CREATING WEALTH: REVITALIZATION AND GENTRIFICATION
ON THE LIMITS OF ARROGANCE OF DESIGN

Charles Buki, Michael Pyatok, Ed Robbins

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We are concerned that New Urbanism overstates the impact design can have. As presently marketed, New Urbanism comes perilously close to implying that the culprit at fault for places like Robert Taylor Homes and Lafayette Courts is bad design. As sold to the public, New Urbanism teeters on the edges of irresponsible architecture by paying lip service to the fact that environmental determinism has limits and that physical housing conditions alone cannot change the social conditions of residents. We say this not as bystanders on the sidelines of the design profession, but as informed believers in the power of good design whose experiences are in the trenches of community development. We say this as some among the converted who strongly believe New Urbanism can indeed make a powerful contribution to the larger effort to build a better urban environment and civil society, but that to do so first requires knowing where the limits of design and planning to influence our lives in fact are.

By arguing that their designs provide the basis for overcoming sprawl, generating community revitalization, and creating a more civil society, the New Urbanists are bound to their forebears by their faith in their own all encompassing vision for a design of a better world. From Ebenezer Howard to Le Corbusier, from Garnier to the designers of Thamesmead, architects have offered their particular and exclusive solutions to the social and cultural problems that naturally accompany urbanism. We find it ironic that, even as the New Urbanists dramatically reject modernist designs for the city by emphasizing more traditional visions of urban place, they share with many of the modernists the dogma that emphasizes the importance of design in overcoming social ills and creating economic value and social good.

The history of architecture, however, is littered with the plans and designs of those who claimed to have the answer to such problems: plans and designs that the New Urbanists now reject with their own one dimensional answer. We are thus justifiably distressed by assertions from many New Urbanists that their architecture and planning addresses the real issues at stake. We simply cannot ignore the fact that millions of residents of the most banal suburbia imaginable lead productive lives. Nor can we look away from hundreds of utterly distressed inner city neighborhoods that are filled with splendid housing and exquisite urban design.

Simply put, exaggerating the impact that design can have in people's lives is irresponsible. In this panel's view, New Urbanism -- in overstating the influence of design -- is a movement playing with fire. It runs the risk of making promises it cannot keep and reducing serious social and cultural problems to ones of design and planning style. It is critical that we ask whether design can foster particular social ends, be it the creation or support of community, the overcoming of social fragmentation, or the lowering of crime. These questions, we believe, must be addressed on equal footing with land assembly and site planning, because, at the end of the day, what parents really care about is a good school and a home in a safe neighborhood.

To foster a public perception that really bad social problems are the result of really bad design and planning, and that really good design and planning, such as Kentlands, results in reductions in crime and a stronger sense of community - fueled by programs like HUD's HOPE VI initiative - is irresponsible. Such a polemic misses the realities of choice and consequence framed by the market place and government policies. It also carelessly helps enable our society to avoid addressing such root problems as poverty, classism, and racism even as it repeats the mistakes of architects of the past.

In the 1940s and 50s a great deal of exceptional urban fabric was destroyed to make way for grand plazas and polished apartment towers. In the name of remediating social pathologies through quick fixes to the physical order of things, whole sections of every American city were razed. Fifty years after renewal, we are again witnessing the gestalt blaming yesterday's architecture for current social problems while arrogantly suggesting today's style of planning is better equipped to address them.

Today, even while the high rises of east Baltimore are being torn down to make way for the very new and urban Pleasant View Terrace, near perfect Victorian rowhouses in Washington, D.C. are being cleared because the neighborhood is distressed. The arrogance of such practices is appalling. It is a natural consequence of the idea constantly being forwarded by the design community that architecture matters more than it really does. Constrained by massive concentrations not just of poor people but poor unemployed people, housing authorities charged with turning things around are very unlikely to remediate the distress in the neighborhoods where their largest projects exist. Is it any wonder that the elixir of newness of the physical plant and traditional scale combined with lots of money and a statutory requirement to reduce long term operating costs, mix incomes, and address family self sufficiency would be intoxicating?

Such thinking ignores the nature of neighborhood change. It is blind to the limitations of architecture to have meaning in people's lives. It fails to understand the relationship between cause and effect. It does not fully appreciate that while big box strip centers are visually decrepit, many people find their form incidental to their lives, if they regard it at all, as they find the prices they offer attractive. It does not take into account that most people want safety, a good job, good schools, and a secure investment in their home -- all things design cannot in itself deliver. Good and pleasing design adds to the attractiveness of place but it is never the basis for its success, and indeed, this panel believes, only becomes relevant after other integuments of civitas, common-wealth, and personal wherewithal are in place. In fact, stable, cohesive communities exist under the most dire of physical circumstances where jobs and schools are strong.

Communities don't fail because the buildings are arranged in a cul-de-sac or because of strip development. People don't abuse their spouses because there wasn't an alleyway behind the house, or a porch out front. Trash won't accumulate because there are no sidewalks. People make choices that may be influenced by design, but rarely do people's choices hinge on it when things like employment and family and food are missing.

To suggest that sprawl is a problem because of form is to forget that many people want to be separated from those not like them and that sprawl provides this while keeping housing costs low, if artificially so due to subsidy. To suggest that inner city deracination is a scourge because public housing is too dense or too high is to neglect the importance of unemployment and industrial flight. It conveniently forgets about mutually reinforcing issues like deteriorating schools, the millions of children who lack an on-going relationship with a caring adult, and racial discrimination. It is to deny that concentrations of poor people are primarily a function of economic choices made by the five percent who own 85 percent of America's wealth. The social and cultural consequences of poverty cannot be ameliorated merely by built form. Certainly, the poor like everyone else deserve the right to housing that they find commodious and attractive, but suggesting that design will solve society's problems is tantamount to believing that the problem with modernism was not modernity, but crummy style. Life is not that easy.

Responsible design and planning should allocate costs accurately. New urbanism attempts to do

this and it should be congratulated loudly for this. But responsible design also enables a society to grapple with issues that cause problems, and New Urbanism -- fixated on the physical -- is disguising these linkages.

Responsible design and planning takes note of cause and effect, of our American requirement for freedom of choice and our hypocritically American demand to be free of those choice's consequences. Responsible design and planning tackles the issue of choice in the market and what happens when it is exercised by some but not all. And new urbanism is not hard-wired to achieve this either.

Last, a responsible architecture is an honest architecture. New urbanism begins to make the case that our public realm requires public investment. It begins to make the case that public investment should not result in inordinate private gain. This is all good. But it is not all there is.

Until the public realm is truly both formally and functionally public, and not reserved for the few who live in particular well-designed neighborhoods, New Urbanism runs the risk of being merely a marketing tool for Corbu Redoux and not a response to the loss of public life in our cities.

The quality of the built environment does indeed affect the quality of our lives people live. We deeply believe that a poorly designed world cannot elevate the human spirit. A world dominated by cars makes it hard for people to connect their own lives to the lives of others. Current residential development patterns offend our sense of place because they abet separation, and reduce the quality of our common experiences. But we caution against remade modernist arguments that imply otherwise when they suggest the problem is an inadequate design, as opposed to an inadequate civic framework and tradition.

At the same time, we are here at and within CNU to suggest that though a poorly designed world does not help to elevate the human spirit, design does not determine it. Neither credit nor blame may alone be placed on the shoulders of architecture.

We believe that our auto-oriented world is fracturing our common tethers. But we also recognize that people like to drive their cars. We think suburbanization does segregate, it inordinately privatizes and that it represents the physical manifestation of a grandiose attempt at private gain at public expense. But we also recognize that people with little to say about architecture enjoy the suburbs and live full and interesting lives there. We recognize that while designers may be unhappy with the suburban dream, for a lot of people, having an oversized garage out front is exactly what they want.

We state this because without a deeply sincere appreciation of culture and economics, it is easy to mistake architecture for what really matters. The rage to improve the quality of our lives through better design runs the risk of recreating the very tenets of modernism we are all here to undo. What architecture can contribute to civitas is no more about sculpture than a grid with alleys and codes is the skeleton of a civil society.

Are alleys important? Sometimes. Do they improve the likelihood that neighbors will talk? They sometimes can and often do. Should we have them? Sometimes. But a form that might enable people to have more social interaction cannot alone overcome the divisions caused by years of neglect in places like East LA or the social alienation that results from the materialism of a place like Littleton, Colorado.

Are our high-rise public housing projects failures? Some are. (But so are some low-rise, garden apartments). Will tearing them down and building low-rise projects based on New Urbanist principles foster the regeneration of a community over the long term without fundamental social and economic change? History does not suggest that would be possible.

What we need is a way to begin to rethink how to make our cities better places without depriving them of the role people have as citizens. We need to think of cities as more than the sum total of buildings while also pushing society at large to stop thinking of places as but the sum total of the cheapest way to make a buck.

If the design of housing is seen first and foremost as the task of creating attractive and salubrious places to dwell as one element among many in the design and production of the city and the region and not as social engineering architects can be both more and less ambitious. They can be less ambitious in recognizing that architecture may have important social implications but has neither determinative nor even dominating social effects; more ambitious by suggesting that, in a world in which so many people are either homeless or housed in less than decent housing, overcoming social fragmentation, crime and alienation is far from being realized.

Such a conclusion would confront architects with another radical notion: to turn Gwendolyn Wright's statement that "for centuries Americans have seen domestic architecture as a way of encouraging certain kinds of family and social life" on its head by understanding that we need to be partners with others and change certain kinds of social life if we are to encourage the design of good housing as part of an effort to overcoming the social ills and urban problems that face us today.