

Crowell 1

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New Urbanism: Spaces & Movement

After absorbing the source material, the purpose of the assignment is, primarily, to answer three questions about the New Urbanist movement in city / town planning, the movement that seeks to replace the mall and asphalt sprawling purgatory that is much of off-ramp America with a return to the community layout and aesthetic appreciation (championed in large part by William Kunstler) that predates the Second World War. The three major questions are: Are New Urbanist communities a step forward, are they what people want, and does Chris DeWolf, a critic of the movement, have a point?

I suppose whether or not one thought that New Urbanist communities were a step forward or not would depend largely upon whether or not you think your community at present works. If one tends to agree with Kunstler, as I do, then one can look around and see the tyranny of brutalist, cost-saving copycat architecture all around. I (as you've already seen me describe in the discussions at length) have lived in Pensacola, Florida, where one can see the actual original pre-war community (because it's historic) bumped right up against the unplanned brick boxes surrounded by proliferate parking. Pensacola's the only place I've ever been (or heard of) with a drive-through funeral home, complete with window for viewing the body, that's how fast-food

culture *they* are. One can actually see, without the benefit of maps or zoning officials, where the zones end and new ones begin. That is housing, that is historic area, this is businesses and restaurants and realty offices. This might not be as obvious to me as it is had I not lived in Madison, Wisconsin, where there are strict mixed-use and building height and frontage rules and the neighborhoods surrounding the capitol. I lived on East Johnson Street, and later, on North Livingston, and our streets were one way, with median flower beds and our apartments were above sandwich shops and liquor stores and coffee houses and corner groceries. You might live next to anyone.

And now I live in Murfreesboro, just off of St. Andrews Drive. I am cul-de-sac people, but that's okay, because most everyone else is, too. If I want a relationship with my neighbors, I have to work at it, because otherwise I can go days without seeing them, such are our lot lines. St. Andrews is the plague of the neighborhood, such as it is – a long, windy stretch of road that's posted at 30 MPH, but too long to really mandate that, and too twisty to go much faster. In all seriousness, the great problem we see all time is the smashed brick mailbox, where some zealous motorist has lost control and destroyed yet another anonymous brick mail-holding monolith.

So: do I think that a planned community along the lines of Kentsville would be a step forward? It's kind of step backward, a return to simplicity, but terms of a solution to so many problems of cities and suburbia, yes, it would be a great boon to have a place that works, with working mass transit, and things located locally and an actual return to community in the sense that most people mean when they say it. So many don't see the need for such planning, and instead of proactive building and design, only engage in reactive planning and design, responding to problems that are happening instead of anticipating things we already know and planning for

them. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, people say without understanding that everything that ain't broke eventually breaks down. People aren't supposed to develop floodplains and barrier islands, and they wouldn't need to if people didn't feel such a great need to escape, to get away to places less oppressive than the ones they've seen. In this sense, I agree wholeheartedly with Kunstler when he talks about these places being terrible for the souls of the people who live in them – killing hope and obscuring the view of the future. In many ways I know that to be true.

Is this what people want? Well, no. Some, maybe, but for the most part, people want easy and convenient, and they have that now, so why would they mess with it? You'd have to make people want it using the tools capitalism provides – making it appealing or cheap or convenient, or creating incentives (beyond those less tangible initially) for making people want to make this move in that direction. Eventually, it'll be good for everyone, but that's not how you move people right now.

Does Chris DeWolf (and those like him) have a point? No, or at least, not a very good one. While you wouldn't want any movement that has ramifications like this to proceed unexamined, to criticize it for being “fake” is the worst kind of ignorance and assumes that the current way of doing things is genuine, organic and came together by accident and/or natural development. His other criticism seems to be that current New Urbanism communities have the same problems with use that we have now, which results in the same problems with car density and unhappiness and so on, but this is a disingenuous point at best, as his examples are places who still have zoning. The point is that zoning must be purely mixed use, or this does not work. If you're criticizing the experiment based on a flawed model, then your critique has less validity, possibly none. The model is: building according to the Kunstler directive, zoning out the

windows that all face the street and have natural sunlight streaming through them. Speak to the actual proposal, Mr. DeWolf (and his pack) or don't speak.

In the final analysis, all communities are going to have problems. I for one, however, would like to give them a chance to be real community problems instead of blinkered, pseudo-pragmatism built into them from the beginning.

Summaries:

1 *James Kunstler's article from The Atlantic "Home From Nowhere"* - This one was easy for me, seeing as how I read his book back in 1998 or 1999, and recommended it to our whole class earlier in the semester. Kunstler's "spirituality of time and place-type language" doesn't always appeal to me, and there's no way you're going to get Americans to re-adopt rods as a system of measurement (unless they're *actual* rods with sponsor names on them and get you 25% off at Wal-Mart's), but I think Kunstler knows he's raging against the machine anyway, and I admire and respect what he says, having lived in places that work and places that definitely do not. At the same time, he seems to overestimate the average American's inclination to fix what makes them unhappy in lieu of simply ignoring it. While he acknowledges that his proposed changes will take time, I don't think he allows for nearly enough time, he undervalues the strength of capitalism in resisting these changes and doesn't seem to grasp the time it takes for an aesthetic movement to really organically change. (When he's angry, he's especially entertaining, like the "band-aids for someone who tripped and fell on their chainsaw" example.)

2 *James Kunstler's TED Talk "How Architecture Wrecked Cities"* First and foremost, I have to say that the TED Talk from Kunstler sponsored by BMW was mind-bendingly ironic. He begins with one of the columns of his typical message – the main reason that this matters has less to do with "pretty places" than the ugly, disconnected life that is the natural result of living in an ugly, disconnected place. He contends that instead of making places that give humanity a view of a hopeful future, we have bent over for rampant capitalism and made instead places that are "not worth caring about." His point was furthered by the fact that whenever he displayed overhead maps of places that worked, I thought I was looking at Nice, France, or someplace just as

European, and when parking lot Hells were displayed, I know where that is without captions. I particularly enjoyed the reclamation plans for expired malls, and the references to I.M. Pei, who designed the dorms in Sarasota at New College, where my wife went to school. Pei's a brutalist, and I've always found his work to be offensive. Especially when one has been tipping a bit – so much concrete.

3the 10 Principles of New Urbanism from newurbanism.org After reading and watching Kunstler put it more entertainingly for 40 minutes or so, the incredibly straightforward design principles set out by the New Urbanism website are staid and maybe need some bullet-pointing work to be a little more engaging. Lists of points are never my favorite things to read, but they are succinct, and they introduced and explained the “Transect” concept better than Kunstler did.

4CBS Sunday Morning's spot on New Urbanism While I feel it is unwise to dis on Crosby Stills, Nash & Young, I have always hated the song, “Our House,” preferring Young by himself to the combo. That said, this spot does a better job at pointing out that “New Urbanism” is really just “Old Urbanism” than Kunstler's comments about throwing history in the garbage after WWII, as it does it visually. I like the point (I guess about 4 minutes in or so) about people becoming more sophisticated and more able to appreciate design – I hope that's true and that they come to appreciate it more than the convenience of parking and Walgreen's and two McDonald's literally within 2.8 miles of their home (which I have at present). The end of this is very typical Sunday morning fluff piece; presenting all sides as equally valid; except that I don't remember the word “Utopia” in the Declaration of Independence.

5Chris DeWolf's article from Planetizen “Why New Urbanism Fails” The initial piece of criticism in this essay (like the end piece from the CBS thing before it), the idea of fake or “faux”

towns, is rank bullshit, if you'll pardon me, because it chooses to leapfrog the process of how we got to this point in the first place. By declaring a planned space that adheres to a set of aesthetic guidelines “fake” you imply that mall/interstate off-ramp neighborhoods are a naturally occurring phenomenon, which is just ignorance, deliberate or not. Certainly, DeWolf has a point about the segregated zones being an issue, but that simply means that the builders have not followed the plan, which is strictly mixed-use. Unless zoning can be gotten around, he's right, and Kunstler would admit so – you have a prettier version of the same problem. Finally, his idea that we have “organic neighborhoods that fill inner cities” is inaccurate, as the beginning of the CBS piece points out about Chicago, and as a drive across American would illustrate. The best of these places are planned, and the planning shows.