse in both population and use, multi-modal transportation options (including the most basic, walking), the importance of accessible public spaces and institutions, and the importance of planning regionally, have been accepted, or have been agreed to without having been consciously accepted, by architects and urban planners who would look at you dumbfounded if you said they were New Urbanists.

While among urbanists these ideas may now seem to be the property of everyone, like the air urbanists breathe, it's worth noting that these ideas are antithetical both to the ideas that led to "conventional suburban development" (CSD) in post-World War II America and to the urbanism of the Modernists from the same period.

To put it plainly, although "sophisticated" architects and planners today (especially since the filming of *The Truman Show*) often condescend or ridicule Seaside, the resort Dauny and Plater-Zyberk designed between 1978 and 1983 to imitate the layout of a typical southern town from before 1940, it was at the time revolutionary to even think of building houses bunched closely together on small lots without garages and driveways in the front.

The New Urbanists not only published their ideas in the Charter, and preach them in events that range from their annual congresses to design workshops, or "charettes," that they facilitate in communities that are looking to make future development and redevelopment more congenial than that of the sprawl paradigm, but New Urbanists work with reforming the zoning and other laws that have made illegal, in most places, the building of those places -- from walkable city districts to the Main Streets of small towns -- that people enjoy so much.

In the 25 years since Seaside opened New Urbanists--along with their allies in the broader anti-sprawl coalition called "Smart Growth--have been so

successful that in 2008 America elected a president who in February told an audience in Florida that "The days where we're just building sprawl forever, those days are over."

So you're thinking, what's the problem? I said that the New Urbanists are misunderstood, but if everyone agrees with them, what's to misunderstand?

Well, to begin with, New Urbanists are attacked from both sides of America's cultural divide. Chances are, if you mention New Urbanism to group of forward thinking, contemporary design professionals, whether architects or planners, they will roll their eyes. To them New Urbanism, because so many of its practitioners make their livings designing new towns and developments outside of existing cities, is a facilitator of sprawl, not a solution. Then, because many of these towns and developments feature traditional architecture, New Urbanism is hopelessly nostalgic.

But if you find yourself among a group of conservatives or libertarians, such as Randal O'Toole of the Independence Institute's Center for the American Dream, and who writes for the Cato Institute and the Reason Foundation, and you mention New Urbanism, you'll just as likely unleash a denunciation on the grounds that New Urbanism aims to thwart the natural desire of Americans to live in a single-family house on a cul-de-sac.

So how do New Urbanists react to these attacks from the left and the right? I'd like to be able to say that they smile, realizing that to be attacked from both sides is a compliment, and reflects the success of the ideas in their Charter. But that's not always the case.

And that's something I'll be asking about as I cover the CNU over the next three days.

Frank Gruber writes a weekly column on local politics, which often involve land use issues, for the Santa Monica Lookout News, a news website. His first book, [Urban Worrier: Making Politics Personal](#), has just been published by City Image Press.

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