Village Vices: The Contradiction of New Urbanism and Sustainability

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Over the last twenty years, theory and practice in planning and urban design have been dominated by the search for sustainable development patterns. Fueled by growing public outcry over issues of environmental protection, energy conservation, agricultural preservation, urban sprawl, roadside aesthetics and highway gridlock, sustainability has become the banner around which the forces for change in the way we develop our cities and suburbs are rallying. Perhaps the most powerful of these forces—certainly the most vocal—has been the New Urbanists, whose revival of the traditional village prototype is being enthusiastically adopted as a model of sustainable development.

I suspect, however, that the village and sustainability are inherently contradictory concepts. This suspicion is offered as a polemic, based on neither empirical data nor a comprehensive review of the literature. My purpose is to voice a renegade opinion on the merits of New Urbanism and its dubious claims to sustainability, and to draw attention to an altogether more sustainable alternative that has been explored in a number of recent projects. This alternative accepts a more open, indeterminate urbanism that recognizes discontinuities and inconsistencies as life-affirming opportunities for adaptation and change, offering choices for the future in accordance with the true definition of sustainability.

For the New Urbanists, the village is an appropriate model of sustainable design because of features such as its compact scale and density, fine-grained mix of uses, focus on walking and transit as the primary modes of circulation, and varied housing types that promote a socially diverse population. 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. But it is precisely this inflexibility, which is so important in its struggle for completion as a development enterprise, that is sowing the seeds of the village's ultimate demise.

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.

It could be that the New Urbanist village is just another seductive, formal prototype that is successfully diverting our attention from the overwhelming challenges of exploding urbanization in a world whose limits we have only recently realized are tangible. Perhaps all this proselytizing about a "new urbanism" and its captivating fantasies of village life is just a way to avoid confronting planning and design issues we are not even sure how to think about, let alone resolve. Rather than working to perfect the village form as a more marketable or accepted development

model, we should be questioning its relevance. Better still, we need to be questioning the utility of prescriptive models altogether in the search for sustainable form.

Admittedly, we cannot accurately evaluate the impacts of New Urbanism until more communities have been built and occupied for a sufficient amount of time. But even without empirical data, there are enough incongruities between the idea of the village and the concept of sustainability to warrant a more cautious review of the progress we are making towards defining sustainable development patterns.

To frame the argument properly, we should begin with the definition of sustainability. Unfortunately—or perhaps inevitably, given the political sweep of the green revolution—the concept of sustainability is routinely reduced to a question of physical survival in an environment of continuing degradation and depletion. As a species, however, we transcended our simple dependence on the environment centuries ago and the question of survival, therefore, has to admit culture in equal part with nature. Incidentally, it is no accident that some of the greenest words of the language maintain "culture" as their root: agriculture, permaculture, aquaculture, etc. In fact, even our interest in the environment as an issue is a cultural construct that has emerged relatively recently, and not without the subjective judgments of a highly politicized controversy. So sustainability must consider the preservation, in some form, of this incredibly complex web of culture, which includes our perceptions of, attitudes towards and operations on the natural environment.

But when we think of sustainability in such broad terms, we have to start wondering exactly what it is that we are seeking to sustain. What are we really trying to preserve in a world where the growth rates of poverty, crime, unemployment, drug abuse, homelessness, racial conflict and just about every other indicator of societal breakdown are rising geometrically? Where in the United States alone, functional illiteracy stands at twenty-five percent? Where terrorism has become a universal form of political protest? Obviously, we should not discount the value of the many beacons of success that have been lit across this country and elsewhere, but in the big picture, we have to admit that they hardly add up to a situation that is unquestionably worth sustaining.

All these horrifying statistics, however, have one thing in common: we tolerate them by choice. With an appropriate political shift and realignment of resources—unlikely, but nonetheless possible—we could choose to be different. And this is, perhaps, the only real quality of our present situation that is undeniably worth sustaining: our ability to make choices, or at least the availability of choices to make. So with a small but significant adjustment to the Bruntland Report's definition, I would suggest that sustainability refers to development that satisfies the choices of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to make choices of their own.[1]

This is precisely the point at which the ideas of sustainability and of the village diverge. A village, by its nature, is a stable, self-perpetuating,

self-sustaining entity. It has boundaries and a limited size, an internal organization that resists revision, a coherent scale and building character that protest the deviant form, and a fragile landscape that is vulnerable to growth. It builds a social network that relies on interwoven destinies, censuring the separatist, the non-participant, the transient. It is, by necessity, a fixed, complete and finished entity, whose greatest enemy is the future. Its very survival requires resistance to change, and physical and social design conspire to preserve the status quo at sometimes quite remarkable human and financial cost.

It is difficult to argue that these characteristics are altogether bad. Perhaps, as Alvin Toffler warned forty-five years ago, the greatest threat to society at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be the acceleration of change. It is certainly hard to maintain that having choices is such a good thing when we have apparently exercised them so poorly. My point is only that if we define sustainability as keeping options open and inviting our children to satisfy their own ambitions, within the same limits of consideration for the next generation, then the village as a model is antithetical to these objectives. And if we want to pay more than lip service to ideas of cultural diversity, environmental justice, freedom of expression, opportunity and democracy, then we have to embrace an open and indeterminate urbanity that allows these qualities to flower.

Pursuing such an alternative would require a radical shift in not only how we define successful urban places, but also how we plan and develop them. What I am suggesting is not another model; in fact, I reject the very idea of models, of prescribed forms, of fixed intentions, of master plans. Instead, we must adopt a way of thinking about the world that accepts unpredictability, coincidence and the accidental; that delights in diversity, multiplicity and contrast; that embraces change and the exercise of individual choice. Perhaps the best way of putting it is that we must find a way of thinking that concedes to the future, not in an acquiescent or submissive way, but as an act of affirmation and supreme optimism, proffered with sufficient humility to acknowledge that the next generation just may come up with better ideas than ours.

There is nothing particularly new in this sort of world view. It is the basis of much of Eastern philosophy and I suspect it underwrote most of the work on flexibility, adaptability and indeterminate structures in the 1960s. After all, Robert Venturi gave us the operative "C-words": complexity and contradiction, almost forty years ago. But a revival of this kind of thinking has particular relevance to the search for sustainability because of its foundation in the sciences and an extraordinary revolution in the ways that physics and biology are looking at the nature of life and questions of human survival.

In a nutshell, science has discovered that we cannot understand the world by reducing it to its simplest constituent parts and examining the laws under which these parts behave. Instead, we need to see the world as an indivisible system, an interlocking network of relationships and interdepen-

dencies between elements that are themselves indivisible systems of unfathomable complexity. In this slippery world of perpetual flux, there are no beginnings and ends, no givers and receivers, no actors and reactors—just constant accommodation and cooperation between parts. The whole idea of a duality between man and nature disappears; they are just parts of the same co-adaptational system. We therefore have to abandon any notions of an optimal equilibrium state, and even the objective of optimization becomes meaningless, except as a fleeting moment in the endless process of adjustment to a new condition.

So what becomes of planning and design in this churning world of uncontrollable change? Does the purposeful design action become just an exercise in futility? How can we continue to believe in planning as a rational process for achieving defined goals when we now know that even initiating the process changes the conditions we set out to improve?

The point is that this has always been so. The interactive nature of the system has not changed, only our understanding of it. Rather than challenging the necessity to plan, this new understanding challenges us to revise the way we plan, to abandon the search for answers or models, and to find ways to maneuver in a world of indeterminacy.

According to Brian Arthur, an economist at the Santa Fe Institute, the think tank that has initiated most of the research on the nature of chaos, operating in such a world means "...keeping as many options open as possible. You go for viability, something that's workable, rather than what's 'optimal' ...What you're trying to do is maximize robustness, or survivability, in the face of an ill-defined future."[2]

For planning and urban design, this translates into foregoing the comprehensive plan in favor of an initial strategic act; defining a beginning, not an end; a housing start, not a neighborhood—something like the tourist whose plans for a six-week tour of Europe only go as far as buying a ticket across the Atlantic. Perhaps Rem Koolhaas puts it best when he talks about urban design as the task of creating potentials. This is an astutely pragmatic idea in its recognition that, besides the selfless offer of opportunity to the future, we are also at liberty to exploit the opportunities we have inherited.

David Leatherbarrow has pointed out three aspects of this kind of indeterminate planning[3] that place it in direct contrast to the closed, fixed form of the village. First, it corresponds to ideas of cultural diversity by resisting any sort of fixed subdivision of a city or region, as well as rigid formal constructs for city and regional development. The village, despite its explicit intentions of diversity, has proven to be a very effective tool for ethnic and economic segregation. As Leatherbarrow aptly recalled, the word "ghetto" derives from the Jewish Quarter in Venice, which had all the elements of the classic urban village.

Second, indeterminate planning has the capacity to tolerate, and even value, the discontinuities that characterize contemporary American cities—what Leatherbarrow calls an "open topography."

These missing teeth are anathema to the village builder, but if we can overcome our preference for the continuous field and the city as a finished artifact, we can recognize the utility of these spaces which can accommodate occasional or temporary events and satisfy unpredictable future needs.

The third advantage of such planning is that it invites true citizen participation in planning and development. The village certainly promotes citizen involvement, but only in the affairs of the village, whose primary concern is its own survival, first by completing, then by maintaining, a preestablished plan. Real participation is more than just a watchdog activity; it requires a kind of planning that demands the continuous attention of future agents and extends to them equal decision-making authority.

There is also a fourth critical advantage of this way of thinking about the city, one that directly addresses the objective of sustainability with new theories on the nature of life and the sustenance of living systems. In his work on artificial life at the Santa Fe Institute, Christopher Langton has offered the compelling idea that life occurs at a point of balance between the forces of order and the forces of disorder, at what he calls "the edge of chaos."[4] The revelation of his work is that life is not an equilibrium condition, but a state of continuous adaptive activity, resisting the equally destructive alternatives of locking into a rigid order or descending into the turbulence of chaos.

For planning and design, this means defining a flexible, shifting decision-making framework that stimulates constant review and revision, rather than a fixed set of rules that defy challenge. While a certain amount of stability or predictability is obviously necessary for society to function, attempting to specify the physical form and functional patterns of our future is potentially a prescription for disaster. What we must do, rather, is establish a process for continual reconsideration and revision of the rules, making choice the only constant and participation an unavoidable obligation.

Probably the most direct expression of this philosophy to date is Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau's proposal for Downsview Park, a 320-acre former military air base in the suburbs of Toronto. To the chagrin of many landscape architects, Koolhaas and Mau won the competition for this major commission with a strategy, not a design, arguing that "the process of landscape planning and development itself, necessarily an open-ended set of complex processes developed over time, was more significant to the urban outcome than was a detailed physical design that would be rendered redundant by subsequent social, economic and cultural developments."[5] It will take fifteen to twenty years before we can evaluate the wisdom of this proposition.

Similarly open-ended and strategic thinking was evident in schemes for an urban park in Cleveland presented by Peter Latz, Anuradha Mathur and Stan Allen (who was also a finalist with James Corner in the Downsview Park competition) during an invitational charrette organized by the Urban Design Center of Northeast Ohio at the end of April, 2001. All three

recognized the futility of attempting to freeze the future of a complicated urban site and offered decision-making frameworks and initial strategic actions, rather than fixed development plans.

Adopting this kind of open-ended planning requires a determined commitment to ongoing review and modification, or the kind of continuous adaptive activity that characterizes living systems. Accepting indeterminacy and choice demands much more of us than settling for the structures of an immutable order. But if sustainability is to be adopted as a sincere objective, we have to plan and build not only in closer correspondence with nature, but also in recognition of the process of life itself.

Notes

1. See the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), commonly known as the Bruntland Report: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."
2. Quoted in M. Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 333.
3. Presentation at the University of Pennsylvania, 1994.
4. Quoted in Waldrop, 234.
5. Charles Waldheim, "Park = City? The Downsview Park Design Competition," in *Landscape Architecture* 91:3 (March, 2001), 82

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