A Matter of Priorities: New Urbanism and Community Life

Emily Talen

Recent scholarship in *Places* (Michael Brill, "Problems with Mistaking Community Life for Pubic Life," vol. 14, no. 2, 2001; Clare Cooper Marcus, "Shared Outdoor Space and community Life," vol. 15, no. 2, 2003) has raised some important concerns about the ability of designers to affect social phenomena like "community." I feel, however, that some important issues have been left out, and that a full accounting of the ironies and ambiguities involved is crucial.

First, it is curious (to say the least) that these articles fault New Urbanists for failing to consider the idea of "community life" in their designs, when this is precisely the principle on which they have been most severely criticized.[1] Essentially, the New Urbanist idea of designing neighborhoods in order to promote a "sense of community" has been attacked on the grounds that it is simplistic, nostalgic, and even dangerous. David Harvey has perhaps best summed up this line of thinking in his article "New Urbanism and the Communitarian Trap," when he wrote, "'Community' has ever been one of the key sites of social control and surveillance bordering on overt social repression."[2]

Such a critique of the notion that it is possible to design for community has been around for almost as long as there have been proposals to do it.[3] Irregardless, such proposals form a strong part of the New Urbanist lineage. And the primary antecedent of New Urbanism – the garden city – was strongly influenced by the idea that there was an intrinsic relationship between design and community. While reading a recent survey by Mervyn Miller of the designs of early garden cities, it struck me how much these designs aimed at "communal life," and how clearly their two-dimensional designs revealed this intention.[4] For example, the designs of Raymond Unwin, the singularly most important figure in New Urbanist history, are full of what Cooper Marcus has called "shared outdoor spaces." Specifically, one could point to his 1899 "Plan of village green"; his 1898 "Quadrangles of cooperative dwellings for a Yorkshire town"; and his 1909 "'Definitive' layout of 'the Artisans' Quarter'." But virtually all garden city designs, from Hampstead Garden Suburb to Radburn and beyond, have relied on shared outdoor spaces in their effort to promote neighborliness.

This is well known. The question is, why would New Urbanists seemingly abandon one of the most important components of garden city design, a lineage to which they readily subscribe? The answer is that they haven't. Rather, their priorities are such that communal space does not take precedence in their designs over issues of connectivity, integration, and urban diversity.

Urbanism Comes First

The greatest concern of New Urbanism is urbanism — the maintenance and nurturing of quality urban environments that are generally compact, walkable, and mixed in use. In some instances, communal, shared outdoor space supports that goal; but in other instances, it does not.

I am sure there are plenty of examples of shared spaces that New Urbanists readily admire. But it is difficult to avoid observing that places which feature communal, semi-private space have traditionally been more suburban than urban in nature. Moreover, not all communal spaces are benign. In fact, they have often been more about homogeneity and inward-looking design intended for the promotion of exclusive enclaves, than about integrated, diverse elements that work to foster quality urbanism.

This does not always have to be the case — as Cooper Marcus shows; but it often is. No doubt, New Urbanists have also at times applied their criteria too vigorously. But, in my opinion, they are justified in their attempt to focus on the promotion of urbanism as a first priority.

What the focus on urbanism means is that New Urbanists are more concerned with the provision of a quality public realm than with the creation of private or semi-private communal space. Furthermore, there may be some justification for assuming that over-attention to private space may undermine this objective. Indeed, some advocates of communal space seem to write off public places as if they could not possibly serve the goals of social interaction — and, eventually, community building. This would seem indicative of a ready abandonment of public space (as if it were eternally doomed to being unsafe and poorly designed for community life).

While less-than-public spaces for local community groups can be wonderful, this does not preclude the possibility that truly public spaces can be equally so. But, given the state of public space in America, it is difficult not to be at least somewhat concerned that a focus on communal space would lessen the focus on the public realm.

What would be the effect on public space if every residential development demanded its own private communal outdoor room? Perhaps we can debate which type of space is in a greater state of neglect, and deserving of more attention.

Much Research Has Been Done

There is another irony about designing for community: the tendency for some designers to seemingly ignore existing literature on the relationship between the physical

environment and social life, while at the same time calling for more research on the topic. As a professor of urban and regional planning, I strongly support a vigorous research agenda — but only when the research that exists has been absorbed.

To be fair, I don't really know if important studies by Kasarda and Janowitz, Michelson, Ahlbrandt, McMillan and Chavis, and Chavis and Wandersman, among many others, on the relationship between physical environments and community or social life have been taken into account by those who call for more research.[5] Perhaps they have been. But it would certainly be helpful if calls for new research could tie into these existing studies. In the end, however, I think it is safe to say that designers could do a better job of assimilating research that comes mainly out of sociology.

One important outcome of this existing literature is that it indicates how ambiguous the relationship between design and community may be. For example, it points to the need to distinguish between designing for community life that is *already* there, and designing in order to nurture a sense of community that is currently *not* there. In other words is design an independent, explanatory variable that can engender community in some form? Or is it a dependent variable that responds to extant community life, like that seen among cohousers?

In the latter context, design may clearly be a matter of responding to self-selection. Groups of residents in cohousing situations — or even those who choose to live in a place like Celebration, Florida — are likely those who are most predisposed to the idea of community life, and therefore most like to actively seek it out. Because of their attentiveness, they gravitate toward settings they believe are nurturing of a particular type of communal environment.

Examples of this tendency are pervasive. Thus, Klaus compared the communal tendencies of residents of Forest Hills Gardens, planned in 1909, with the same ideals found in the residents of Celebration.[6] Both groups saw themselves, at least initially, as pioneers looking for a way to nurture the communitarian spirit. They were, in other words, predisposed. The fact that communities with shared spaces exist – or are being built to satisfy this need – is therefore very important. Advocates of the need for more communal space are likely responding to a perceived mismatch between the demand for such spaces and the existing supply.

However, the assertion that design is an explanatory variable that *creates* a sense of community in residents who are not self-selected or predisposed is very different — and much more difficult to support.

As a start, it is necessary to account for a variety of social realities that seem to work against the idea. Examples include the following: the complex meaning of the term "community" itself; the fact that some aspects of community life are coercive and socially undesirable; the strong sense of community that is known to exist in seemingly placeless domains; the documentation that localized interaction is not a requirement for building a sense of community; the knowledge that neighborhood units do not coincide with geographies of social interaction; and the evidence that people have been known to resist designing for social interaction.

These complexities are not anecdotal, but have been established based on a great deal of research conducted over many decades.[7] At the very least, designers intent on designing for community need to take these "downsides" into account.

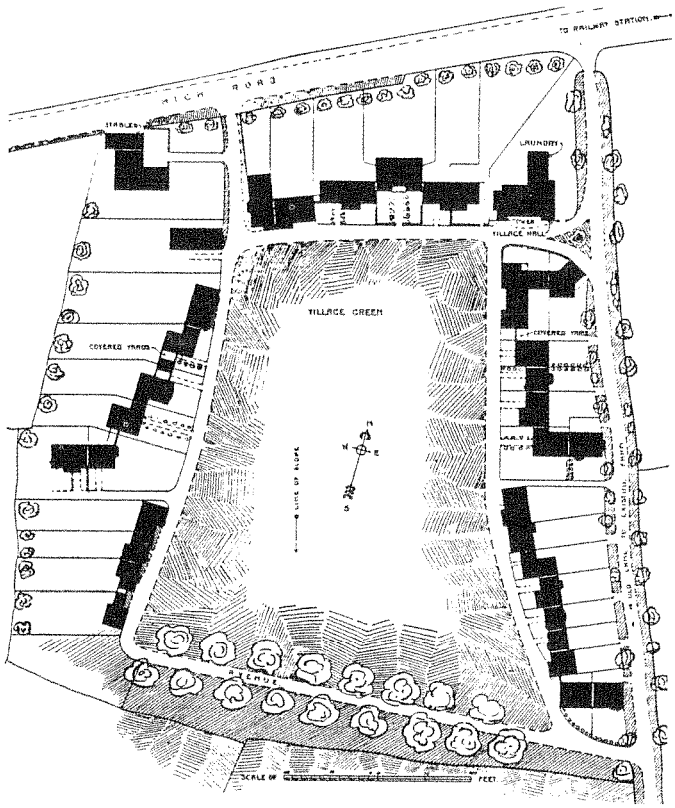
The Power of Quality Design

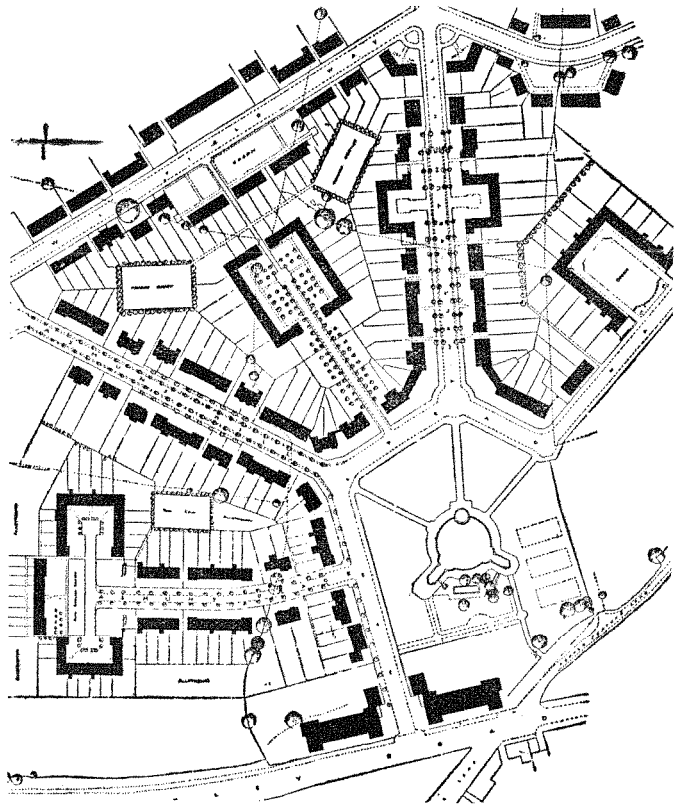
All of this could seem hopelessly negative if it weren't for the fact that quality urban design and planning rests on something other than the elusive notion of community. I can not speak for other New Urbanists on this point, but in my view the principles of New Urbanism are based on something much less ambiguous – the need to support communities that are diverse, interconnected, walkable, and service-oriented.

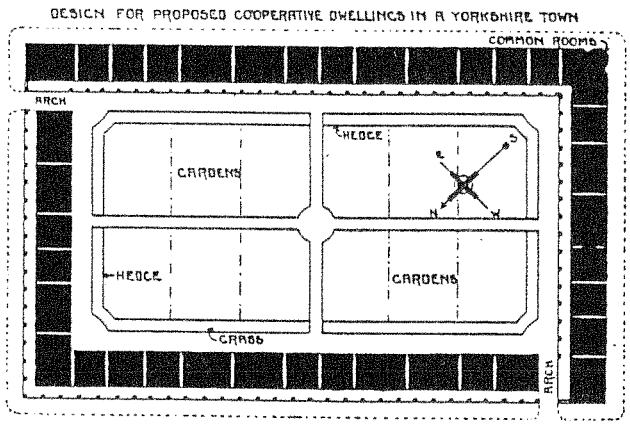
Rather than the need to foster community as an end goal, the highest priority in my view is the need to promote urbanism through the provision of services, facilities, public spaces, public transit, and all the other functions of daily life that the human habitat needs – in relatively close proximity – in order to sustain itself. This is a socially responsive approach, but it does not necessarily require the nurturing of specific kinds of social relationships (like community). It requires design skill and knowledge of human behavior, but not necessarily a focus on social life.

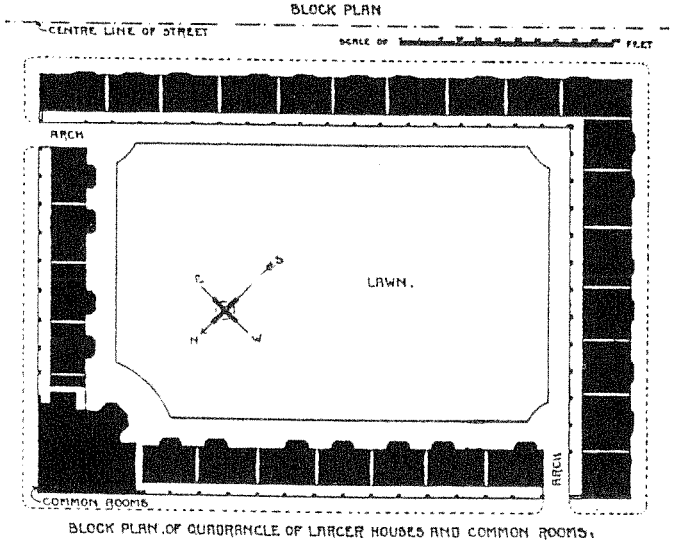
In this regard, I would like to draw a connection here to what Gerda Wekerle wrote more than twenty years ago in "From Refuge to Service Center: Neighborhoods that Support Women."[8] She argued that the social life of neighborhoods was being overemphasized in lieu of the more basic, service-oriented needs of residents. This is still a relevant critique.

Perhaps there could be some common ground, or some stimulation of common commitment, if we look for ways in which the two conceptions overlap – where, for those bent on using community as a basis of good design or for those more focused on quality urbanism as a first priority,









Top left: Plan of a Village Green, c. 1899, by Raymond Unwin. Originally published in *The Art of Building a Home*, 1901. Source: Mervyn Miller, "The Origins of the Garden City Residential Neighborhood," in Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, eds., *From Garden City to Green City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). According to Miller: "This informal open-ended grouping became an element of identity within larger schemes and was most completely realized at Westholm, Letchworth, in 1906" (p. 106).

Top right: Quadrangles of cooperative dwellings for a Yorkshire town, c. 1898, designed by Raymond Unwin, as illustrated in *The Art of Building a Home*, 1901. Source: Mervyn Miller, "The Origins of the Garden City Residential Neighborhood," in Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, eds., *From Garden City to Green City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

Bottom left: 'Definitive' layout of "the Artisans' Quarter," by Raymond Unwin. Originally published in *Town Planning in Practice*, 1909. Source: Mervyn Miller, "The Origins of the Garden City Residential Neighborhood," in Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, eds., *From Garden City to Green City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). According to Miller: "Groupings . . . were arranged to encourage neighborliness" (p. 116).

the goals of community-building and quality urbanism are mutually supportive. The list of important communal spaces can readily include facilities and services of all kinds. That this overlap is fundamental to the sustenance of good urbanism is a view that precedes New Urbanism by at least a couple of millenia.

Notes

1. See the following summaries: Ivonne Audirac and Anne H. Shermyen, "An Evaluation of Neotraditional Design's Social Prescription: Postmodern Placebo or Remedy for Social Malaise?" *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 13 (1994), pp. 161-73; and Emily Talen, "The Problem with Community in Planning," *Journal of Planning Literature*, vol. 15 no. 2 (2000), pp. 171-83.
2. David Harvey, "The New Urbanism and the Communitarian Trap," *Harvard Design Magazine*, Winter/Spring 1997, p. 69.
3. For a review, see Tridib Banerjee and William C. Baer, *Beyond the Neighborhood Unit: Residential Environments and Public Policy* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984).
4. Mervyn Miller, "The Origins of the Garden City Residential Neighborhood," in Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, eds., *From Garden City to Green City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 99-130.
5. John D. Kasarda and Morris Janowitz, "Community Attachment in Mass Society," *American Sociological Review* 39 (1974), pp. 328-39; William H. Michelson, *Environmental Choice, Human Behavior, and Residential Satisfaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Roger S. Ahlbrandt, Jr., *Neighborhoods, People, and Community* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984); and David M. Chavis and Abraham Wandersman, "Sense of Community in the Urban Environment: A Catalyst for Participation and Community Development," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1990), pp. 55-81.
6. Susan L. Klaus, *A Modern Arcadia: Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. & the Plan for Forest Hills Gardens* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).
7. Some of these are reviewed in Emily Talen, "Can Sense of Community be Built? An Assessment of the Social Doctrine of New Urbanism," *Urban Studies*, vol. 36, no. 8 (1999), pp. 1361-79.
8. Gerda R. Wekerle, "From Refuge to Service Center: Neighborhoods that Support Women," *Sociological Focus*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1985), pp. 79-95.

Clare Cooper Marcus responds:

Emily Talen raises some important points. I will attempt to comment on some of them.

In my article, I was not trying to suggest that the New Urbanists are ignorant of their forebears (Unwin, etc.), but that they have laid too much attention on public as opposed to community space. There is reasonable evidence to suggest that residential interaction — an important component of a sense of community — is facilitated by a site plan which creates a venue for chance encounters. One such venue is the type of shared outdoor space defined and described in my paper.

Social interaction in such spaces especially serves the needs of our most environmentally vulnerable citizens (children, parents of young children, the elderly, and low-income families), for whom a walk to a public park or plaza may not be desirable, or even possible. By focusing almost exclusively on the public realm, the New Urbanists are ignoring the recreational and social needs of important sectors of society.

I am not suggesting that every residential development provide "its own private communal outdoor room," but that we consider a reasonable mix of private and communal space and note the important difference between them. As to which kind of space is "in a greater state of neglect," I would suggest we look at which kind of *life* is in a greater state of neglect, and take heed of the late Mike Brill's plea that it is community rather than public life which is deserving of our attention. The argument that territorially based communities are no longer relevant does not apply to children, the elderly, and the poor.

I concur with Talen that people moving into cohousing or developments such as Village Homes are probably predisposed to community life. Such people exist, and we should aim to meet their needs, as well as those who prefer to spend time in fully public space. Ideally, planning goals should aim at maximizing choice, providing opportunities for those seeking community life as well those seeking public life — and everyone in between.