

Churches supporting New Urbanism will be disappointed

May 30, 2013

by [Randy Bright](#)



Randy Bright

There are a lot of churches that are seeking to find a way back into the core of the city and to the suburbs, rightfully looking at those areas as a mission field that the church has abandoned over the past few decades. It needs to be done, and I hope that those churches are successful.

The discourse now among church professionals is how to fit into the new urban landscape. They have adopted much of the vocabulary that urban planners use – walkability, sustainability, etc. – and they have come to believe that church architecture is auto-centric instead of human-centric.

While that may be sincere narrative, it is not a holistic view of the problem.

To be sure, there are many cities that are adopting form-based codes and sustainability as a mindset in planning decisions, but as I have discussed many times in this column, different people have different perceptions of what those things really mean.

In reality, most cities that are adopting form-based codes are not adopting them citywide all at once. Like the city of Tulsa, they are introducing them gradually, hoping that people like what they see and are willing to accept them more broadly in the future.

Another columnist in the Tulsa area who is a zealot for form-based codes recently lamented the turtle-like pace at which these codes are being implemented. Comments to one of his articles were bipolar; one person in deep agreement that we can't adopt these codes fast enough, and another who sees a bigger picture and was not eager to see them adopted at all.

A recent article in a church-related trade magazine praised New Urbanism, concluding that there was a big place at the table for churches to reintroduce themselves to the city core and suburbs. Some architects were interviewed, who like what they see and have been able to do church projects in that context, explained how they were able to do so with the same vocabulary that urban planners use.

However, the main project cited as a successful example for New Urbanism was a large shopping center that had been converted to a church. In reality, there were good people in city

government somewhere that saw that as a worthy project and allowed that huge tax-generating retail center to be taken out of the tax base.

I see that as a good thing, but the thing to realize is that it wasn't an example of New Urbanism at all. It still included a mass of parking, something New Urbanists don't want to see; if their textbooks are to be believed, they would prefer that all or most of that parking be converted to multi-story housing so as to increase living density and walkability.

I am thrilled that such a conversion actually took place, and I suspect that there are many examples like this that are bringing the church back into communities; but it is not what urban planners want. In their way of thinking, if there are to be churches at all, they need to be part of mixed-use developments, not standalone buildings.

There is a great deal of focus in our churches on this idea of community, being a part of the community and serving the community. If a church believes it can fit into a mixed use development, that they can function on the third floor of a five story building, then I think it is a worthy endeavor. We need more churches everywhere, in all kinds of contexts – rural, exurban, suburban, city core and everything between – so that our increasing population has an opportunity to hear the Gospel and be a part of the body of believers. We were never instructed to build churches, but we were admonished not to forsake the gathering of ourselves together, so we need places to do so.

That gathering tradition has long been a part of American culture. It is exactly what the New Urbanists claim that they want to recreate, not the church, but the human connectivity that creates relationships and friendships, knowing and caring about your neighbor, and individuals being a part of community. They are right in this context, people are isolated, but they are wrong about the cause. It has nothing to do with automobiles and all to do with a declining culture.

So to church people who are embracing the new way of doing things, look at the big picture. Keep in mind that eventually your community's government may not want your church; indeed there are communities that have already said that they do not want any more churches. For all of the support churches show for this new way of thinking, they may be bitterly disappointed that there is no place at the table for them.

©2013 Randy W. Bright

Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-582-3972, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

© 2013 Tulsa Beacon