

One problem with New Urbanism is its lack of flexibility

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=3512#more-3512>

I have just read a most insightful paper regarding New Urbanism entitled, “Village Vices: The Contradiction of New Urbanism and Sustainability.”

It was written by Ruth Durack, who is now the director for the Urban Design Centre in Western Australia. At the time she wrote the paper in 1998, she lived in the United States and it won second place in the 1998 Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism Award. It was later published in Places Journal, which is produced by the UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design.

The driving force behind New Urbanism is to achieve sustainability by returning people to cities designed to a standard that essentially exemplifies a traditional English village. The classic definition of sustainability assumes that the resources of the earth are finite, and that the present generation must conserve resources for future generations.

But Durack successfully challenged the notion that we must all fit into a New Urbanistic mold to accomplish what needs to be accomplished in order to achieve sustainability.

There may be as many definitions of sustainability as there are people. I would not presume to know what Durack’s political beliefs are, but she gives a definition of sustainability that varies only slightly from the classic definition, but with a key distinction: “sustainability refers to development that satisfies the choices of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to make choices of their own.”

The key distinction is that the present generation can be satisfied and that future generations can make their own decisions, instead of inheriting a system of urban development that has been so tightly controlled that there is no flexibility for change.

She describes New Urbanism as follows: “To achieve its delightful physical qualities and egalitarian ambitions, the New Urbanist village is by necessity a fully planned and regulated environment, fiercely resistant to change and any deviation from the rigid rules that govern its form and function.”

Choices are, of course, the mantra of New Urbanists who believe that what they are actually doing is giving us more choices, not fewer. But these choices are not really choices at all, merely substitutions. This is because the lifestyle that most Americans now choose is suburbia, and suburbia is strictly verboten in New Urbanistic thought. In reality what they wish to achieve is to remove one set of choices (suburbs they claim is designed for cars, not people), and substituting another set of values disguised as choices (that is, high density, walkable communities with light rail and few or even no cars).

Durack puts it this way: “Since the emergence of New Urbanism as a mainstream urban design concept in the 1980s, the central preoccupation of its adherents has been finding ways to adapt the village form to contemporary development demands and vice versa. But the real issue that these talented practitioners and theorists should be confronting is not how to implement the alluring vision, but whether it actually achieves any of its lofty claims, particularly the overriding objective of sustainability... Rather than working to perfect the village form as a more marketable or accepted development model, we should be questioning its relevance.”

Randal O’Toole, in his book *The Best Laid Plans*, points out that a 50-year plan written in 1950 would have excluded accommodations for commercial jet air traffic, the Internet or computers, it would have assumed only a few women in the workplace and men with the highest paying jobs, and that America would be the world’s manufacturing power. He further quotes Harvard economics professor Steve Marglin saying that if “the only certainty about the future is that the future is uncertain, if the only sure thing is that we are in for surprises, then no amount of planning, no amount of prescription, can deal with the contingencies that the future will reveal.”

Durack says of Alvin Toffler, an American writer and futurist, “perhaps as (he) warned forty-five years ago, the greatest threat to society at the dawn of the 21st Century will be the acceleration of change.”

This is, in fact, what makes New Urbanism invalid. The rigid control of development of our cities is exactly the opposite of what we need to maintain a competitive edge. It is the cities that are flexible enough to accommodate unexpected change that will maintain that competitive edge over other cities, and it is the collective competition of American cities that will help America become the world power it once was.

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