

# Three Urbanisms and the Public Realm

DOUGLAS KELBAUGH

University of Michigan

New Urbanism is by now a well-known movement that promotes neo-traditional, neighborhood-based design. Although it has enjoyed meteoric success in the American media, it is far from the centerline of either the academic or the real estate development world. Despite many successful greenfield projects such as the Kentlands, conventional suburban development continues to envelop the American metropolis, which is still spreading out at a rate considerably faster than population growth. And conventional urban development and redevelopment is fast changing our downtowns into entertainment/tourist/convention/sports/office centers. Philadelphia, for instance, has recently converted three important downtown office buildings into tony hotels. These profound changes are happening piecemeal, without much input from urban designers and planners in general, much less from New Urbanists. And New Urbanism enjoys little and usually begrudging respect in academia, especially in most schools of architecture, where avant-garde theory continues to dominate.

Beyond the conventional "market" urbanism that is willy-nilly changing the face of American downtowns and suburbs, there are at least three self-conscious schools of urbanism: Everyday Urbanism, New Urbanism, and what I call Post Urbanism. There are other urbanisms and architectures, such as environmentally inspired ones (which I subsume under New Urbanism), but these three cover most of the cutting edge of theoretical and professional activity in these two fields. All three are inevitable and necessary developments in and of the contemporary human condition. Here's my synopsis of the three paradigms.

Everyday Urbanism is not utopian. Nor is it as tidy. It celebrates and builds on everyday, ordinary life and reality, with little pretense about the possibility of a perfectible or ideal built environment. Its proponents are open to and incorporate "the elements that remain elusive: ephemerality, cacophony, multiplicity and simultaneity."<sup>1</sup> This openness to populist informality makes Everyday Urbanism conversational as opposed to inspirational. Unlike New Urbanism, it downplays the relationship between physical design and social behavior. It, for instance, delights in the way indigenous and migrant groups informally respond in resourceful and imaginative ways to their ad hoc conditions and marginal spaces. Appropriating space for commerce in parking and vacant lots, as well as private driveways and yards for garage sales, is urban design by default rather than by design. Vernacular and street architecture in vibrant, ethnic neighborhoods like the barrios of Los Angeles, with public markets rather than chain stores, and street murals rather than civic art, are championed. Everyday urbanism could be easily confused with conventional real estate development but it is more intentional, ideological and self-conscious than the generic "product" that mainstream bankers, developers, and builders supply to an anonymous public.

New Urbanism is idealistic, even utopian - because it aspires to a social ethic that builds new or repairs old communities in ways that equitably mix people of different income, ethnicity, race and age, and because it promotes a civic ideal that mixes land of different uses and buildings of different architectural types. It sponsors public architecture and public space that attempt to make citizens feel they are part, even proud, of both a culture that is more significant than their individual, private worlds and a natural ecology that might even be sustainable. New Urbanism rejects the physical fragmentation and functional compartmentalization of modern life. It maintains that there is a structural relationship between social behavior and physical form, although the connection can be subtle. It posits that good design can have a measurably positive effect on one's sense of place and community, which it holds are essential to a healthy, sustainable society. The basic model is a compact, walkable city with a hierarchy of private and public architecture and spaces that are conducive to face-to-face social interaction, including background housing and private gardens as well as foreground civic and institutional buildings, squares and parks.

Post Urbanism, which includes "infrastructure urbanism" or "landscape urbanism," is heterotopian and sensational. It welcomes disconnected, hypermodern buildings and shopping mall urbanism. It discounts shared values as no longer possible in a fragmenting world composed of isolated zones of the "other" (e.g. the homeless, the poor, criminals, minorities, etc.) as well as mainstream zones of consumers, internet surfers, and free-range tourists. Outside the usual ordering systems, these zones of taboo and fantasy and these commercial zones of unfettered consumption are viewed as liberating because they allow "for new forms of knowledge, new hybrid possibilities, new unpredictable forms of freedom."<sup>2</sup> to cite Ellen Dunham-Jones.

Post Urbanism attempts to wow an increasingly sophisticated consumer in and of the built environment with ever-wilder and more provocative architecture and urbanism, like architect Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Like Modernism, its architectural language is usually abstract with little reference to surrounding physical or historical context. It also continues the modernist project of avant-garde shock tactics, no matter how modest the building site or program. It is sometimes hard to know if it employs shock for its own sake or whether the principal motive is to inspire genuine belief in the possibility of changing the status quo and of resisting controls and limits that are thought to be too predictable, even tyrannical. Gehry describes his exuberant insertions into the city as examples of democratic urbanism, despite the fact they usually ignore or overpower local discourse. His projects are usually self-contained and microcosmic, with little faith in the work of others to complete the urban fabric, even the dynamic, fragmented one that post urbanists advocate. Signature buildings, which are typically more self-referential than contextual, and a sprawling, auto-centric city like Atlanta are held up as models - although the very idea of model might be rejected outright by post urbanists.

These three urbanisms utilize different methodologies. New Urbanism is the most precedent-based. It tries to learn and extrapolate from the most enduring architectural types, as well as the best historical examples and traditions as they intersect contemporary environmental, technological, social, economic and cultural practices. It is also the most normative, often drafting prescriptive codes rather than proscriptive zoning. Overall coherence, legibility and human scale are highly valued.

Everyday Urbanism is the most populist of the three, with the designer seen as an empirical student of the common and popular rather than the ideal and pure. It grows out of both the community design movement and the pop art movement. The design professional has fewer conceits. She is more of a co-equal participant in the public dialogue with the local citizens. Citizen participation aspires to be very open-ended and democratic. It is less normative and doctrinaire than New Urbanism, because it is more about reassembling and intensifying existing, everyday conditions than overturning them and starting over with a different model. It is also the most modest and compassionate of the paradigms. If the New Urbanist romanticizes a mythic past, the Everyday Urbanist overestimates the mythic aspect of the ordinary and ugly.

Post Urbanism claims to accept and express the techno-flow of a global world, both real and virtual. It is explorative rather than normative and likes to subvert design and zoning codes and convention. Post Urbanists don't engage the public as directly in open dialogue because they feel the traditional "polis" is obsolete and its civic institutions too calcified to promote new possibilities. They tend rather to operate as "lone geniuses" contributing a monologue – often an urbanistically selfish one – to the media marketplace. Rem Koolhaas, the famous Dutch architect, claims there is no longer any hope of achieving urban coherence or unity. His architecture is internally consistent – elegantly so in most cases – but demonstrates little interest in weaving or reweaving a consistent or continuous urban or ecologic fabric over space and time. Projects tend to be Large or X-Large, denatured, bold and overwhelming to their contexts. If the New Urbanist tends to hold too high the best practices of the past and the Everyday Urbanist overrates a prosaic present, the Post Urbanist is over-committed to an endlessly exciting future.

The three paradigms lead to very different physical outcomes. New Urbanism, with its Latinate clarity and order, achieves the most aesthetic unity and social community as it mixes different uses at a human scale in familiar architectural types and styles. Its connective grids of pedestrian-friendly streets look better from the ground than the air, from which they can sometimes look overly formulaic, baroque and slavishly symmetrical. Everyday Urbanism, which is the least driven by aesthetics has trouble achieving beauty or coherence, day or night, micro or macro, but is egalitarian and lively on the street. Post Urbanist site plans always look the most exciting, with their laser-like vectors, fractal geometries, sweeping arcs and dynamic circulatory systems. However, they are overscaled and empty for pedestrians. Tourists in rental cars experiencing the architecture and urbanism through their windshields are a better served audience than residents for whom there is little human-scale nuance and architectural detail to reveal itself over the years. Are local citizens becoming tourists in their own city, just as tourists are now, conversely, citizens of the world?

Everyday Urbanism makes sense in developing countries where global cities are mushrooming with informal squatter settlements that defy government control and planning, and where underserved populations simply want a stake in the economic system and the city. But it doesn't make sense in the cities of Europe, where a wealthy citizenry has the luxury of fine-tuning mature urban fabric and freely punctuating it with monumental, civic buildings that can be counterpoint. In American cities, which lack the continuous fabric of European cities but have the economic wherewithal to build anew, New Urbanism offers just such a possibility. In the ecology of cities, development in the third world and in poor American neighborhoods represents early

successional growth, while middle-aged American cities try to thicken their stand of mid successional growth. European cities are more like climax or late successional forests, where there is little room for growth except in clearings made for experimentation.

Everyday Urbanism is too often an urbanism of default rather than design, and Post Urbanism is too often an urbanism of sensational, trophy buildings in an atrophied public realm. We can build a more sustainably ordered and emancipatory commons than the latter two models promise. Although Europe may hanker for Post Urbanism and the developing world may embrace Everyday Urbanism, the typical American metropolis needs and would most benefit from New Urbanism at this point in its evolution. It may not be an absolute or ultimate fix (indeed, it will eventually ossify and lose its meaning and value as it degenerates in the usual historical course from archetype to type to stereotype), but it is far superior to what passes for new brownfield, grayfield, and greenfield communities in America today.

## CIVITAS – THE PUBLIC REALM

Without community, without civitas, we are all doomed to private worlds that are selfish and loveless. As our society becomes more privatized and our culture more narcissistic, the need and appetite to be part of something bigger than our individual selves grow. Organized religion and individual spiritual development answer this need for many people. For some people, however, belonging to a community or "polis" may be the highest expression of this spiritual need. And for all members of society, there is the need to be part of some social structure. People are social animals, and our need to share and to love makes community a sine qua non of existence. On the other hand, humans also have a fundamental need to express themselves as individuals, to individuate themselves psychologically and socially, even to excel and rise above the crowd. A community must simultaneously nurture both a respect for group values and a tolerance for individuality, even eccentricity. This is the paradox of community that will forever require readjustments.

Community must deal with the full range of human nature, including its own dark side. If it projects its own dysfunction and pathologies onto an outside enemy or stigmatized minority, it has not fully faced itself and is in collective denial. More typically, the unity in community is bought at the price of identifying enemies, who are sure to return the favor. Enemies will get even some day, as the chain reaction of intolerance and injustice is perpetuated. If this dialectic is an inevitable part of the human condition, the question arises as to what is the most hospitable scale for social harmony and political unity and the least hospitable scale for hatred and enmity. It begs a deeper question: at what scale are civitas, justice and brotherly love best fostered? Ancient Greek philosophers suggested that 5,000 citizens was an optimum size for a polis. (With wives, children and slaves, the total number must have been more like 25,000.) New Urbanism of course presents the case that neighborhood of a half mile on a side and the metropolitan region are the most sensible and equitable scales for community and governance in the metropolis.

Americans have been quick to exchange the more raw and uncomfortable sidewalk life of the inner city neighborhood for the easy and banal TV life of the suburban family room. We have been too quick to give up the public life that American cities have slowly mustered in spite of a long legacy of Jeffersonian rural yeomanry and anti-urbanism. It has been our good fortune that immigrants from countries with strong public realms (and cities where the wealthy citizens live downtown rather than at the periphery) have imported urban and ethnic values for which we are much the richer. But many European immigrants have wanted to leave the public life behind. Indeed, the pioneers of Modernism in Europe came out against traditional urban streets and the messy complexity they sponsor. The Athens Charter of C.I.A.M.,

led by the most heroic of all twentieth-century European architects, Le Corbusier, joined the battle for a more “rational” separation of vehicles and pedestrians in a new urban vision that spread to and across America.

African-Americans – the group brought to America most forcibly and most unfairly – have often maintained a strong and rich street life, as have Latinos. But European Americans have continued to flee the public realm – most recently from public city streets to the gated subdivisions of affluent, second ring suburbs. They have taken the money with them, and the best schools – without which there cannot be healthy community.

Few humans would deny the value of *civitas*, as well as of mutual respect and tolerance. But some contemporary critics question the notion of traditional community. They posit that communities of interest, including ones enabled by modern electronic communications, have supplanted what used to be communities of propinquity and place. This is not a new notion in America; as de Tocqueville observed: “Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations . . . religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute.”

It is an undeniable fact that telecommunications and computers have changed our lives in many ways and will continue to do so at an increasing rate. However, it is not evident that they have reduced our need for physical community. Indeed, living with a computer screen in your face all day and a telephone in your ear, with radio or CD in the background, may increase the appetite for physical community. As the poet and pundit Gary Snyder has said, the internet is not a community or a commons because you can’t hug anyone on it. The world wide web may prove antithetical to community by providing anonymous sources with instantaneous access to vast audiences to which they are not accountable. Never have such hidden voices had such access to such large audiences. Electronic snipers alongside the information highway are not engaging in public discourse, any more than a website can equal an Italian piazza. If anything, electronic communications have increased the human need for traditional neighborhoods with buildings you can kick and neighbors at whom you can wave or frown.

There are three ways to go with these weightless invisible electrons, which have no architectural palpability. One way is to accept, embrace and even celebrate their evanescence and flux, trying to make an architecture and urbanism that is transitory and ephemeral. This is the Posturbanist city where a physical public realm, indeed the very notion of urbanism, is denied – or at least transformed beyond recognition. Everyday Urbanism is committed to a vibrant, authentic public realm, but seems somewhat indifferent as to whether it’s face-to-face interaction or electronic communication. The third way is to resist the electronic net as the primary public realm, to build a high quality physical world of buildings, streets, plazas, and parks that encourage and dignify human interaction among friends and strangers, rich and poor, black and white, old and young. That is the time-tested strategy that New Urbanism has rechampioned – first with the automobile and now the electron – not to exclude it but to control it.

Traditional notions of the city and of community and its public realm are being challenged by new design ideologies and new technologies. It’s confusing and we need to step back, especially in America, and examine what drives us as designers and as citizens. As designers, are we too enthralled by innovation, or worse, the appearance of innovation? Has this mandate for originality, or worse, for novelty slowly ruined our cities? Has it turned them into Post Urban places of entertainment and spectacle? Has Everyday Urbanism, on the other hand, underestimated the value that architectural and urban form can add? As citizens, are we too seduced by private pleasures and personal conceits to cultivate a rich, coherent, and healthy public realm? In our quest for a new *civitas* – a commons – are we prepared, like strong cultures before us, for the balance and discipline required? Or will technological determinism, the market, and design fashion simply pull us where they want?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>Ellen Dunham-Jones (personal correspondence, January 2, 2000).