Presidential Address
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URBAN FORM, HUMAN IDENTITY, AND POLITICAL POSSBILITIES

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> In experience, human relations, institutions and traditions are as much a part of the nature in which we live as is the physical world. Nature in this meaning is not "outside." It is in us and we are in and of it. But there are multitudes of ways of participating in it, and these ways are characteristic not only of various experiences of the same individual, but of attitudes of aspiration, need and achievement that belong to civilizations in their collective aspect.
>
> - John Dewey, *Art as Experience*[1]

> Many, many human beings are not thriving in the city, in fact they are barely surviving....It is obvious that [the late-capitalist city is] eating its own children in order to satisfy the unquestioned demands of a market economy made manic by global greed.
>
> - Joseph Grange, *The City: An Urban Cosmology*[2]

> In general, you can tell what really scares a society—its collective vision of the dangerous other—by examining its architectural arrangements for exclusion and isolation.
>
> - William J. Mitchell, *Placing Words: Symbols, Space, and the City*[3]

I. Crisis of Cities

1.1 Introduction

Much has been written, especially in the United States, about the crisis of cities, about the many problems facing our largely automobiled cities. This is not the crisis of the late 1970s. It is not the crisis of cities burning, runaway inflation, and cultural "malaise." Rather, the crisis is described as one of sprawl, loss of farm and wilderness lands, increasing racial and economic separation, increasing demands on infrastructure, time lost to commuting, loss of financial resources, the waning of community, and an ever more fractured political life.

What I plan for the next few pages is to discuss briefly this crisis, and hint at the role of suburbanization in this process. I will then consider two possible responses: New Urbanism and Civic Environmentalism. In the end, I will suggest that of these Civic Environmentalism is a better response, better in large part because while the problems we

face are problems of design and planning, they are neither exclusively, nor even mainly, such.

1.2 Sprawl

Over the last 75 years, cities in the United States have sprawled. A study from Cornell University concludes that the growth of population explains about 31% of the growth in land area of United States urban areas in the last 20 years. Even those areas that experienced no population growth increased in urbanized land area by an average of 18%.[4] Data collected by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development for its *State of the Cities 2000* report show that urban areas are expanding at about twice the rate that the population is growing.[5] Development patterns have emphasized single-use development, with pods of commercial, housing, public, and other spaces all developed independently. One of the reasons for sprawl, and one of the upshots of it, is our ever-continuing love-affair with individual motor vehicle transportation.[6] The automobile carries people from one space to another, stringing out the social experience, and mapping a community with no center and no edge. Sprawling growth patterns eat land, increase travel time and cost, and lead to greater pollution levels.[7] Sprawl also exacerbates social separations. Living patterns become increasingly segregated along racial lines,[8] and along economic lines.[9] Further, as the sprawl continues, older, inner ring suburbs now face many of the same problems as the central city.[10]

Consider Atlanta. From the mid-80s to the mid-90s, Atlanta grew 32% in population. During the 1990s alone, the region doubled in size from 65 miles north to south to a staggering 110 miles. This growth has not been evenly distributed. In 1998, growth in Atlanta's suburbs was 100 times the growth in the city. From the mid-80s to the mid-90s, Atlanta's property taxes increased 22%, vehicle miles traveled jumped 17%, and ground-level ozone, measured by number of days with unhealthy concentrations in the ambient air, rose 5% in Atlanta.[11]

1.3 The Meaning of Sprawl

Sprawl contributes to loss of land and more environmental degradation. Between 1992 and 1997 the loss of farmland accelerated. The US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Inventory for farmland lost shows a significant increase in suburban sprawl during the 1990s. During those 5 years in the mid-90s, we lost 11.2 million acres worth of farmland and other open spaces to sprawl. This means the annual average rate is 2.2 million acres. The total land lost to sprawl was 25 million acres in the 15-year period from 1982 to 1997 alone.[12]

Perhaps sprawl is the American Dream, and perhaps any problems with it are easy to fix. There is plenty of land left in the United States, and congestion would go away if we would just build more roads. Wal-Mart and Super Target respond to our desire for convenience and easy access. They offer everything we might need in one place, and sometimes 24 hours a day. Further, sprawling development patterns are the result of the free market responding to people's true desires—including the desire for a single-family

residence and a patch of green. People participate through neighborhood associations and by voting on bond issues and for local office holders. If more people do not participate, perhaps that is because they are satisfied with the state of things.

Perhaps, but as you probably guess, I think not. This version of the American Dream is what Walter Benjamin called a phantasmagoria—a deceptive image intended to dazzle and amaze, a thing which appears as itself while simultaneously hiding itself.[13] We have tract mansions and suburban subdivisions as key to making a home and a place that is so like others as to be placeless, and which may often only be inhabited for a few years. We purchase individual vehicles as the key to mobility in order to sit in traffic on the freeway. We build gated communities as the key to security, and we fear the remainder of the city and leave it to fulfill our fears. All of these offer and undermine what they promise. And, these commodities remain, as they were for Benjamin, phantasmagorias—the "century's magic images."[14] Just as for Benjamin's Paris the 19th century was a nightmare from which the city needed to awaken, so now we live within the dream of both 19th (early suburbs, rapid westward expansion of the country) and 20th centuries (the American century, with booming economic and military might).

These phantasmagorias are also fantasy versions of citizenship. They are perhaps consistent with a highly formal account of citizenship realized primarily through voting activity and consumption in pursuit of a narrow notion of self-interest. Narrow because a fuller sense of self and hence of self-interest would recognize the poverty of this model of citizenship and human living in which there is little connection to people or to place. But the perpetuation of this very model as dream and ideal cuts against this recognition of a larger self-interest.

Further, we have some evidence that the trajectory of sprawl is neither sustainable nor desired. 1998 and 2000 state-wide polls in Colorado found that 45% of citizens thought that addressing growth and transportation problems were the most pressing issues facing the state.[15] A 2001 poll by the Federal Highway Administration found that over 60% favored sidewalks, mass transit, and bikeways, and fewer than 40% favored building more roads.[16] And numerous national publications have examined the growth of suburban "mega-churches" as responses to the isolation and lack of community found in most US suburbs.

II. Some Responses: New Urbanism and Civic Environmentalism

2.1 New Urbanism

The New Urbanism movement is a response to the out-of-control development of the American suburban landscape. Its founding figures, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberg, have embraced commercial residential development opportunities like Celebration and Seaside, Florida, with a moral fervor, hoping to use market forces to their advantage, in order to, as Duany has said, "attack [the] enemy on [its] terms" and, as Plater-Zyberg has said, "improve the world with design, plain good old design."[17]

New urbanism promotes the creation and restoration of diverse, walkable, compact, vibrant, mixed-use communities composed of the same components as conventional development, but assembled in a more integrated fashion in the form of complete communities. These contain housing, work places, shops, entertainment, schools, parks, and civic facilities essential to the daily lives of the residents, all within easy walking distance of each other. New Urbanism promotes the increased use of trains and light rail, instead of more highways and roads. In the last 20 years, urban living has again become desirable to a growing segment of the US populace, and has become a hip and modern way to live for people of all ages. Currently, there are over 500 New Urbanist projects planned or under construction in the United States alone, half of which are in historic urban centers.

The principles of New Urbanism are:

1. Walkability
2. Connectivity
3. Mixed-Use and Diversity
4. Mixed Housing
5. Quality Architecture and Urban Design
6. Traditional Neighborhood Structure
7. Increased Density
8. Smart Transportation
9. Sustainability

An important assumption of the New Urbanist movement is the tenet that architecture and the organization of space strongly influence social behavior. That is, New Urbanism, in spite of a certain postmodern cuteness in design elements, rests on the decidedly modern notion that the "built environment" can create democratic utopias. It is also a movement built upon a certain amount of nostalgia. For the New Urbanist architect and town planner, the ideal form of human community is found in the ambience of the New England colonial village—town centers, green space, and interconnected walkways—where people shared space intimately and nurtured social relations conducive to the free exchange of ideas perhaps best exemplified by town hall meetings. The goal of New Urbanist developments is to recapture, or even to recreate, these sorts of communities. The New Urbanism is an attempt to create space with an identifiable center and edge—in short, to create community through the manipulation of space.

Influential in the New Urbanist search for urban spaces with definable centers has been architect Charles Moore's 1965 article in the influential architectural journal *Perspecta,* "You Have to Pay for the Public Life."[18] In this piece, Moore analyzes the lack of a public realm on the West Coast and in particular in the city of Los Angeles. He claims that the city lacks an urban focus or center and that "the houses are not tied down to any place much more than the trailer homes are, or the automobiles. [The houses] are adrift in the suburban sea, not so mobile as the cars, but just as unattached....This is...a floating world in which a floating population can island-hop with impunity...." Los Angeles is characterized by a lack of place.[19] Moore argues that a central characteristic of cities that

are identifiable places is that there is a marked and celebrated center. Identifying a place and marking its center is a self-consciously public act where people come together to celebrate a place for particular reasons, the marker then becoming the symbol of their shared values. In his article, Moore claims that Disneyland is one of the few real public spaces in L.A. Disney's new town of Celebration has its roots in the work of Charles Moore because he was the first to point out that Disneyland was a self-conscious attempt to create an interactive public space amid the disconnected suburban sprawl of Los Angeles. In Disneyland, we agree to pay for the public life we are missing out on elsewhere, just as in Celebration.

2.2 Civic Environmentalism

Unlike New Urbanism, Civic Environmentalism arose not in response to failures of planning, or lack of community in cities, but in response to three failures of the environmental movement: top-down organization, over-emphasis on abstract theoretical issues (does non-human nature have intrinsic value), and the deep anti-urban bias that means the movement does not address the places where most people live.

Civic Environmentalism is the idea that members of particular communities are the ones who should plan and organize to "ensure a future that is environmentally healthy and economically and socially vibrant."[20] Two central insights of this movement are that in order to have viable cities i) the broader interest in and support for protecting remote wilderness areas should bear on our immediate quotidian environment, and ii) we need to reinvigorate, or create, networks of community and build social capital.[21] The guiding principles are:

1. Democratic Process
2. Community and Regional Planning
3. Education
4. Environmental Justice
5. Industrial Ecology
6. Place

Civic Environmentalism (CE) is not a planning or design paradigm, but a vision of engaged communities, organizing around common interests, working to direct their own lives. As I will suggest in my following discussion of some limits of a design model of responding to the crisis of cities, CE represents an approach that is open to a variety of design models, because it is directed by stakeholder participation, and, further, this very nurturing of democracy means that it is more likely to be sustainable and effective.

2.3 What are Cities For?

What are cities for? Why should we care if cities are emptying out, if people are living in greater levels of economic and racial separation, if we sprawl across the countryside? And what are we trying to do as we imagine responses to our existing urban situation?

Some reasons we should be concerned with the state of cities are:

1. Public Sphere, Public Life, and Political Community
2. Community Life
3. Services and Sustainability
4. Self Discovery and Creation

As many sociologists, political scientists, historians, and philosophers have noted, modern democracy, modern cities, and the "public sphere" arise together.[22] Many argue that the public sphere is essential to modern democracy, and further that it is made possible by modern cities: by the social energy, economic power, division of labor, and quite importantly the regular and unavoidable encounters with those whose ideas, beliefs, values, and lives are different from one's own. One role of cities is to nurture this public sphere and political community.

Insofar as suburbanized people rarely encounter directly those with importantly different experiences of the city, and insofar as the primary mode of interaction is the intricate ballet of the automobile, these people might lack the intellectual and experiential resources to critically engage the direction of the city. We might consider the work of Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam, who shows that the longer people spend in traffic, the less likely they are to be involved in their community and family.[23] As Michael Oden notes, the experience of the city is often an experience of alienation from Nature, and also an experience of alienation from each other and from self.[24] Once again, Dewey has a relevant comment.

> Zeal for doing, lust for action, leaves many a person, especially in this hurried and impatient human environment in which we live, with experience of an almost incredible paucity, all on the surface. No one experience has a chance to complete itself because something else is entered into so speedily. What is called experience becomes so dispersed and miscellaneous as hardly to deserve the name. Resistance is treated as an obstacle to be beaten down, not as an invitation to reflection. An individual comes to seek, unconsciously even more than by deliberate choice, situations in which he can do the most things in the shortest time. [25]

This points to the fourth reason: Self-discovery and creation. The modern city is an important site of self-discovery and self-creation. One that helps nurture citizen participants whose self-understanding is formed through face-to-face encounters with others. Also, the second reason, Community Life is present here. Cities are places of work and play in ongoing, changing networks of family and friends. All of which lead to the third reason: Sustainability. A sustainable city, or community, is one that is open to change. Places, communities, people who are static tend to be overwhelmed or fragile, and thus unable to respond to the real exigencies of life.

III. A Brief Story

A brief story about one of the showcase New Urbanist developments. The first crisis in Celebration, Disney's showcase New Urbanist development, was the wide-spread recognition that the houses of Celebration were poorly built. It turns out that Celebration was built upon the backs of unskilled migrant labor because that was the only labor available in the booming Orlando construction economy. Disney was victimized by the very economy it was attempting to take advantage of, and received less than it had hoped from the very laborers it was willing to exploit for profit—pricey upscale homes with leaky roofs and pipes, cracked foundations, chimneys out of plumb, and doors that won't close. Complaints were so widespread that residents organized a Homeowners Association to bring pressure against Disney. And thus a Celebration "community" began to form—not as the product of market strategy and New Urban design, but rather, in opposition to corporate ineptitude, inefficiency, and greed.

Unfortunately, this new-found "community," born of opposition to the Disney "community-builders," soon found itself facing a prickly dilemma: going public with their complaints in an effort to pressure Disney into action ran the risk of damaging property value. Prospective buyers (those who would complete the development project and thereby secure its market value long into the future) would certainly shy away from upscale homes with leaky roofs and yards that didn't drain. The common interest in protecting property values prevailed. The residents kept quiet, and thus began a long private battle with Disney which was ultimately resolved, but not without significant frustrations along the way. Nonetheless, the brouhaha over construction provided the first real evidence that something like a community was indeed forming, albeit not in the way Disney had envisioned or the residents would have wanted.[26]

In Celebration, community is a commodity—but one that proves to be a curiously bittersweet phenomenon. Although the notion of "community" is all too often bundled into the package of amenities the housing industry has to offer, it can take on a life of its own. True enough, the community Disney was selling was not the community the residents bought, but the residents could have no way of knowing that, and neither could Disney. In the end, both stumble into "community." If the measure of a community is the extent to which its members engage in the identification and debate over a set of core values—those things which they claim to share when they mark out a place for themselves and call it "theirs"—then Celebration measures up as a community. But notice that community formed not because of the success of design and planning, but in response to a common experience of a defective product. Disney had attempted to sell community as a commodity, one of those things purchased along with a garage door opener and highly regularized street-front appearances, but it arose because common interests were recognized and social action followed.

IV. Evaluating New Urbanism and Civic Environmentalism

Here, as I move toward the close, I want to outline some ways in which New Urbanism fails, along with some reasons why.

New Urbanism proposes to solve these problems primarily through design alone,

a) New Urbanism proposes a design solution that would in some ways replicate, and in other ways leave in place, the existing problems (e.g., preferences for single family dwellings),
b) New Urbanism proposes a top-down design solution that trusts existing market forces to resolve urban dilemmas, and that,
c) New Urbanist developments, within existing legal and economic frameworks, have increased commuting and economic segregation.

Thus, New Urbanist solutions will likely replicate or even further existing problems.

Moreover,

d) New Urbanism confuses public with community life,
e) New Urbanism takes self and desire as either i) fixed or ii) infinitely malleable,
f) New Urbanism embodies a problematic quest for certainty,
g) And New Urbanism is a response to an urban crisis that represents a dislike and distrust of cities.

I will comment on these last four, and I hope that during our discussion we will have the opportunity to explore the other critiques.

d) New Urbanism confuses public with community life.
   - Public Life is sociability with a diversity of strangers.
   - Community Life is sociability with people we know to some extent.

New Urbanism does work to create something like community life, even though, as the example of Celebration shows that might come about not because of the success of the design but because of the recognition of a common problem. But, it fails to nurture public life, and thus fails as a site for the building of genuine and sustainable democratic community.

e) New Urbanism takes self and desire as either i) fixed or ii) infinitely malleable.

New Urbanism attempts to resolve urban problems through an appeal to market forces responding to new design. One possibility is that New Urbanism assumes that our desires are fixed, but the existing market has failed us. If the latent desire for good design can be unleashed, we will then have better lives. Or, it might be that New Urbanism understands desire as malleable and assumes that design alone will transform our desires. So, if we can just get these new design paradigms accepted either i) people will respond from their

long-submerged authentic desires, or ii) the new settings will be so powerful, that desire will respond and embrace New Urbanist communities.

f) New Urbanism embodies a problematic quest for certainty.

New Urbanism is a static design model. And, one that is certain about what people need and want (or ought to want). But, New Urbanism as such is not flexible or revisable. One example is the response of Andres Duany to the new "Latino New Urbanism." He calls it "barrio urbanism" and criticizes it for valorizing the wrong aesthetic and for celebrating poverty. Latino New Urbanism starts with the real neighborhoods where many Latinos in the United States live. Alas, these neighborhoods fail to have the regular, harmonious, and predictable design features that New Urbanism specifies. Further, the residents of these neighborhoods use public transit and live in more modestly-sized structures not by choice, but because they are poor. Duany suggests that these choices are virtuous only when chosen.[27]

New Urbanism thus fails to be sustainable and to nurture individual and community growth and creativity.

g) New Urbanism is a response to an urban crisis that represents a dislike and distrust of cities.

The response of Duany to Latino New Urbanism also points to one of the greatest limits of New Urbanism as a response to the problems of cities: New Urbanism is an anti-urban approach. In taking the colonial New England town as its model, it embodies the pastoralism of Thomas Jefferson over the urbanism of his rival Hamilton, but without Jefferson's emphasis on democratic community. By emphasizing the community sphere over the public sphere, New Urbanism can contribute to a loss of public life. As such, we lose an important avenue of individual growth (public life with strangers), we lose an avenue of political will formation that is outside of the state and corporation, we lose the marvel and wonder of the encounter with strangers, and following Levinas, we become morally impoverished as the range of face-to-face encounters we have is ever more attenuated.

On the other hand, Civic Environmentalism proposes that design alone will not be the solution. Further, in terms of my earlier list of reasons to care about the fate of cities, I note the following for Civic Environmentalism:

- Building the Public Sphere is central to any hope for transforming cities, communities, and ultimately selves.
- It does not take desire as fixed. Rather, it understands desires, selves, and communities as formed through on-going and interactive processes in which the quality of everyday experience is central.
- It does not have a predetermined idea of the design form and is open to contingency. It aims at "end-in-view" which is the best we can think of and agree on given where we are now.
- Similarly, it does not assume a single way of living. It is open to the creative chaos of the city, but one made richer by political and community life.

Civic Environmentalism holds that rebuilding common interests around clearly definable ends-in-view will help both to rebuild human community and to involve those most affected in the design process. Not only will this be more likely to lead to better design, but the process alone is an important step in responding to the crisis in cities. I argue that Civic Environmentalism is more promising as an approach to our urban problems.

Notes

1. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (NY: Perigee Books, 1980) 333.

2. J. Grange, *The City: An Urban Cosmology* (Albany, NY: SUNY P, 1999) 193.

3. W.J. Mitchell, *Placing Words: Symbols, Space, and the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2005) 49.

4. Rolf Pendall, Analysis commissioned by Smart Growth America, September 2000. <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.com/>

5. US Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The State of the Cities 2000* (Washington, D.C., 21 July 2005) <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/states/socrpt.pdf>

6. M. G. Boarnet, and A.F Haughwout, *Do Highways Matter? Evidence and Policy Implications of Highways Influence on Metropolitan Development* (Brookings Institution, August 2000), and Heavner, B. *Paving the Way: How Highway Construction has Contributed to Sprawl in Maryland* (Maryland Public Interest Research Group Foundation, November 2000).

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10. Boarnet and Haughwout, *Highways*, and Heavner, *Paving*.

11. B. D. Bullard, G. S. Johnson, and A. O. Torres, eds., *Sprawl City: Race, Politics, and Planning in Atlanta* (Atlanta: Island P, 2000); F. K. Benfield, M. Raimi, and D.I. Chen, *Once There Were Greenfields*. (Natural Resources Defense Council and Surface Transportation Policy Project, 1999); U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development, *State of the Cities 2000*; A.C. Nelson, *Effects of Urban Containment on Housing Prices and Landowner Behavior* (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy's Land Lines, May 2000).

12. USDA, 1997, Washington, D.C. (21 July 2005); <http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/NRI/1997/summary_report/original/body.html>.

13. W. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings,1913-1926*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P, 1996) 46ff, 55, 1256.

14. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P, 1999) 1153.

15. Ciruli Associates, 2000, Denver, CO. (21 July 2005). <http://www.ciruli.com/polls/CO-issues1.htm>

16. Federal Highway Administration, 2001, Washington, D.C., (21 July 2005). <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/movingahead.htm>

17. For discussions of New Urbanism see A. Duany, E. Plater-Zyberk, and J. Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point P, 2000). See also Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, *The Lexicon of the New Urbanism* (Miami: Self-Published, 1997), New Urbanism. <http://www.newurbanism.org>, and The Congress for New Urbanism, <http://www.cnu.org>

18. C. Moore, "You Have to Pay for the Public Life." *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal*. 9/10 (1965): 57-97.

19. See also F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 992), and M. Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles.*, (NY: Vintage, 1992).

20. W. A. Shutkin, *The Land That Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century* Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2000) 14.

21. For more on Civic Environmentalism, see: J. Dewitt, *Civic Environmentalism: Alternatives to Regulation in States and Communities*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly P, 1994), and *Civic Environmentalism in Action*, Progressive Policy Institute, 1999. See also, Civic Practices Network, <http://www.cpn.org/topics/environment/civicenvironA.html>, The Marshall Institute, <http://www.marshall.org/subcategory.php?id=10>, New Ecology Inc., <http://www.newecology.org>

22. See, for example, J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1991).

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26. S. Schaffer, "Disney and the Imagineering of Histories," *Postmodern Culture* 6.3 (1996).

27. See A. Holtzmann, "Latin Invasion," *Architecture*. 93(3) (2004): 21-23.