

New Urbanism: Chinatown as a Model for the Inner City

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For over a century, most of the American populace turned its back to the city in its search for a simpler, more harmonious style of life. "The desire to fashion a retreat from the unruly world of power and gain" drove many from the city proper to its outskirts, where they sought tranquillity in a natural setting. As planners, architects, and developers expanded the metropolitan envelope further and further into rural areas, they created the almost seamless sprawl that characterizes the contemporary American landscape. From the City Beautiful elements in streetcar suburbs to towns in bucolic settings by John Nolen, from Garden City designs by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright to the standard postwar suburb, design professionals attempted to marry technological innovations such as the train, streetcar and automobile with the idyllic imagery of the village. This led initially to low-density suburbs with lots of open space, little traffic and unimpeded vistas. These very amenities, however, evaporated as more and more people left the city in pursuit of them. Once an area was developed to 70 percent of its capacity, residents once again experienced crowded and congested neighborhoods, limited opportunities for their children, and many of the vices traditionally associated with urban centers.'

As the resulting urban sprawl became more and more unwieldy, many corporations and professional firms relocated to the newest edge cities. This placed them closer to executives' mansions and first rate golf clubs. At the same time they remained readily accessible through their proximity to interstate highways and regional airports. Recent data, however, suggests that some of these suburban downtowns are struggling economically.' Like other suburbs, they have begun to experience an increase in crime, traffic congestion and the cost of living. As a result, corporations have left, and office spaces have been reclassified to the lower "Class B" status, thus bringing in lower rent than anticipated. In addition, nearby malls are experiencing troubling vacancies due to the loss of major retailers. In such situations, the cycle of flight, renewal and decline might begin again in a yet more remote location.

New Urbanism, the latest reform movement to address our dissatisfaction with urban and suburban environments, at-

tempts to overcome these ills by redefining the nature of the American metropolis. Conceived as a critique of the auto-dominated suburb favored by American planners and developers since the 1940's, the movement re-introduces the idea of small walkable communities connected by public transit systems and characterized by different types of land uses. The movement's guidelines, the Ahwahnee principles, call for diverse housing types to provide for people with varying incomes. In addition, they stress the importance of a wide range of employment opportunities as well as a mixture of schools, parks and civic facilities within the community. They also suggest that the location of businesses and public facilities encourage pedestrian traffic or bicycle use. Furthermore, they recommend that the community have easy access to a regional transit system, and that it cultivate a well-defined green edge to permanently discourage sprawl. Rather than applying these well-conceived guidelines to inner cities as set forth in the preamble to the Ahwahnee Principles⁴ the majority of New Urbanist designers propose new communities that, like villages, have little or no ties to the city proper. Indeed, even though Webster's dictionary defines urbanism as the "character of life in the cities," it is exactly these areas that are largely ignored.

Although proponents of New Urbanism genuinely attempt to better everyday life, the movement itself has nonetheless generated criticism on several fronts. Nelson Benzinger, Professor of Urban Design at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, argues that "partial achievements . . . [of the movement] . . . must be as rigorously criticized for their shortcomings as they are applauded for their strengths, or they will be adopted as ideal models."⁵ He goes on to question whether a town or village isolated from the workplace can ever become more than a Garden Suburb. Indeed, many of what are called New Urbanist communities are nothing more than "dense blocks of suburban housing," in which "developers struggle to establish the crucial businesses, stores, and civic centers that make up true communities."⁶ Several other architectural critics and developers argue that communities such as these (5,000 inhabitants or less) are unable to generate enough jobs within walking distance or to support an eco-

nomically feasible commercial center that would serve the needs of the residents.' Due to the relatively low density of most of these communities (about sixteen units per acre⁸), it is highly unlikely that the diversity sought by New Urbanists can be achieved.

Given the narrow range of employment opportunities, commercial establishments and/or religious institutions, residents of these communities either have to exhibit common tastes, beliefs, and customs or commute to other municipalities that cater to their needs. Unless public transportation exists nearby, this mandates ownership of at least one car per family,⁹ significantly weakening the New Urbanist criticism of auto-dominated suburbs. Indeed, few neotraditional communities are willing to financially support public transportation. Instead, current taxation and transportation subsidies continue to favor individual transportation, without which the price of a gallon of gasoline would increase by \$2.25 at the pump.¹⁰ There are, however, a few cases in which communities support public transportation. In 1994 Portland area residents voted for payroll and gas taxes to pay for the public transit necessary to connect the New Urbanist community, Clackamas Town Center, with the city.¹¹ Residents supported the project despite the fact that the community's "sixteen units per acre will not support an effective system of mass transport."''

New Urbanist communities also face a severe challenge in the marketplace. Unlike conventional suburban tracts, where the promise of large lots in a sheltered environment are enough to lure buyers, New Urbanist settlements are marketed as entire communities. "Well-timed phasing of homes, stores, and other community amenities"¹³ becomes crucial to the marketing effort. Unfortunately, the development of community facilities, public transportation infrastructure and service components often occurs before they are economically feasible or sustainable. This huge up-front cost, in turn, raises house prices well above market rate.¹⁴ New Urbanist projects are thus likely to suffer in real estate recessions if the houses aren't sold quickly enough. The communities might fail to attract retail stores (Kentlands, Maryland), lay idle due to the developer's financial troubles (Laguna West, CA), or place retail out of residents' walking distance in order to better serve the surrounding auto-oriented region (Newpoint, South Carolina). These economic challenges force many developers to abandon the wide range of housing types required by the New Urbanist principles. Single-family homes dominate the landscape in many communities (Laguna West), where an economically diverse body of residents can no longer be accommodated. By reducing the variety of housing types, the community is more likely to attract a wealthier and often more homogeneous group of buyers.¹⁵ While these deviations from the original plan might aid the project's success in the marketplace, they certainly undermine the New Urbanist ideals.

New Urbanists have indeed brought forward many sound and relevant principles. Unfortunately, they have still failed to create complete, integrated communities with a wide range of housing and employment opportunities as well as a diverse

mix of retail, entertainment and civic services. Furthermore, due to a general absence of public transportation, residents of New Urbanist communities have not become significantly less car-dependent. Is New Urbanism thus perpetuating the low-density, car-dependent, suburban condition, and creating nothing more than a form of *New Suburbanism*?¹⁶ Can the movement possibly succeed in a suburban environment, where the attitude towards auto-oriented real estate development and urban planning prevails? And aren't the movement's efforts to create autonomous communities misdirected, for "much of the populist migration out of villages arose precisely because they were oppressive to the human spirit and otiose as a form of sociopolitical organization?"¹⁷ Given these questions, critics such as William Fulton conclude that "it makes no sense. . . to build neotraditional neighborhoods on the metropolitan fringe while ignoring the decline of traditionally designed neighborhoods in the urban core."¹⁸

America's cities, although often characterized by urban blight, are equipped with the utilities, amenities, and infrastructure that are integral parts of New Urbanist planning. They offer a range of housing and employment opportunities for a diverse community, as well as the historical, cultural, educational and nostalgic associations that most suburban downtowns and neotraditional communities have been unable to acquire. As a result, recent years have seen the beginning of an urban renaissance, where corporations, rather than moving their offices to even more distant small towns, are expanding their operations in the more dynamic, traditional downtowns.¹⁹ Perhaps the promoters of New Urbanism should shift their focus from settlements at the fringe to the city proper. Rather than studying suburban prototypes such as Garden Cities, their research could scrutinize inner city districts that have been able to withstand the overall trend of urban flight.

New York's Chinatown is one of a few successful inner-city neighborhoods that continues to thrive as a community. For over 100 years it has provided a place of residence and employment in retail, service and production for Chinese immigrants. Unlike many other ethnic communities — such as Little Italy, German Town, and Irish or Jewish enclaves — that made up vast parts of downtown America during the nineteenth century, Chinatown has remained intact. Most urban ghettos that provided refuge for early European immigrants served only as a home for newcomers until they could learn English and adjust to American culture. They subsequently dispersed and integrated themselves into the larger fabric of the city. Even today, however, Chinatown continues to accommodate residential and communal spaces within its compact and coherent layout. As a result, this ethnic enclave enjoys a vibrant streetlife throughout the week, attracts customers and visitors from surrounding neighborhoods and other cities, and experiences dynamic growth in its industries and commerce.²⁰ With these accomplishments in mind, Chinatown could possibly become a model for the rejuvenation of the American city.

Located between Manhattan's Little Italy, the Irish Five

Points, and "Jew Town," Chinatown emerged as immigrants fled eastward from the abuse and mob violence that they experienced in the Western States. With the Central Pacific Railroad completed and many of the California gold mines exhausted, over 100,000 Chinese immigrants started to compete with other ethnic groups for jobs as canners, fishermen and industrial or agricultural workers. They earned less than other laborers, thus posing a financial threat, especially to the Irish, who reacted by persecuting them relentlessly. The environment became steadily more hostile, leading many Chinese to move to the more tolerant metropolitan areas on the East Coast.

In New York City, the first Chinese settled around Manhattan's Chatham Square, a neighborhood already host to immigrants and transients. The area's proximity to the docks provided opportunity for employment as well as the security of anonymity due to the large number of seamen roaming the streets. By the turn of the 20th century, the small community of 150 Chinamen had developed into an enclave of about 4000 residents. The three-block area defined by Bayard Street, Doyers Street, Chatham Square and Mott Street housed predominantly small-scale operations: shops, grocery stores, restaurants and laundries. The majority of its residents were male because the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882 excluded Chinese women from immigrating. Interracial marriages were frowned upon, which left Chinese men for the most part unable to marry, start a family or interact with other groups based on children and family life. Assimilation was thus practically impossible. The members of this "bachelor society" saw themselves as sojourners, who dreamt of making their fortune and returning to their native country. The community reflected this lifestyle in its boarding houses, brothels, opium dens and gambling facilities. Indeed, until the revocation of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, Chinatown remained virtually unchanged.

The years following the second world war saw a steady increase in Chinatown's population and a subsequent expansion of its territory. As the number of its residents grew to 20,000, the area they inhabited expanded from three to seven blocks. During this period, women were once again allowed to enter the United States from China.²³ The new immigrants found employment in the garment industry as well as in the many small-scale Chinese businesses that catered to the needs of the community. Local restaurants flourished as well because more and more workers lacked the time to shop and prepare a meal. By the 1960's Chinatown's population no longer consisted almost exclusively of single men. Rather, much like the 19th century ethnic communities such as Little Italy, or the Irish or Jewish neighborhoods, it housed families who wanted to make their permanent home in the United States. Unlike the residents of other ethnic enclaves, however, the Chinese remained for the most part in their own community, and were not assimilated into the overall fabric of New York City.

The slow stream of Chinese immigrants turned into a torrent with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality

Act in 1965. The legislation based admission to the United States on two principles: first, kinship with American citizens; and second, professional skills needed to ensure the growth of the US economy. Consequently, two distinctively different groups of immigrants emerged: "Uptown" and "Downtown" Chinese.

Most of the "Uptown Chinese" immigrated from Taiwan or from major cities on the mainland. Family ties did not play a role in their admission because, through their specialized education, they were able to meet the needs of the American economy. Most were proficient in the English language or were able to acquire proficiency within a short period of time. Those who continued their studies at American universities moved easily into well-paid, white-collar professions. They did not settle in Chinatown but preferred outlying areas where they could more readily become a part of American society. Although reluctant to settle in Chinatown, "Uptown Chinese" contributed to its economy through their frequent weekend excursions. They traveled to the community to purchase Chinese goods, sample the cooking, participate in extended family celebrations, or visit one of the seven Chinese movie theaters.²⁵ The sheer number of these visits prompted the opening of the area's first supermarkets, which catered to this clientele by stocking frozen and canned dishes. The advent of these stores did not, however, change the character of the community to a large degree.

Unlike the "Uptown Chinese," the majority of those admitted based on kinship came from rural areas in the southern part of mainland China. They had little formal education or training, and lacked the language skills necessary to find work anywhere but in Chinatown. Known as "Downtown Chinese," they lived close to their sponsoring relatives, and sought support from the economic and social network of the enclave. As a result of this large influx of new immigrants, Chinatown once again outgrew its boundaries, and spilled over into what had traditionally been Jewish, Irish and Italian neighborhoods. By 1985 it encompassed 35 blocks and housed 70,000 residents. Five years later its population had doubled, and its territory had expanded yet another five blocks. Most of its residents worked in restaurants or garment factories within the community. These industries sparked the growth of related businesses such as restaurant suppliers, sewing machines repair shops and textile wholesalers. Furthermore, Chinatown's drastic growth created new opportunities for a variety of small-scale businesses that operated on the sidewalk. The constant arrival of new immigrants kept wages low, which, in turn, fueled a tremendous increase in the economic growth of the community.

In order to meet the needs of Chinatown's growing population, an ever increasing number of restaurants opened their doors to the public. Competition was fierce, and some Chinese owners began to deliberately attract the white-collar clientele who worked in the nearby municipal buildings and on Wall Street. As Chinatown's restaurants and specialty stores began to attract many professionals, the community gained respectability, and its reputation changed from slum

area to popular tourist attraction.²⁶ Furthermore, as a reaction to Anti-Asian sentiments during the Vietnam war, many "Uptown Chinese" professionals moved to Chinatown. They found employment as social workers or in banks and law offices. As a result, Chinatown's make-up gradually changed to include a more balanced mix of residents from all walks of life. Today Chinatown hosts numerous bilingual lawyers, doctors, real estate agents and tax accountants, as well as many banks, four TV production companies, several newspapers and numerous office buildings. Street vendors, small-scale shops and restaurants enliven the area as residents and tourists mingle on the street. In short, Chinatown provides an excellent example of the complete, integrated community proposed by the New Urbanists in their Ahwahnee principles.

Chinatown and New Urbanist communities fulfill these ambitious principles to differing degrees. Both contain housing, shops, work places, schools, parks and civic facilities, all within easy walking distance. Although the types of accommodations differ, both communities offer various types of housing. Chinatown does not offer the single detached home found in New Urbanist communities. It does, however, provide residences from upscale condominiums to inexpensive boarding houses to studios shared by more than one family. This wide range of housing types serves an economically more diverse group of people than those housed in the more limited choices found in New Urbanist communities. Indeed, in many other ways, Chinatown more completely fulfills the New Urbanist requirements for a successful community. It offers a wider range of jobs that include service and executive positions as well as employment in manufacturing and repairs. In addition, it is connected to a much better public transportation network than most New Urbanist communities, which in many cases have failed to implement their transportation plans. Due to its greater population, Chinatown also supports a more diverse spectrum of schools, churches, stores, restaurants and entertainment centers. The sheer number of these establishments in such a small area creates a vibrant atmosphere that draws people from their homes where they join the crowds that mingle on the streets. This picture contrasts sharply with the sedate character of neotraditional neighborhoods.

It should now be evident that inner city neighborhoods can achieve the goals set by New Urbanist planners. Perhaps we should turn our attention to the rejuvenation of these areas rather than creating neotraditional communities on valuable farmland. The American Farmland Trust claims that the compact development patterns proposed by New Urbanists will slow down the conversion of farmland into developed areas when compared to the current low-density patterns of suburban sprawl.²⁷ Nevertheless, these neotraditional communities would consume huge amounts of open space. Were planners to focus their efforts on inner city districts, however, much of the natural and agricultural land at the urban fringe could be preserved for future generations. The Ahwahnee Principle that "community design should help conserve resources and minimize waste" would also be served should the

inner city become the setting for New Urbanist designs. Existing infrastructure (sewage, streets, public transportation systems, schools, fire departments, hospitals, police stations, etc.) could be rejuvenated at far less expense than the cost of creating it anew in an outlying community. If, as at present, the desertion of our cities for new communities at the fringe continues, each generation will fund an entire new infrastructure rather than capitalizing on existing investments.

It is high time that design professionals shift their focus away from the planning of new suburban villages towards the revitalization of inner city neighborhoods. The guidelines for such endeavors already exist in the New Urbanist Ahwahnee Principles. Although these have only been partially implemented in many neotraditional communities, they could most likely be fully realized once applied to the city proper. Chinatown fulfills the guidelines set forth by New Urbanist theoreticians, and could therefore serve as a model for the rejuvenation of the city. Of course Chinatown has over 80 years of history as an ethnic enclave. This has led to the development of strong ties as well as to support systems that might not be found in racially mixed communities. Does this mean that Chinatown might not work as a model for urban revitalization? Only the future can tell. Evidence is strong enough, however, that makes such an experiment worthwhile.

Rejuvenation of the urban environment, however, will not happen overnight. After World War II, many cities implemented drastic urban renewal measures through which much of the small-scale, mixed-use fabric was demolished over a short period of time. Office towers, hotels and parking lots replaced many of the older structures at the core of the city, and convention centers covered multiple downtown blocks. Much of the livelihood of these areas evaporated as its residents were relocated to make room for big businesses. Although most renewal efforts were focused on the urban core, adjacent older neighborhoods also experienced changes of similar magnitude. As their more affluent residents moved to outlying suburbs, rents and property values declined drastically and much of the 19th century fabric started to deteriorate. Currently, most of these older residential neighborhoods form a ring of dilapidated, vacant or condemned buildings surrounding the Central Business District.

To combat the blight found in these residential neighborhoods, planners should introduce more retail and, in some areas, light industry.²⁸ Tax exemptions could be used to attract stores and services for the neighborhood residents. This would in turn encourage the renovation and preservation of existing buildings. Absentee land ownership and excessive speculation could be discouraged through tougher ordinances, stricter enforcement of building inspections and heavy fines for any violations. Empty lots could be used for parks, playgrounds, child-care facilities or schools to attract families and to help generate a sense of community. A portion of the tax revenue generated by the Central Business District could fund these improvements, which would go a long way towards revitalizing the neighborhood.

The Central Business District should also be rezoned to allow for a residential/commercial/light industrial mixture. This zoning, in conjunction with tax exemptions on capital investments, would attract new businesses and industries to the downtown area. Because it is vital to the success of the rejuvenation program that residents move back downtown, planners should also reintroduce housing, schools and parks to accommodate them. Furthermore, every effort should be undertaken to attract a variety of specialty retailers. These stores would serve the new residential population as well as the thousands of employees that commute to the inner city. As more and more people shy away from superstores because they want to "go on an errand instead of a shopping excursion,"³⁰ these stores would undoubtedly attract many customers and promote a richer, more varied streetlife.³⁰

Architects and planners should limit the size of new structures downtown as well as in residential areas in order to conform to the existing fabric rather than destroying its continuity. Street facades should be articulated with great attention to detail so that a visually diverse street space will prevail. If necessary, the storefronts of existing large-scale buildings should be remodeled to fit this standard. All stores and establishments should be oriented towards the street, and in commercial areas sidewalks should be widened in order to accommodate sale racks, outdoor seating or small stands for street vendors. In order to keep the street envelope continuous and to support the visual interest created by the above measures, the city should replace a few on-grade parking lots with parking structures. The remaining lots could either be filled with additional mixed-use buildings or used for parks, open air markets or playgrounds. In addition, the city should undertake every effort possible to provide clean and highly visible public transportation throughout the day and well into the evening.

Should these suggestions be followed, the city could be transformed into a vibrant, exciting environment that would lure its residents back from the suburbs, thus providing it with a broader economic base. The increased tax revenue would allow rejuvenation to continue, which would broaden the city's overall appeal. In short, the cycle of renewal would begin, which could lead to the rebirth of the American city.

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NOTES

- ¹ Nancy Stieber, "The Seductions of Withdrawal," December 1995, quoted in William Fulton, *The New Urbanism* (Cambridge: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1996), p. 7.
- ² Fulton, *The New Urbanism*, p. 4.
Charles Lockwood, "Edge Cities on the Brink," *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 December 1994.
- ⁴ The preamble demands that New Urbanists "first, infill existing communities and, second, plan new communities that will suc-

cessfully serve the needs of those who live and work within them." For a detailed description of the 1991 Ahwahnee Principles see Fulton, *The New Urbanism*, p. 6.

- ⁵ Nelson S. Benzing, "Agenda for a New American Urbanism: A Critique of The New Urbanism," in *Proceedings: 83rd ACSA Annual Meeting* (Washington: ACSA, 1995), p. 499.
- ⁶ Heidi Landecker, "Is New Urbanism Good for America," *Architecture* 85, no.4 (1996), p. 70.
- ⁷ Edward Robbins, "New Urbanism's Unkept Promise," *Harvard Design Magazine* Winter/Spring (1997), p. 61.
- ⁸ In a discussion held at the GSD in July, 1996 and published in the *Harvard Design Magazine* Winter/Spring (1997), Andres Duany asserts that "sixteen units per acre is the highest density that works with parking. Beyond that you have to use heroic measures to accommodate parking."
- ⁹ According to Peter Calthorpe, each car adds about \$ 8,000/year to the family budget. Landecker, "Good for America," p. 68.
- ¹⁰ Stephen B. Goddard, quoted in Benzing, "Agenda for a New American Urbanism," p. 501.
- ¹¹ Landecker, "Good for America," p. 73.
- ¹² Alex Krieger, "Urban or Suburban," *Harvard Design Magazine* Winter/Spring (1997), p. 52.
- ¹³ Fulton, *The New Urbanism*, p. 28
- ¹⁴ Single-family houses in the Kentlands were 30% above market rate. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ¹⁵ Market research on New Urbanist communities shows that the majority of buyers have a household income of \$ 51,000 - 110,000 (60%/48%), have no children living at home (73%/53%), and are willing to pay more to shop locally (56%/32%). Comparative figures of non-buyers are in bold. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ¹⁶ Alex Krieger, quoted in *Harvard Design Magazine* Winter/Spring (1997), p. 52.
- ¹⁷ David Harvey, "The New Urbanism and the Communitarian Trap," *Harvard Design Magazine* Winter/Spring (1997), p. 69.
- ¹⁸ Fulton, *The New Urbanism*, p. 29.
- ¹⁵ According to Charles Lockwood, the vacancy rate in downtown Boston has fallen to 12% from 19% in 1991. Lockwood, "Edge Cities on the Brink."
- ²⁰ According to Min Zhou and John R. Logan, New York's Chinatown serves as a place of residence, a place of work, and as an industrial sector, thus fulfilling the three criteria for an enclave economy. See "Returns on Human Capital in Ethnic Enclaves: New York City's Chinatown," *American Sociological Review* 54 (1989), pp. 809-820.
- ²¹ John Kuo Wei Tchen, quoted in Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 50.
- ²² Arthur Bonner, *Alas! What Brought You Hither?* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), gives the following breakdown of economic activity by 1888:
 - 2000 laundries in Manhattan
 - 30 all purpose stores catering mainly to Chinese
 - 8 restaurants
 - many cigar makers, few barbers, scribes, merchants, clerks
- ²³ In 1950, the male/female ratio was 1.89 : 1 compared to 27 : 1 in 1885. See Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), p. 20.
- ²⁴ According to Peter Kwong (1987, p. 61), Taiwan tailors its educational system to the needs of the American job market, teaching English in junior high school and encouraging students to study math, physics, or engineering even if their talents lie elsewhere.
- ²⁵ See: Bruce Edward Hall, "Ghosts," *New York*, 4 October 1993, for a description of such a visit.
- ²⁶ Whether the interest in this enclave was sparked by Nixon's visit to China, or whether the preference for Chinese food was really a reflection of a changing lifestyle amongst urban professionals remains unclear. Peter Kwong (1987, pp. 34-5).

²⁷ Fulton, *The New Urbanism*, p. 23.

²⁸ A similar approach is undertaken in East Harlem, NY, where attempts to re-introduce light manufacturing into a depressed residential area are aided by the creation of Empowerment and Economic Development Zones. Companies that move into the manufacturing zone are exempt from city and state sales taxes on capital investment and are eligible for state and Federal tax

credits and a 30 percent reduction in their utility bills. *New York Times*, 7 September 1997, p. 20.

²⁹ One retail analyst quoted in Richard Panek, "Superstore Inflation," *New York Times Magazine*, 7 April 1997, p. 68.

³⁰ Diesel Jeans, which opened a store complete with D.J and coffee bar, or Levis which offers custom-fit jeans for women, are thriving examples of this new trend.