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Building blocks

DEVELOPMENT: On school choice and community-building, conservative Christians can work alongside New Urbanist groups | *Marvin Olasky*

DENVER—John Norquist sat in a Starbucks—where else would the mayor of Milwaukee be?—and showed this summer once again why he makes political enemies left and right.

The innovative former Democratic mayor of Milwaukee is not a favorite of Democratic Party radicals, who dislike his fiscal conservatism. He criticizes the "moderate" Democratic Leadership Council, calling it "a bribed bunch of special interest people—the tobacco industry, the teachers union." Norquist also criticizes "country club Republicans." He strongly supports school choice and, in his sardonic way, praises Christian schools: "If they teach creationism, there's a pretty good chance that those kids will be able to spell *creation*."



DAN CUNNINGHAM

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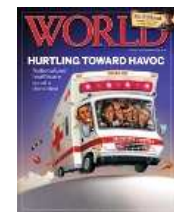
At 6 feet 7 inches, Norquist casts a large shadow over the 3,000-member CNU, which several architects founded in 1993. The CNU recently had its annual convention here in Denver, and Norquist was not the only surprise for conservatives who expect hostility from "New Urbanists," folks who want to renew cities and retrofit suburbs to make them less car-centric. Sure, the CNU's first board president, San Francisco architect Peter Calthorpe, ripped me a minute into our sit-down because I admitted to skepticism about global warming, but he is also a school choice proponent.

Calthorpe's reasons for supporting vouchers differ from those of many evangelicals—he doesn't want middle-class families to feel the need to live in suburbs for the sake of their children's education—but he is the type of liberal co-belligerent (to use Francis Schaeffer's term) whom evangelicals need. So is architect/community planner Andrés Duany, who grew up in Cuba, left there in 1960, flashes a libertarian streak, and garnered great respect here as the CNU's top guru.

Some evangelical pastors emphasize "human flourishing" because we are all created in God's image, so Duany's rapid-fire attack on "the current theory of environmentalism" is significant: "Their ideal is wilderness. . . . Every human who walks in undermines the ideal . . . but cities are part of the solution, not part of the problem."

Some CNU members obviously favor a top-down model run by urban planners, but Duany speaks of "two ways to do urbanism—with numbers or statistics, or the Jane Jacobs way in which you observe." (See "Ballet of the sidewalks," Nov. 17, 2007.) Observation leaves Duany

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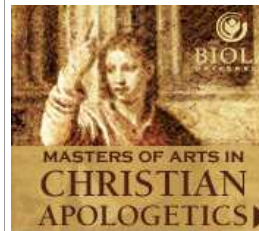
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endorsing quirky ideas: Forget the front porches with rocking chairs that few people use ("Americans don't like to be observed at leisure"). Instead, try front gardens that enable people to stand with a hoe in their hands and talk with passers-by: "They won't engage directly so they need a third party—a dog, a baby. A dog is a wonderful thing, but there's nothing like a tomato."

Duany also throws tomatoes: "Environmentalists are trying to ruralize everything. [For them] nature is the hammer, everything is the nail." He takes on those who insist that, in order to make mass transit cost-effective, "you should never build fewer than 14 units to the acre." He emphasizes use of the "transect," a spectrum of densities from wilderness to urban core that allows for a wide variety of housing choices.

Such CNU embraces of diversity even allow room for one of the left's whipping boys, "big box" stores that feature large inventories and relatively low prices within windowless, standardized one-story buildings surrounded by parking lots. One new urbanist goal is not to eliminate them but to incorporate them into the surrounding community by incorporating windows rather than blank walls and putting at least half the parking at the back or sides.

Duany praises neighborhood traditions and criticizes both avant-garde radicalism and the sense (present among both leftists and Ayn Randians) that listening to customers is a sell-out. His acolytes generally oppose relying on convention centers or stadiums for community revitalization, because such projects create activity during the business day or when there are special events, but ghost towns at other times. They don't care for cul-de-sacs that lead people to drive places that would be otherwise walkable if paths could be added and mixed-use development (such as neighborhood stores and offices) encouraged.

CNUers tend to criticize state regulations that don't allow pay-as-you-drive insurance. They don't want officials to determine insurance rates without regard to actual miles driven, even though risk increases with each mile driven: Pay-as-you-drive would lower rates for those who drive less. It would also provide an incentive to drive less, particularly if improvements in mass transit offered realistic alternatives, and if park-and-ride lots incorporated grocery and video stores, banks, dry-cleaning businesses, and so on.

Duany distinguishes between neo-traditionalism—combining what is beautiful from the past with what is efficient from the present—and ideological traditionalism: For example, he might furnish a house with classic furniture but install a modern bathroom with a good shower rather than a claw-foot bathtub. He and his followers accept gentrification as a way to bring new capital to long-depressed areas and roust petrified poverty. They look for cross-class mixes of housing.

What should conservatives make of all this? Some libertarians and conservatives attack the new urbanism. Randal O'Toole, an economist associated with the libertarian Cato Institute, argues that development strategies favoring denser land use and light rail ignore consumer desires for big backyards and end up wasting taxpayer dollars. But Paul Weyrich, the longtime head of the Free Congress Foundation who died last December, coauthored with William Lind *The Next Conservatism* (St. Augustine's Press, 2009), which praises New Urbanists and argues that conservatives should support them in opposition to government-imposed building codes that require single-use development. *The Next Conservatism* advocates cities and towns that are compact (for walking), connected (by a variety of transport, especially rail), complete (with a variety of housing types), and convivial (aiding in the creation of community).

Conservative New Urbanists argue that the development of car-dependent suburbs was not the result of free markets: Governmental policies—freeway construction, zoning regulations, income tax deductions for mortgage interest, a lack of school choice—boosted suburbs and hurt cities. They note that progressive era planners, modernists who pushed unadorned "workers' housing," and top-down designers who liked big plazas have all scorned the messy but stimulating cities generated by the bottom-up pressures of markets and tastes.

CNU head Norquist and his size 14D shoes leave a large footprint at CNU, but when 14-year Charlotte Mayor Patrick McCrory, a Republican, told a ballroom full of planners, "Don't criticize the people who make money. Making money and creating jobs is very important," he received only scattered applause. When he added, "I'm not talking about jobs in the public sector, I'm talking about the private sector," it was almost possible to hear the sound of one hand clapping. When he described his support for mass transit but emphasized a policy that "once ridership fell under a certain number, that route was canceled," shocked awe set in.

Norquist sees government regulators and not private developers as responsible for suburban design that forces many residents to get into their cars for travel to schools, youth baseball games, and even the purchase of a quart of milk: He rails against "bad zoning" that separated housing from stores and offices. He's not against discount stores: "We're not snobs." He calls his CNU "the free market arm of the environmental movement" and touts his "strong appreciation for markets. . . . We want to reform development, not stop it."

New Urbanist buzz words



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Charette: An intense, often multi-day meeting of municipal officials, residents, developers, and New Urbanists to plan community design

Transect: A simple chart that shows the varieties of land use from urban core to urban center, general urban, suburban, rural, and natural

TND (Traditional Neighborhood Design): Mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly developments similar to those common before World War II

TOD (Transit Oriented Development, or Design): The creation of compact, walkable neighborhoods centered on light rail —

Two new urbanist views of school choice/vouchers

Congress of the New Urbanism president John Norquist:

The current system of real estate-based choice keeps dollars flowing exclusively to government-owned schools, but its legacy of segregation and sprawl is bad for the poor kids left behind and even kids from affluent families who spend hours per day being shuttled across the scattered landscape of suburbia. . . .

You contemplate the Detroit Public Schools and you notice your kid would be just about the only kid who isn't poor. You get scared, you move to upscale Bloomfield Hills. . . . If Detroit had a voucher program, you might still live there, with your kid attending a private or parochial school. You might even have your child in the Detroit public system that was forced by competition to make its schools more attractive to parents. In Windsor, Ontario, across the Detroit River, you have a choice to send your child to public or religious school—both paid by the Province of Ontario. Japan, Holland, and France all have school choice, too. Even Socialist Sweden has school vouchers allowing parents to pay for private and religious schools with public money.

In the U.S. we protect ourselves from public-financed private education except, of course, in higher education where GI and Pell vouchers help students attend great universities—public or private—most of which are in big cities. Yet every day, fear of poor K-12 schools pushes parents with means to avoid the places where poor people are allowed to live. . . . The current system of real-estate-based school choice increases residential segregation in metropolitan America by driving the poor and affluent farther apart.

Duke University economist Thomas Nechyba:

Private school markets (and other forms of school choice that allow families to unbundle their housing decision from their school choices) introduce a desegregating force. A recognition of these forces then provides an opportunity for cities that choose to implement greater school choice: Families that are not averse to living within cities but are currently stretching financially to live in overpriced housing outside cities to gain access to good public schools will choose to come back to cities under increased school choice within cities. Increased school choice (outside the traditional residence-based choice) is therefore predicted to result in dramatic reductions in economic segregation across cities and suburbs, large increases in property values in cities and greater economic activity in disadvantaged areas.

—from *CNU Report, Schools/2007*—

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