

Theme Panels

New Urbanists Look to Regional Planning

The connectivity and diversity New Urbanism brings to neighborhoods—a concept long espoused by New Urbanism leaders Andres Duany, FAIA, and Peter Calthorpe, AIA—applies as well to regional planning, they told a jammed audience May 18 at the AIA national convention. Based on their regional planning work and studies across the country, Duany and Calthorpe outlined the Transect Concept (as the New Urbanism regional planning model is called), which sets a pattern for smart growth without suburban sprawl.

Three kinds of urbanism

Moderator Douglas Kelbaugh, FAIA, began the discussion by defining three types of urbanism:

- New Urbanism is based on the precedent of planned towns that progress symmetrically from a business/civic core to an outer reach of farms and forest.
- Everyday Urbanism is unplanned development and the progenitor of suburban sprawl.
- Post Urbanism combines laser-like fractal forms that make exciting images in plan, such as the work of Daniel Libeskind, “but it is overscaled and empty at the street level,” Kelbaugh said.

There is a place and preference for all three forms of regional development, the panelists agreed. The only one the panel put forth as worthy of rational pursuit, not surprisingly, was the New variety. New Urbanism is still not mainstream, Kelbaugh said, saying that “it gets little or grudging respect in academia.” That aside, the audience, which filled every seat and square foot

of non-aisle floor space in the auditorium, sat in rapt attention for more than two hours and queued up dozens deep afterward for a chance to speak directly with the panelists.

The only tense moment of dissention came when an audience member asked pointedly why New Urbanists look so poorly on preservationists. (The question was apparently in response to an earlier comment Duany made that some people want forests around every home instead of yards. Too much green space



Kelbaugh, left, Duany, and Calthorpe.

adversely effects connectivity, density, and safety, he had said.) “This woman misunderstood me,” Duany shouted repeatedly in mock horror, promptly diffusing the situation. In seriousness, he contended that urbanism has to be seen as an environmental movement on its own. When teaching the Transect Concept at Yale, he continued—only slightly defensively—his classes were attended by many more forestry than architecture students. Kelbaugh jumped into the fray. “Architecture students aren’t into the transect because they are too busy in the transect, worshipping their star archi-

tects,” he quipped.

The Transect Concept

The fundamental element in the Transect Concept is the continuum of zones it establishes from the town or city business district core outward through a high-density, mixed-use city center; a general-use area, including multifamily housing; an edge area of single-family housing and schools; and finally reserves of green space that might be developed and preserves that cannot be developed. Similar to a system of capillaries flowing into arteries, transit systems and roads feed to the central core. (Cul-de-sacs need not apply in the New Urbanist vision.)

Development within each zone has its own range of options for setbacks, parking requirements, street widths, and so on, Duany said. Each also needs a diverse range of housing options from affordable to opulent to keep the community mix healthy. He acknowledged that some critics consider New Urbanism to be unduly restrictive. His response is that the range of options, although fixed, provides people with broad array of choices. They choose to live where they feel comfortable, and they have some assurance that it will stay that way.

In a regional plan, town and city zones coordinate with one another. They share the green-space preserves and mutually plan preservation or development of the reserves. City growth is contained within its boundaries through infill development rather than outward sprawl. Or, if the city is allowed to develop outward, zoning can ensure that outlying towns

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maintain their own transect progression and remain intact as town “parks,” with the urban transect flowing around them instead of through them, Duany said.

Fully developed zoning needed

The zoning for a transect plan needs to be developed fully and put into place in parallel to existing zone regulations, Duany said. Trying to replace an existing zone system would be extremely difficult and require compromise, which would diminish or destroy the transect plan. There are people who love the urban core and there are people who much prefer the rural life. Both are miserable in the suburbs as they are commonly zoned now, he said.

In the new towns he has planned, Duany said he begins with a set of community principles to which everyone involved in the development plan agrees. These are inviolate concepts of performance prescription for concepts such as connectivity and mixed use. His clients either agree to these principles or “I tell them to get another planner,” Duany said. “Once all those principles are put in place, it’s too late for people to change their minds and say ‘Oh, I didn’t know you meant my backyard.’”

The coded plan will grow over many years and guide the work of many clients and designers, Duany said. He sug-

gested that no plan should be expected to go more than 20 years without reconsideration.

Involve the developers

Another important element to making the Transect Concept real is to make sure the developers are involved; that they can make a profit. If they don’t have the incentive, the plan will fail. Often it is incentive enough if the overseeing jurisdiction preapproves the development permits, a process many developers find hellish, Duany said. Of course, securing such preapprovals means convincing the jurisdictional decision makers yourself, he said.

An effective disincentive to development is to buy reserve land—but not all of it, Duany advised. Developers are only interested in the first 400 feet back from a main road. If you buy that from the farmers and allow them to continue to work the land, you maintain the green space and the farmers get the same money the developers would have been offering.

New Urbanism and the neighborhood

New Urbanism is generally recognized as a planning concept at the neighborhood scale. Acting as a fractal, Calthorpe said, the concepts of connectivity and diversity can be applied to regional planning as well. Where neighborhoods depend on pedestrian access for connectivity, re-

gions rely on transit systems. Where neighborhoods have health-care centers and K-12 schools, regions have hospital centers and colleges.

Preservation is at the heart of both, Calthorpe said. Neighborhoods and regions have distinct edges that need to be preserved. Where those edges are blurred, you don’t see green fields, you see grayfields and brownfields-paved-over suburban strip development and abandoned manufacturing sites. The key to changing grayfields back into neighborhoods is to target these infill-development sites, reconstruct nature, provide a complex mix of uses, and recreate the sense of neighborhood boundaries, Calthorpe said.

The biggest difficulty with this concept, he acknowledged, is how to incorporate employment districts with the commercial and residential districts. In the case of business parks, for example, one corporation can take up four million square feet of space. It’s hard to maintain a neighborhood scale with that kind of enormity.

The way to handle planned urban growth is through regional-scale planning that allows people to see the full range of choices, Calthorpe concluded. Give people what they want—be it a walkable neighborhood, a bustling city center, or the outer open spaces—and they will be happier. ■