The New Urbanism and the Communitarian Trap

David Harvey on social problems and the false hope of design

ON RETURNING TO OAKLAND after many years of absence, Gertrude Stein remarked that "there is no there there." This is often taken as a simple condemnation of the impoverished qualities of American urban life, a comment that came naturally to someone who viewed America as her home country and Paris as her home town. That reading fits into a long line of critical and sometimes outraged commentary on the "placelessness" and lack of "authenticity" that characterizes many American cities, an urbanization process that produces what James Kunstler (in *The Geography of Nowhere*, 1993, and *Home from Nowhere*, 1996) dubs "the geography of nowhere" (soulless suburbs, mindless edge cities, collapsing and fragmenting city cores fill in the pieces of this dyspeptic view). The task of architecture and urban design is then construed as a heroic battle against such monstrous deformities. But Stein's remark was actually an intensely personal and emotional response to the rapidity of change in U.S. cities, to that process of perpetual redevelopment that obliterates and erases childhood memories of people and places. How to recuperate history, tradition, collective memory, and identity then becomes the holy grail.

These two themes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. And in what nowadays passes for the New Urbanism (see Peter Calthorpe, *The Next American Metropolis*, 1993, and Peter Katz, *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*, 1994), we witness their deliberate conflation into a programmatic statement. Urban living can be radically improved, made more authentic and less placeless, it is argued, by a return to concepts of neighborhood and community that once upon a time gave such vibrancy, coherence, continuity, and stability to urban life. Collective memory of a more civic past can be recaptured by a proper appeal to traditional symbols.

There is much in this movement to commend it, beyond the adrenaline surge of doing battle with conventional wisdoms entrenched in a wide range of institutions (developers, bankers, governments, transport interests, etc.). There is, first, the willingness to think about the place of particular developments within the region as a whole and to pursue a much more organic, holistic ideal of what cities and regions might be about. In so doing, the postmodern penchant for fragmentation is overcome, even as Unwin, the New York Regional Plan of 1929, and Mumford are resurrected as better guides to action than the Charter of Athens. There is, furthermore, a strong interest in intimate and integrated forms of development that by-pass the rather stultifying conception of the horizontally zoned and large-platted city. This liberates an interest in the street and civic architecture as arenas of sociality. It also permits new ways of thinking about the relation between work and living; facilitates an ecological dimension to design that goes somewhat beyond the argument for superior envi-

ronmental quality as a consumer good (though there is plenty of that in evidence); and begins to pay attention to the thorny problem of what to do with the profligate energy requirements of the automobile-based form of urbanization and suburbanization that has predominated in the United States since World War II.

But there is also room for skepticism. The presumption, for example, that America is "full of people who long to live in real communities, but who have only the dimmest idea of what that means in terms of physical design" (Kunstler, 1996) betrays a certain arrogance. But there are more substantive objections. It is not clear, for example, that a preference for neighborhood and

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community (presuming it really exists) will easily displace America's love affair with the car even if such a displacement is economically feasible. Most of the projects that have materialized, furthermore, are "greenfield" developments largely for the affluent and appear more directed to making the suburb "a better place to live" (Philip Langdon, *A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb*, 1994) than to revitalizing decaying urban cores. And it is not clear even to Vincent Scully, a skeptical ally of the movement, that the rich are really choosing "community" rather than "the image" of community ("The Architecture of Community" in Katz, *The New Urbanism*). Is collective memory being recaptured or invented? Even more seriously, the new urbanism cannot get to the crux of urban impoverishment and decay. When jobs disappear, as William Julius Wilson points out in *When Work Disappears*, the whole fabric of sociality is torn asunder, making invocations of community and traditional neighborhood districts (of the sort that Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk design) seem irrelevant to the fate of the

"new" American metropolis actually forming all around us. In the absence of employment and government largesse, the "civic" claims of the new urbanism sound particularly hollow.

But my real worry is that the movement repeats at a fundamental level the same fallacy of the architectural and planning styles it criticizes. Put simply, does it not perpetuate the idea that the shaping of spatial order is or can be the foundation for a new moral and aesthetic order? Does it not presuppose that proper design and architectural qualities will be the saving grace not only of American cities but of social, economic, and political life in general? Few supporters of the movement would state so crude a thesis (although Kunstler comes close). Yet this presumption pervades the writings of the new urbanists as a kind of subliminal subtext. The movement does not recognize that the fundamental difficulty with modernism was its persistent habit of privileging spatial forms over social processes. This, as L. Marin (in *Utopics: Spatial Play*, 1984) shows, is central to all classical forms of utopianism (beginning with Sir Thomas More, whose descriptions of Utopia bear a rather distressing similarity to those set out in the new urbanism). The effect is to destroy the possibility of history and ensure social stability by containing all processes within a spatial frame. The new urbanism changes the spatial frame, but not the presumption of spatial order as a vehicle for controlling history and process.

The connection between spatial form and social process is here made through a relation between architectural design and a certain ideology of community. The New Urbanism assembles much of its rhetorical and political power through a nostalgic appeal to "community" as a panacea for our social and economic as well as our urban ills. Vincent

Scully, for example, in commenting on Seaside, that icon of the New Urbanism, notes (in Katz, *The New Urbanism*) that it has "succeeded beyond any other work of architecture in our time . . . in creating an image of community, a symbol of human culture's place in nature's vastness." He continues:

> One cannot help but hope that the lessons of Seaside and of the other new towns now taking shape can be applied to the problem of housing for the poor. That is where community is most needed and where it has been most disastrously destroyed. Center city would truly have to be broken down into its intrinsic neighborhoods if this were to take place within it. Sadly, it would all have been much easier to do before Redevelopment, when the basic structure of neighborhoods was still there. . . . It is therefore a real question whether "center city" as we know it can ever be shaped into the kind of place most Americans want to live in.

The presumption here is that neighborhoods are in some sense "intrinsic," that the proper form of cities is some "structure of neighborhoods," that "neighborhood" is equivalent to "community," and that "community" is what most Americans want and need (whether they know it or not).

But can "community" really rescue us from the deadening world of social dissolution, grab-it-yourself materialism and individualized, selfish, market-oriented greed? Community has always meant different things to different people, so what kind of "community" is understood within the philosophy of the New Urbanism? It is here that harking back to a mythological past carries its own dangerous freight.

The New Urbanism in fact connects to a facile contemporary attempt to transform large and teeming cities, so seemingly out of control, into an interlinked series of "urban villages" where, it is believed, everyone can relate in a civil and urbane fashion to everyone else. In Britain, Prince Charles has led the way on this emotional charger toward "the urban village" as the locus of urban re-

generation. Leon Krier, an oft-quoted scion of the New Urbanism, is one of his key architectural outriders. And the idea attracts, drawing support from marginalized ethnic groups, impoverished and embattled working-class populations left high and dry through deindustrialization, as well as from middle- and upper-class nostalgics who view it as a civilized form of real estate development encompassing sidewalk cafés, pedestrian precincts, and Laura Ashley shops.

The darker side of this communitarianism remains unstated: from the very earliest phases of massive urbanization through industrialization, "the spirit of community" has been held as an antidote to any threat of social disorder, class war, and revolutionary violence. "Community" has ever been one of the key sites of social control and surveillance, bordering on overt social repression. Well-founded communities often exclude, define themselves against others, erect all sorts of keep-out signs (if not tangible walls). As I. M. Young (in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 1990) points out, "Racism, ethnic chauvinism, and class devaluation . . . grow partly from the desire for community" such that "the positive identification of some groups is often achieved by first defining other groups as the other, the devalued semihuman." As a consequence, community has often been a barrier to rather than facilitator of progressive social change, and much of the populist migration out of villages (both rural and urban) arose precisely because they were oppressive to the human spirit and otiose as a form of sociopolitical organization (see, for example, R. Blythe, *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village*, 1969, and Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder*, 1970). All those things that make cities so exciting — the unexpected, the conflicts, the excitement of exploring the urban unknown — will be tightly controlled and screened out with big signs that say "no deviant behavior acceptable here." No matter: the idea of the urban village or of some kind of communitarian solution (see Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 1982, and Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda*, 1993, for social arguments of a similar sort) to our urban ills worms its insidious way into public consciousness, with the New Urbanism as one of its forms of articulation.

A more proper antidote to the underlying spatial determinism of both modernism and the new urbanism is not to abandon all talk of the city (or even of the possibility of utopia) as a whole, but to understand urbanization as a group of fluid processes in a dialectical relation to the spatial forms to which they give rise and which in turn contain them. A utopianism of process looks very different from a utopianism of spatial form. The problem is then to enlist in the struggle to advance a more socially just, politically emancipatory, and ecologically sane mix of spatio-temporal production processes rather than to acquiesce to those imposed by uncontrolled capital accumulation, backed by class privilege and gross inequalities of political-economic power. Building something called community coupled with the politics of place can provide some sort of empowering basis for such a struggle (I discuss this in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, 1996). But the New Urbanism pays no mind to that: it builds an image of community and a rhetoric of place-based civic pride and consciousness for those who do not need it, while abandoning those that do to their "underclass" fate.

The logic of capital accumulation and class privilege, though hegemonic, can never control every nuance of urbanization (let alone the discursive and imaginary space with which thinking about the city is always associated); the intensifying contradictions of contemporary urbanization, even for the privileged (some of which are highlighted in the New Urbanism), create all sorts of interstitial spaces in which liberatory and emancipatory possibilities can flourish. The New Urbanism identifies some of those spaces, but its conservatism, its communitarianism, and its refusal to confront the political economy of power blunt its revolutionary potential.

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