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Title

New Urbanism and Smart Growth: Twins Separated at Birth? [Dispatch]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8wp02013>

Journal

Places, 15(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

2003-01-15

Peer reviewed

New Urbanism and Smart Growth: Twins Separated at Birth?

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"New Urbanism and Smart Growth: A Research Symposium," conference sponsored by the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education (NCSGRE), University of Maryland at College Park, May 3-5, 2002.

As more communities are built following the principles of the New Urbanism, serious researchers have begun to check whether the underlying urban design instincts and chosen precedents of its practitioners are truly effective.¹ Indeed, the many New Urbanist projects now nearing completion are being seen as laboratories in which to test the movement's key claims. Among the questions researchers have started asking are these:

- *Can a walkable neighborhood really reduce automobile trips?*
- *Does a neighborhood designed with New Urbanist principles demonstrably improve its residents' sense of community (or civility) when compared to conventional suburban development?*
- *Can New Urbanist design reinforce ecological planning?*²

If New Urbanism's principles are supportable in practice, its advocates should have little to fear from such research — and much to gain. Thus, it was a sign of New Urbanism's coming of age that the Congress for the New Urbanism's 2002 academic conference, "New Urbanism and Smart Growth," was the most relaxed, most interdisciplinary, and most focused on research of that organization's gatherings to date.

In recent years the CNU has also tried to widen its focus. In particular, it has formed partnerships with the federal government's HOPE VI program for inner-city projects, and with the Smart Growth Network for regional planning. In this regard, the May conference was also a coming-

out party for the new National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education, its co-sponsor.

The location of the conference at the Center's home base, the University of Maryland at College Park, signaled these new allegiances. This institution is well situated to analyze Smart Growth, and its School of Architecture is open to the ideas of New Urbanism (its dean, Steven Hurtt, is chairman of CNU's education task force). By contrast, CNU has had a tough time infiltrating many elite architectural schools, as demonstrated by the mixed results of its first four academic conferences. In particular, the fierce discussions at Harvard, UC Berkeley, and Michigan that followed the 1998 Seaside debates generated much smoke, heat and press, but not much light.³

There is much in the field of urbanism that remains unsubstantiated by rigorous peer-reviewed research, the standard of proof in the academic world. This often places urban designers at a disadvantage in relation to other specialists, most notably landscape ecologists and transportation planners. A lack of hard research is particularly damaging in forums where scientific data is valued, as in administrative decision-making and the awarding of government funds.

It was particularly encouraging, therefore, that many of the papers presented at the 2002 CNU academic conference succeeded in establishing a clear research agenda. Such an objective stance not only helps define what we think we know, but more importantly, what we do not know about urbanism.

The Design-Transportation Link

The conference opened with a stimulating exchange between its keynote speakers, Maryland's

Governor Parris Glendening and the CNU's Andrés Duany. Glendening proudly pointed to how Maryland had created the nation's leading Smart Growth program, targeting state infrastructure expenditures to shape development and conservation. Duany, meanwhile, cleverly proposed Miami as a poster child for Smart Growth, citing its metropolitan government (1957), urban growth boundaries (1976), unified school district, higher regional densities, and Metro-Rail system as evidence of the kind of policies that Smart Growth advocates recommend.

Duany also challenged those in attendance to see how a regulatory response may not be enough to enhance overall quality of life. Without attention to place and community, he said, planners may just create "high-density sprawl."

Such comments about the value of urban design clearly touch a nerve in the fledgling relationship between New Urbanism and Smart Growth. While the CNU was one of the founding partners of the Smart Growth Network, New Urbanists may still be surprised to find that Smart Growth does not require their vision of good urban design — particularly on transportation issues.

The conference's dual mandate was examined in more detail in later paper presentations. In particular, Susan Handy (University of Texas) presented an exemplary transportation research review. She reported there is still much to be unraveled in terms of the complex interaction between built form and travel.⁴ However, research results are fairly definitive on several issues:

- *New highways do not cause sprawl, but they help determine its location.*
- *As a corollary, a moratorium on new highways will not prevent sprawl.*
- *Travel increases after new road*

construction, but it also increases after no road construction.

- *Light-rail transit will only increase density in corridors with strong intensification policies in place.*

However, on a key issue of interest for *Places* readers — whether good urban design reduces automobile use — Handy’s findings were more disappointing. Apparently, urban design matters somewhat, but good regional land-use planning matters more. Thus, a centrally located infill project, even if poorly designed, will have more impact on reducing work-related automobile travel than a greenfield project with the finest urban design. On the other hand, we don’t know much about nonwork travel, according to Handy, and this comprises more than half of the ten daily trips associated with each new home. These are the auto trips that good community design may have the most potential to replace or reduce, and they are an obvious target for more research.

Among other things, such findings indicate why urban design issues are not a core concern of Smart Growth advocates. Thus, while good urban design of the sort New Urbanists propose could marginally improve the transportation performance of an inner-city infill project, Smart Growth policy analysts might not force the issue. Indeed, such divergences are one reason NCSGRE Director Tom Downs has described Smart Growth and New Urbanism as “twins separated at birth.”

Urban Form Research

In comparison to transportation, the academy has hardly pricked the surface of issues like public health, community, information technology, and urban form. But in his presentation, landscape architect and planner

Larry Frank (Georgia Tech) suggested that the relationship between health and urban form is a promising avenue for future research. In particular, air-quality problems and the recent attention to obesity in North America have already attracted substantial funding for rigorous long-term studies.

Frank explained how partnerships between urban designers and public-health advocates go back to the origins of the planning movement in the late nineteenth century. But the burden of proof today is much higher. Merely asserting that good urban design would have public health benefits may have been sufficient in the era of Frederick Law Olmsted. But the public-health lobby has clout today because it is able to cite rigorous clinical trials in support of its policy recommendations.

In comparison, we barely know how to measure the composition of a city, according to the presentation by Emily Talen (University of Illinois). Terms like sprawl, density, and mixed use lack specificity and encompass a wide range of phenomena, she said. As a result, they are considered unreliable for analysis.⁵

There has also been much general discussion of “community” in New Urbanist literature. Sociologist David Brain (New College) argued that the concept of “community” might be the wrong one for designers to pursue — after all, Herbert Gans was able to find it even in Levittown. Instead, Brain argued that a good place may depend more on civility (the normative order of behavior) and social capital. The pending completion of more New Urbanist projects may be particularly telling in this regard. The first rigorous social studies of these communities are just appearing. Through the late 1990s, researchers had little to go on other than the evidence of

Seaside, the Kentlands, and Laguna West.

In contrast to such vague declarations of social value, landscape ecologists are often far ahead of urban designers in their ability to analyze the phenomena that concern them. They use Geographic Information Systems to analyze road patterns, stream networks, impervious cover, and habitat fragmentation at a regional scale. However, such a radical difference in scale and orientation aroused the sharpest exchange of the conference. This occurred during Maria Alberti’s presentation on ecology, environment, and sustainable development. Her work made it evident how little common ground there may be between regional landscape ecology and traditional neighborhood development (TND). In particular, urbanists in attendance raised concerns over the low level of human use proposed after metropolitan environmental protection.

Can human diversity and biodiversity coexist? Recent research indicates that effective ecosystem planning should be done at a regional scale, long before neighborhood design.⁶ By the time urban design begins on a 640-acre TND the potential for environmental conflict is much higher, since development impacts may extend well beyond the site. Smart Growth initiatives and the “West Coast” strain of New Urbanism may address environmental issues with less conflict.⁷

Economist Anthony Downs concluded the conference by giving a cold shower to the enthusiasms of Smart Growth and New Urbanism advocates. He warned that local and state governments in the U.S. have a dismal record in implementing regional planning (the state is often the only level that can do planning at this scale, and few do it well). The author of *Stuck in*

Traffic, Downs's warnings carry weight, because he has had a successful long-term record observing urban-policy issues.⁸ Some benefits have emerged from New Urbanism, he said, especially at the neighborhood level. But the market economy places limits on how far developers and designers can push the behavioral reforms some New Urbanists propose.

Downs did predict that some benefits will emerge from New Urbanism by self-selection. Specifically, people who want a walkable suburb will finally be able to buy into one. But good streetscapes may not be enough to get other people out of their cars. And he warned against any suggestion that Smart Growth policies or New Urbanist designs will reduce road congestion on a regional scale. Complicated and powerful forces are pushing travel in ways that are not well understood.

Finally, Downs challenged New Urbanists to conduct more research on how their projects will benefit lower-income people, particularly by creating more affordable housing through higher levels of density on greenfield sites.

Reflections

In many of these fields, New Urbanist planners are attempting to design the built environment to shape human behavior — an endeavor that is no longer automatically rejected as “environmental determinism” by informed observers. Evidence exists that the physical environment can condition some behavior, by design or default.⁹ But, as Doug Kelbaugh noted, the real power of architects and urban designers may lie in their ability to lead by representation. The ability to envision and prepare a persuasive proposal for the future remains a powerful tool for change.

Furthermore, while changing human behavior is a difficult and long-term objective, the anti-smoking campaign has shown it can be done — even in the face of tobacco advertising that rivals Detroit's promotion of automobility. Thus, as Dr. Howard Frumkin (Emory University) noted, there is much that urban designers may learn from public-health advocates:

- *Stronger evidence is more compelling than weaker (clinical trials vs. case studies).*
- *Policies with multiple benefits (TND) are more effective, since at least one of their elements may work.*
- *Future benefits for the health and quality of life of our children are very compelling in the public-policy arena.*
- *Such tactics may help the Smart Growth Network and the Congress for New Urbanism shape new research agendas for transportation, environmental and social issues.*

To date, the academic debate over New Urbanism has not shed much light on these issues. In some ways the situation recalls the “Garden Cities vs. Garden Suburbs” debate of the 1920s. At that time, there was tiny, struggling Letchworth to evaluate — and maybe Hampstead Garden Suburb as an alternative — but little else.

The literature from that era was similarly spirited. But not much of it was informed by close observation of built work, until the New Towns were developed in the 1950s. Both critics and proponents of New Urbanism now have a similar opportunity to investigate whether their rhetoric reflects reality.

Notes

1. Congress for the New Urbanism, *Charter of the New Urbanism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).
2. Scores of books and peer-reviewed research articles have recently been published. For a detailed bibliography of the wide range of academic research relating to New Urbanism and Smart Growth discussed in the article, see www.cnu.org/cnu_reports/academic_biblio.pdf.
3. Todd Bressi (ed.), *The Seaside Debates: A Critique of the New Urbanism* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002).
4. The NCSGRE will publish the proceedings of the conference in 2003. For Handy's and other papers, see www.smartgrowth.umd.edu/publications/ConferencePaps.html.
5. Emily Talen, “Exorcising the Ghost of Emily Latella,” *Places*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Fall 2002).
6. David Gordon and Ken Tamminga, “Large-Scale Traditional Neighbourhood Development and Pre-emptive Ecosystem Planning: The Markham Experience, 1989-2001,” *Journal of Urban Design*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Winter 2002).
7. Peter Calthorpe and William Fulton, *The Regional City* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001).
8. Anthony Downs, *Stuck in Traffic* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1992).
9. See Donald Appleyard, *Livable Streets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); W. H. Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1988); and Alice Coleman, *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing* (London: Hilary Shipman, 1990).