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# NEWS

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## An Introduction to New Urbanism

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You probably would not be surprised to learn that the majority of Americans now live in suburban communities built in the last 60 years.<sup>1</sup> Until the mid-20th century, however, cities were generally developed as walkable, compact mixed-use neighborhoods. The end of World War II brought the emergence of modern architecture and zoning, as well as the popularity of the automobile. A new system of development characterized by a rigorous separation of uses took hold across the country. This phenomenon is now known as conventional suburban development ("CSD"), or urban sprawl. Although CSD has been popular, it has consumed large portions of countryside and made having a car a necessity. For most of us, it is impossible to get to work or accomplish the mundane tasks of daily life without an automobile. In addition, some would say that there isn't much character to many of the subdivisions, strip malls and other commercial destinations that now populate our suburbs.

New Urbanism is a reaction to this sprawl. Its principles were defined in a charter developed by a group of architects, planners, developers, elected officials, scholars and interested citizens in the early 1990s. The charter was ratified at the fourth annual meeting of the Congress for the New Urbanism ("CNU") which, with more than 2,500 members, is the leading international organization promoting new urbanist design principles. The charter states:

We advocate the restructuring of public policy and development practices to support the following principles: neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accepted public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be framed by the architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice.<sup>2</sup>

New Urbanists strive to create diverse, human-scale, walkable communities in various forms - infill development within existing cities and towns, small projects on individual blocks, transit-oriented development (for example, a higher-density mixed-use project within walking distance of a transit station, sometimes referred to as a transit village), or the redevelopment of a neighborhood, public housing project, military base or retail center. Sometimes known as Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND), one of its main tenets is that traditional neighborhoods can be used to restore functional, sustainable communities. Each neighborhood is well-defined and limited in size, and has a discernible center, such as a town square, green space or important intersection. The goal is for people to be able to walk from the center to the perimeter of the neighborhood within five minutes (the time it takes to walk about a quarter of a mile). Its clear boundaries contribute to a sense of place, and its streets are safe, interesting and comfortable places where people can walk and meet. With a mix of different commercial uses and dwelling types, people of all ages and economic groups can live, work and play in one area. Shops and offices are located at the edge of the neighborhood, buildings open onto sidewalks, parking is limited to the rear of buildings (which are usually accessed by alleys) and civic buildings are built at prominent sites, such as the town square or center to create landmarks.

Streets within the neighborhood form a network in order to create the greatest number of pedestrian and vehicular routes from one location to another. This serves to disperse traffic and relieve congestion. Narrow streets shaded by rows of trees are used to slow vehicular traffic down, creating a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly environment, while broad boulevards are designed to handle automobile traffic.

The first New Urbanist town built from the ground up was Seaside in the Florida Panhandle. Said by some to be the most successful example of TND to date, this 80-acre oceanfront resort was created in the early 1980s by developer Robert Davis, who enlisted the husband-and-wife architectural team of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, two of the founders of the CNU, to design the project. In order to avoid creating a sprawling urban community, the development team traveled to Key West, Charleston and Savannah to discern what makes traditional neighborhoods so attractive, and then attempted to combine the best features of those cities in Seaside. Most of the buildings on the beach are public, a network of sand walkways permits beach access in bare feet, and the community's porch-lined streets all lead to the beach or the town center. Seaside, with 25 condominiums, 335 single-family residences and 26 mixed use units, has become well-known internationally for its diverse architecture, the quality of its streets and public spaces, and its focus on community interaction.

Most of the early projects (those of the late 1980s and early 1990s) involved undeveloped soil, or “greenfield” sites. During this period several large-scale projects were launched in suburban areas, including two of the best known and most ambitious: Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland and Laguna West in Sacramento County, California. The 352-acre Kentlands, the first large suburban greenfield project to incorporate the principles of New Urbanism, showed that some development components typical in the Washington, D.C., area could be put together in a more attractive manner. Residential parking was placed behind houses, along alleys, so that the facades of the houses would form more appealing streetscapes. Accessory units were incorporated into the development, by adding small apartments above garages or another portion of a single-family home. The combination of extra income for the homeowner and inexpensive housing for the renter have made this a win-win situation, and auxiliary units are now a common feature in new urbanist developments.

However, because such projects were built on previously undeveloped land, critics have suggested that they are merely another form of sprawl. In addition, some in the world of sustainable development believe that two of its hallmarks are high-density and transit-oriented neighborhoods. Accordingly, to the extent that these developments cater to the detached single-family housing market and require residents to rely on automobiles, the goal of living in a sustainable neighborhood has not been achieved.

New Urbanist architects, developers and planners continue to work on suburban and new town communities, with projects underway in most states across the nation, as well as many foreign countries. These projects are displaying a widening range of architectural styles. Whereas many of the early New Urbanist projects used colonial-style architecture, for example, neighborhoods of contemporary homes are beginning to appear.

As the New Urbanism movement developed, its proponents realized that “good urbanism” is possible with many different types of architecture, layouts and densities. The developers of Mashpee Commons, a suburban commercial district in the Town of Mashpee on Cape Cod, have successfully turned a strip shopping center into a town center, with narrow streets and sidewalks, a post office, a cinema that opens onto a public square, second-floor offices, live/work units, a library, a church, a senior center and housing for the elderly. Mashpee Commons and an adjacent neighborhood are approved for over 365,000 square feet of retail, restaurant and office space and 100 housing units. These two neighborhoods have been partially constructed in a phased manner to meet community needs at a rate that reflects the area’s growth. The project’s master plan now includes six interrelated neighborhoods, and the developers intend to build mixed-use neighborhoods with housing, offices, stores, civic buildings and open space in a traditional New England form, all controlled by a strict site and architectural design code.

About half of the New Urbanist projects now under way in the U.S. involve brownfields projects, infill development, the conversion of failed shopping centers into a mixed-use development or the rehabilitation of an urban structure. As young childless couples and empty nesters have sought out urban real estate and increased the allure of urban reinvestment, the New Urbanists have become part of the movement for livable cities. Their projects include loft redevelopment, the revival of aging Main Streets and transit villages.

Even the Federal government has taken steps to embrace New Urbanism. The

Department of Housing and Urban Development's HOPE VI program replaces distressed housing projects with clusters of single-family homes, townhouses and apartments on comfortable, walkable street grids. Using the concepts of New Urbanism, huge developments of high rises and sprawling barracks-style townhouses have been transformed into smaller, lower-density developments, composed of attractive buildings and appealing open spaces. Design changes that increase safety, such as private entrances facing the street, have been incorporated into these developments. In addition, the General Services Administration has adopted a New Urbanist agenda, teaming with the CNU to set forth its future practices.

New Urbanists are also involved with a number of other projects, including the reform of zoning codes. Zoning codes were established in the first half of the 20th century, largely to separate uses and restrict density. In recent years reformers have championed "form-based codes" that regulate the three-dimensional shapes of buildings and the public arena. They focus on building frontage, placement and other factors associated with the character of a place, as opposed to the potential uses of a property. Though a substantial number of jurisdictions have adopted form-based codes, many more still employ conventional ones. Just last month, however, the City of Miami made history by adopting a form-based code in lieu of its automobile-oriented conventional zoning code, one that calls for convenient, walkable neighborhoods and gentler transitions between high-intensity and lower-scaled development. Designed to make each area within Miami a unique, vibrant place to live, learn, work and play, "Miami 21" has been described as the most ambitious contemporary zoning code reform ever undertaken by a major U.S. city.

The second movement is the reform of thoroughfares. Whereas street design normally is consumed with the safe movement of automobiles, New Urbanists have stressed that alternative modes of transportation such as walking and mass transit deserve our attention and should be given equal priority on all but the highest-speed thoroughfares. In addition, New Urbanists believe that streets must have character, as well as capacity, and that character is a function of a number of things: a street's building facades, landscaping, sidewalks and related accoutrements that give a street its character. Further, streets serve a social function - they are a place for social interaction and, as such, should be attractive and conducive to such interaction.

Finally, a number of the New Urbanists have been strong advocates for transit-oriented development and in recent years mixed-use, higher density projects of this type have been built across the country with great success. Creating compact, walkable communities whose residents do not need to depend on automobiles for their mobility and survival can help reduce our dependence on oil. Moreover, evidence is emerging that housing and mixed-use projects within walking distance of high quality transit service have retained their value during the economic downturn.

More than 500 new towns, villages and neighborhoods have been built or are under construction in the U.S. using new urbanist principles. Hundreds more smaller-scale new urban projects are restoring our cities and towns by establishing walkable streets and blocks in communities throughout the country.

With an increasing demand for real neighborhoods, lively cities and regions with protected open space, the principles of New Urbanism are on the agenda of many of the country's elected officials. Since the beginning of the housing recession in 2006, urban housing has generally outperformed that of the distant suburbs. If suburbs are, in fact, a major contributor to global warming and dependence on oil, it is likely that the appeal of new urban communities will increase. Demographic trends such as the aging of the baby boomers and the coming of age of their children likely will make our

urban areas even more popular. In short, one can expect that the principles of New Urbanism will continue to influence the fields of planning, architecture and public policy in the years ahead.

1. The New Urbanism: A Better Way to Plan and Build 21st Century Communities, Robert Steuteville and Philip Langdon, [www.newurbanism.com](http://www.newurbanism.com).

2. Charter of the Congress for the New Urbanism, [www.cnu.org/charter](http://www.cnu.org/charter).