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Humanizing the Built Environment

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Karl Besel and Viviana Andreescu (eds.), *Back to the Future: New Urbanism and the Rise of Neotraditionalism in Urban Planning* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 2013).

Pope Francis, in the first apostolic exhortation of his pontificate, *Gaudium evangelii*, spoke of the significance of the city as both reality and symbol:

The new Jerusalem, the holy city (cf. Rev 21:2-4), is the goal towards which all of humanity is moving. It is curious that God's revelation tells us that the fullness of humanity and of history is realized in a city. We need to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares (no. 71).

This book is "a contemplative gaze" at American cities, observing how they fall short of the "ideal" city and what steps have and should be taken to reverse course from ever expanding suburban sprawl, which negates the meaning of the city, in order to recover a more livable human environment.

The two editors and principal authors, Besel and Andreescu, both studied and/or taught at the University of Louisville in the nineties. This is significant because it was the restoration of Old Louisville that was a major influence on the rise of the new Urban Movement. It is not surprising that an account of this restoration is the centerpiece of the book in Chapter Five. From there, the authors work backwards to the original architects of the movement, Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs. They then move to the policies and situation following World War II, which saw the proliferation of suburban sprawl made possible by the automobile. They contrast it with earlier pre-automobile towns such as Alexandria, VA and Georgetown, DC. The remaining chapters detail case studies of new communities in Kentucky, Indiana and Florida which have consciously adopted the New Urbanism rules of diversity, mixed use, walkability and strategic green space. This review will follow a similar path, with a reflection at the end on what might still be missing in New Urbanism planning.

Louisville is one of the oldest cities in the South. It was a booming river town, acquiring its own city government in 1828. In the 1880s, on the land east of the city, spacious Italianate, Queen Anne and Greek revival mansions began to attract the elite into what was called the Cherokee Triangle. From the outset, a variety of commercial as well as community-based businesses and institutions shared space with residential properties, including churches, grocery stores, taverns and other small businesses. When the Depression hit, foreclosures resulted in the division of the large houses into multi-family dwellings. The deterioration of the neighborhood continued with the flight to the suburbs after World War II so that by the 1950s it was in a steep decline.

Residents, wanting to preserve what was left of the neighborhood, formed the Cherokee Association and obtained designation as an historic district following the lead of Old Louisville. The latter had also suffered from the post-World-War-II flight to the suburbs and become crime-ridden. An enlightened activist restored ten houses in 1961. He was soon joined by others who established the Historic Preservation Area in 1975. Between the 1990s and 2000 home values doubled, new restaurants and coffee shops opened and crime dropped. Not only was a powerful relation between historic preservation and economic benefits shown but a significant market developed for traditionally designed communities that were more environmentally sustainable and closer to work, school and shopping.

Ideas do not usually spring out of thin air. The authors point to two theorists whose work has had a major influence on the New Urbanism, Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs. Mumford's monumental work *The City in History* won the 1962 National Book Award. Besel and Andreescu say it is still regarded as the "leading 20th century authority on cities" (p. 2). The village in the city was his ideal community on the lines of Cambridge, MA. The New Urbanists took from Mumford the concept of mixed use design, combining residential and commercial spaces, human-scale architecture, narrow streets, central common areas, greenbelts, medium to high density and walkability. Jane Jacobs for whom a major concern was reducing crime, and peace and quiet, espoused many of the same features, for example, she opposed large open spaces which attracted criminal activity. But she critiqued the New Urbanists, whom she saw as causing a new and different form of suburbia with their new communities. Whereas Mumford and the New Urbanists espoused theories and order, Jacobs hated theories and loved randomness. They came together on the characteristics and preservation of traditional neighborhoods.

Both abhorred the post-World-War-II suburban sprawl, which Mumford called "a low grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible" (p. 3). The architects of this flight were first of all Henry Ford who said, in 1922, "We shall solve the city problem by leaving the city" (p. 29); federal housing policies that lowered the down payment on a house from 50 to 20 percent to be repaid over 30 years, thus expanding home ownership to the middle class; and the federal Highway Act of 1956, which sought a quick get-away in the event of nuclear attack. The vision of Robert Moses, who directed public works in the city and state of New York from 1922 to 1968, prefigured some of these developments. His construction favored "the open road, the soaring towers, open parks, highways and beaches" (p. 3). He had little concern for the negative effect on inner city neighborhoods and the spread of urban sprawl. Mumford was one of the strongest opponents of Moses.

One of the traditional neighborhoods from which the New Urbanists took their principles of sustainable town planning was Georgetown in Washington, DC. It was held up as a model as it includes (1) diversity of incomes, ages and occupations; (2) mixed use residential and commercial spaces; (3) narrower streets; (4) inclusion of walkways; and (5) green space planning. Alleys are another feature of traditional neighborhoods, which New Urbanists favor

because they have been shown to reduce crime and increase neighborhood interaction, in contrast to cul-de-sacs whose isolation actually fosters crime. The pedestrian not the automobile must be the focus in any traditional-type planning.

The remaining chapters, authored or co-authored by others, describe various communities which have adopted these neo-traditional values. Among them are Park Du Valle, Louisville, home to mainly lower-income African Americans and West Clay Township, Carmel, Indiana appealing to higher-income Caucasians. Another case study is Gainesville, with residents drawn from nearby University of Florida. Chapter Eight details an initial study (research on these new communities is sparse) comparing a neo-traditional and conventional suburb. The residents of the neo-traditional neighborhood did report a stronger sense of community, scored higher on satisfaction with neighborhood, were more vocal in their pride, and walked and visited more with their neighbors. A major criticism was the lack of diversity, especially racial, ethnic and religious.

In surveying the commercial side of these new communities, Besel found that they have particular problems in attracting and keeping grocery stores and restaurants. Problems include “visibility and access problems, price of goods and lack of patronage by local residents” (p. 108). While professional services like healthcare, educational, government and non-profit entities thrive, residents prefer to drive to seek cheaper groceries with parking availability elsewhere. In conclusion, Besel and Andreescu see the need for addressing these problems with financial strategies, zoning laws and state encouragement if these promising new urban projects are to grow and flourish.

In Lewis Mumford’s view “the medieval city serves as the basis for the ideal city” (p. 7). Will these neotraditional towns approximate it? The cathedral or great church was central to the life of the medieval town, with a market usually close by. The church acted as the community center in front of which a large piazza held the crowds. While the market was occasional, church services were constant. A series of little cities grew up each with its own church, market and fountain, joined to each other by narrow winding streets. Decentralization and organic growth incorporating different historical styles were the order of the day. Mumford described this as

a mode of planning that met the requirements of life and yielded to change and innovation without being shattered by it. In the deepest sense of the word, it was both functional and purposeful, for the functions that mattered most were those of significance to man’s higher life. *

It remains to be seen whether such a model is possible in secular America. However, Besel and Andreescu have done a service in exploring the efforts of citizen activists, housing developers, urban planners, city mayors and new urbanism advocates to make American cities more human and livable.

*The Mumford Reader, ed. Donald L. Miller (Athens, GA: the University of Georgia Press, 1995), p. 124.

