

Three Urbanisms and the Public Realm

14

Douglas Kelbaugh
University of Michigan, USA

Abstract

This paper deals with two major interests of space syntax, urbanism and public space. The rich and bewildering of contemporary urban design theory and practice is divided into three emergent ideologies: Everyday Urbanism, New Urbanism, and Post Urbanism. The public realm, which each of these urbanisms treats differently, is being challenged by privatization, extremist politics, and electronic modes of interaction. The author argues in favor of New Urbanism, which he characterizes as the middle path and the most appropriate for North American cities.

Three paradigms: everyday urbanism, new urbanism, post urbanism

In addition to the conventional, unself-conscious urbanism that is every day changing the face of American downtowns and suburbs, there are at least three self-conscious schools of urbanism: Everyday Urbanism, New Urbanism, and what I call Post Urbanism. They run parallel to contemporary architectural paradigms, although there would be additional schools of thought defined by tectonics, environmentalism, regionalism, historicism, etc. There are other urbanisms and architectures, such as environmentally inspired ones, (which is here subsumed under New Urbanism), but these three cover most of the cutting edge of theoretical and professional activity in these two fields. All three are inevitable and necessary developments in and of the contemporary human condition. A brief synoptic view of the three paradigms follows:

Everyday Urbanism is nonutopian, conversational, and nonstructuralist. It is nonutopian because it celebrates and builds on everyday, ordinary life and reality, with little pretense about the possibility of a perfectible, tidy or ideal built environment. Indeed, as John Kaliski, Margaret Crawford and others in *Everyday Urbanism* point out, the city and its designers must be open to and incorporate "the elements that remain elusive: ephemerality, cacophony, multiplicity and simultaneity."¹ It is this openness to populist informality that makes *Everyday Urbanism* conversational. It is non-structuralist because it downplays the direct relationship between physical design and social behavior. It, for instance, delights in the way indigenous and migrant groups informally respond in resourceful and imaginative ways to their ad hoc conditions and marginal spaces. Appropriating space for commerce in parking and vacant lots, as well as private driveways and yards for garage sales can be urban design by default rather than by intention. Form and function are seen to be structurally connected in an open-ended way that highlights culture more than design as a determinant of behavior.

Keywords:
New Urbanism,
everyday urbanism,
post-urbanism, public
space, North
American cities

14.1

Douglas Kelbaugh
FAIA
Professor and Dean,
Taubman College of
Architecture & Urban
Planning, University
of Michigan,
2000 Bonisteel Blvd.
Ann Arbor MI 48109
USA
+1 734 764-1315
kelbaugh@umich.edu

Vernacular and street architecture ("quotidian bricolage" by one account) in vibrant, ethnic neighborhoods with public markets rather than chain stores and street murals rather than civic art are held up as one instructive model. Everyday urbanism could be easily confused with conventional real estate development but it is more intentional, ideologically egalitarian and self-conscious than the generic "product" that mainstream bankers, developers, and builders supply to an anonymous public.

New Urbanism is utopian (or at least idealist and reformist), inspirational in style and structuralist in conception. It is utopian because it aspires to a social ethic that builds new or repairs old communities in ways that equitably mix people of different income, ethnicity, race and age, and because it promotes a civic ideal that coherently mixes land of different uses and buildings of different architectural types. It is inspirational because it sponsors public architecture and public space that attempts to make citizens feel they are part, even proud, of both a culture that is more significant than their individual, private worlds and a natural ecology that is connected in eternal loops, cycles and chains of life. New Urbanism also eschews the physical fragmentation and the functional compartmentalization of modern life and tries "to make a link between knowledge and feeling, between what people believe and do in public and what obsesses them in private."² It is structuralist (or at least determinist) in the sense that it maintains that there is a direct, structural relationship between social behavior and physical form. It is normative in that it posits that good design can have a measurably positive effect on sense of place and community, which it holds are essential to a healthy, sustainable society. The physical model is a compact, walkable city with a hierarchy of private and public architecture and spaces that are conducive to face-to-face social interaction, including background housing and gardens as well as foreground civic and institutional buildings, squares and parks.

Post Urbanism, championed by architects like Rem Koolhaas, is heterotopian, sensational and poststructuralist. Koolhaas' Generic City projects, inspired to some extent by the city we are in, welcome disconnected hypermodern buildings and shopping mall urbanism. They are also heterotopic because they discount shared values or metanarratives as no longer possible in a fragmenting world composed of isolated zones of the "other" (e.g. the homeless, the poor, gays, militia, prisoners, minorities, etc.) as well as mainstream zones of atomistic consumers, internet surfers, and free-range tourists. Outside the usual ordering systems, these liminal zones of taboo and fantasy and these commercial zones of unfettered consumption are viewed as liberating because they allow "for new forms of knowledge, new hybrid possibilities, new unpredictable forms of freedom. It is precisely this distrust of 'ordering' that makes the post-structuralists so against conventional architecture and urbanism."³ Traditional communities based on physical place and propinquity are claimed to be stultifying, repressive, and no longer relevant in light of modern technology and telecommunications.

As Andres Duany has pointed out, there is a widespread tendency within the architectural avant-garde to equate order with repression and, by extension, disorder with democracy. However, the modern conception of democracy, as set out by western philosophers such as John Locke, has been about civic responsibility as well as personal rights and freedoms. Only this century in America have individual freedom and license trumped civic responsibility and

duty. Private rights now overwhelm group rights, at great cost to community. This trend has helped jump start counter movements such as communitarianism and, to some extent, New Urbanism.

Post Urbanism is stylistically sensational because it attempts to wow an increasingly sophisticated consumer in and of the built environment with ever-wilder and more provocative architecture and urbanism. Like Modernism, its architectural language is usually very abstract with little reference to surrounding physical or historical context. It also continues the modernist project of avant-garde shock tactics, no matter what the building site or program. It is sometimes hard to know if it employs shock for its own sake or whether the principal motive is to inspire genuine belief in the possibility of changing the status quo and of resisting controls and limits that are thought to be too predictable and even tyrannical. Koolhaas, Eisenman, Hadid, Libeskind, Tschumi, and Gehry are poststructuralists of different persuasions and passions, many of them in the thrall of Derrida and Deconstructionist literary philosophy. Gehry describes his exuberant insertions into the city as examples of open, democratic urbanism, despite the fact they usually ignore and overpower any local discourse. De Con projects are usually self-contained and microcosmic, with little faith in the work of others to complete the urban fabric, even a fragmented one. Post urbanist work embodies and expresses a more dynamic, destabilized and less predictable architecture and urbanism. The personal design portfolio of signature buildings, which are typically more self-referential than contextual, and a sprawling, auto-centric city like Atlanta are held up as the professional and physical model, although the very idea of type or model might be rejected outright by post urbanists.

Three Sensibilities, Methodologies and Outcomes

The differences in these three architectures and urbanisms run consistent and deep. The divergence probably starts with the designer's aesthetic sensibilities, which are arguably more basic than his or her design values. Sensibilities often come down to early experiences and memories, such as toilet training and childhood play. They are less conscious and harder to change than cognitive knowledge and learned values. How messy and complex a world a designer can tolerate is probably harder wiring than how much injustice she can tolerate or how many problems he can justify passing on to the "seventh generation". Where designers fit on the spectrum of these three paradigms may ultimately have to do with whether in the gut they prefer to spend time, for instance, around the grand monuments and boulevards of 19th century Paris or in the medieval streets and buildings of its Marais district or in the free-standing high rise complex of La Defense, its 20th century office complex. (They may, in fact, enjoy hanging out in two or all of these places, depending on mood, time of day, etc., but a single portfolio rarely if ever spans this range.) Theoretical and ethical discourse of course tempers these gut feelings. For instance, the very different political regimes and philosophical systems that gave rise to each of these Parisian urbanisms would no doubt color their visceral design sensibilities, in addition to shaping their design values, which are learned and cerebral.

In addition to varying sensibilities, designers utilize different methodologies. Everyday Urbanism is the most populist, with the designer seen as an empirical student of the common and popular rather than the ideal and pure. The design professional is more of a co-equal participant who feels privileged to enter the public dialogue, which aspires to be very open-ended and democratic. It is less normative and doctrinaire than New Urbanism, because it is more about reassembling and intensifying existing, everyday conditions than

overturning them and starting over with a different model. It is also more modest and compassionate than either of the other two paradigms. If the New Urbanist romanticizes a mythic past, the Everyday Urbanist overestimates the mythic aspect of the ordinary and ugly, much as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, in my opinion, have tended to over praise the arterial strip and entertainment districts in places like Las Vegas.

New Urbanism is the most precedent-based of the three. It tries to learn and extrapolate from the most enduring architectural types, as well as the best historical examples and traditions as they intersect contemporary environmental, technological, social, economic and cultural practices. It is also the most normative, often adopting prescriptive codes rather than proscriptive zoning. Overall coherence, legibility and human scale are highly valued. New urbanists see themselves as urban design "experts" who lead the public debate and try to democratically shape the dialogue (often through community design charrettes) into holistic design and planning.

Post Urbanism claims to accept and express the techno-flow of a global world, both real and virtual. It is explorative rather than normative and likes to subvert codes and convention. Perhaps Post Urbanists don't engage the public as directly in open dialogue because they feel the traditional "polis" is obsolete and its civic institutions too calcified to promote liberating possibilities. They tend rather to operate as "lone geniuses" contributing a monologue - often an urbanistically self-centered one - to the media marketplace. Koolhaas claims there is no longer any hope of achieving urban coherence or unity. His own architecture, not unlike Libeskind's, Hadid's, Eisenman's and others, is internally consistent - elegantly so in some cases - but has little interest in weaving or reweaving a consistent or continuous urban or ecologic fabric over space and time. Projects tend to be Large or X-Large, denatured, bold and overwhelming to their contexts. If the New Urbanist tends to hold too high the best practices of the past and the Everyday Urbanist overrates a prosaic present, the Post Urbanist is over-committed to an endlessly exciting future.

The three paradigms lead to very different physical outcomes. These outcomes vary with whether the client is public or private, but remarkably little. Everyday Urbanism, which is the least driven by aesthetics has trouble achieving beauty or coherence, day or night, micro or macro, but is egalitarian and lively on the street. The New Urbanism, with its Latinate clarity and order, achieves the most aesthetic unity and social community. As it mixes different uses at a human scale in familiar architectural types and styles. Its connective grids of pedestrian-friendly streets look better from the ground than the air, from which they can sometimes look overly formulaic, neobaroque and slavishly symmetrical. Post Urbanist site plans always look the most exciting, with their laser-like vectors, fractal geometries, sweeping arcs and dynamic circulatory systems. However, they are overscaled and empty for pedestrians. Tourists in rental cars experiencing the architecture and urbanism through their windshields are a better served audience than residents for whom there is little human-scale nuance and architectural detail to reveal itself over the years. Are local citizens meant to become tourists in their own city, just as tourists are now, conversely, citizens of the world?

Everyday Urbanism makes sense in developing countries where global cities are mushrooming with informal squatter settlements that defy government control and planning, and where underserved populations simply want a stake in the economic system and the city. But it doesn't make sense in the cities of Europe, where a wealthy citizenry has the luxury of fine-tuning coherent mature and urban fabric, freely punctuating it with monumental, civic build-

ings that can be Post Urbanist counterpoint. In American cities, which lack the continuous fabric of European cities but have the economic wherewithal to build a coherent urban fabric, New Urbanism offers just such a possibility. In the ecology of cities, development in the third world and in poor American neighborhoods represents early successional growth, while middle aged American cities try to thicken their stand of mid successional growth. European cities are more like climax or late successional forests, where there is little room for growth except in clearings for experimentation with new forms of urban life.

Although it sponsors a strong, if informal, public realm, Everyday Urbanism is too often an urbanism of default rather than design, and Post Urbanism is too often an urbanism of sensational, trophy buildings in an atrophied public realm. We can build a more sustainably ordered and emancipatory commons than the latter two models promise. Although Europe may hanker for Post Urbanism and the developing world may accept Everyday Urbanism, the typical American metropolis needs and would most benefit from New Urbanism at this point in its evolution. Among other advantages, this middle road offers the greatest hope for a shared and coherently defined public realm. Since space syntax is eminently concerned with public space and its healthy interconnectedness, it is worth discussing the public realm in greater detail.

Civitas: the public realm

Without community, without civitas, we are all doomed to private worlds that are more selfish and loveless than they need be. As our society becomes more privatized and our culture more narcissistic, the need and appetite to be part of something bigger than our individual selves grow. Organized religion and individual spiritual development answer this need for many people. For some people, however, belonging to a community or "polis" may be the highest expression of this spiritual need. And for all members of society, there is the need to be part of some social structure. People are social animals, and our need to share and to love makes community a sine qua non of existence. On the other hand, humans also have a fundamental need to express themselves as individuals, to individuate themselves psychologically and socially, even to excel and rise above the crowd. A community must simultaneously nurture both a respect for group values and a tolerance for individuality, even eccentricity. This is the paradox of community that will forever require readjustments.

To quote Bart Giamatti, former president of Yale University and of baseball's National League:

Over millennia, this refinement of negotiation - of balancing private need and public obligation, personal desire and public duty, and keen interests of the one and the many into a common, shared set of agreements - becomes a civilization ... is achieved because city dwellers as individuals or as families or as groups have smoothed the edges of private desire so as to fit, or at least work in, with all the other city dwellers, without undue abrasion, without sharp edges forever nicking and wounding, each refining an individual capacity for those thousands of daily, instantaneous negotiations that keep crowded city life from becoming a constant brawl or ceaseless shoving match.⁴

Society must strive to be both tolerant and just enough to allow minority groups and subcultures to coexist with dignity and in peace. Achieving this tolerance is easier said than done, as America has found after centuries of slavery and immigration. It is becoming an even bigger challenge as more and more Americans grow up without firsthand experience and skills in city living. "There are now several generations of Americans who have no idea or

experience of the kinds of tolerance and cooperation which are implicit in higher density neighborhoods or communities." They may know how to behave on the internet but not in their neighborhood.

Community must deal with the full range of human nature, including its own dark side. If it projects its own dysfunction and pathologies onto an outside enemy or stigmatized minority, it has not fully faced itself and is in collective denial. More typically, the unity in community is bought at the price of identifying enemies, who are sure to return the favor. Enemies will get even some day, as the chain reaction of intolerance and injustice is perpetuated. If this dialectic is an inevitable part of the human condition, the question arises as to what is the most hospitable scale for social harmony and political unity and the least hospitable scale for hatred and enmity. It begs a deeper question: at what scale are civitas, justice and brotherly love best fostered? Ancient Greek philosophers suggested that 5000 citizens was an optimum size for a polis. (With wives, children and slaves, the total number must have been more like 25,000.) New Urbanism of course presents the case that neighborhood of a half mile on a side and the metropolitan region are the most sensible and equitable scales for community and governance in the metropolis.

Americans have been quick to exchange the more raw and uncomfortable sidewalk life of the inner city neighborhood for the easy and banal TV life of the suburban family room. We have been too quick to give up the public life that American cities have slowly mustered in spite of a long legacy of Jeffersonian rural yeomanry and anti-urbanism. It has been our good fortune that immigrants from countries with strong public realms (and cities where the wealthy citizens live downtown rather than at the periphery) have imported urban and ethnic values for which we are much the richer. But many European immigrants have wanted to leave the public life behind. Indeed, the pioneers of Modernism in Europe came out against traditional urban streets and the messy complexity they sponsor. The Athens Charter of C.I.A.M., led by the most mythic and heroic of all twentieth-century European architects, Le Corbusier, joined the battle for a more "rational" separation of vehicles and pedestrians in a new urban vision that spread to and across America.

African-Americans - the group brought to America most forcibly and most unfairly - have often maintained a strong and rich street life, as have Latinos. But European Americans have continued to flee the public realm - most recently from public city streets to the gated subdivisions of affluent, second ring suburbs. They have taken the money with them, and the best schools - without which there cannot be healthy community.

In the worst case, right and left wing groups have also tried to take government with them - to secede, in some cases entirely, from society, whether in extremist militia groups or religious communes. These radicals and fringe sects are nothing new in society and do not pose a numerical threat to civitas. However, they do tend at the moment to move the fulcrum of debate on community and privacy to the political right. The property rights movement is, in my opinion, one of the great threats to civitas. The conflict between private property rights and community rights (including intellectual property rights) could shake this country to its constitutional roots in the next decade, much as civil, women's and gay rights have done so in recent decades. Property rightists must come to grips with the fact that rights attached to land ownership are part of a social contract and not inalienable, absolute, natural, or God-given. (If their Christian God gave land and property rights to anyone in this country, it was to the Native Americans.) Moreover, those who cry loudest about government "takings" are

the most monumentally silent about "givings" that accrue to them as a result of government actions. If we are going to compensate landowners for their every loss, we should tax them for their every gain. A guarantee of risk-free land ownership and absolute protection of private property would ultimately rescind community and repeal civilization itself.

For reasons deeply and heroically embedded in its history, property rights are stronger in the U.S.A. than any country on earth. They have long played a central role in shaping American urbanism or, more accurately, in keeping the government from shaping it. We have increasingly had fragmented private development within a public realm that is often little more than leftover space. In other countries, the public sector takes a stronger planning and regulatory role in urban development, and private property rights are more frequently trumped by the public good. Many Americans may feel that, in the bigger picture, it is important for the U.S.A. to be the vigilant champion of private property. "If we don't, who will?" has been a conservative position. But has the bigger picture changed?

The Cold War is over and the global economy and political order are more democratic, less polarized and increasingly interconnected. There is no longer the historical need for the U.S.A. to act as the last bastion against the danger of totalitarianism and fascism or the sole guardian of freedom. Although there will always be extremist threats to freedom from the left and right, the world no longer needs a brand of American individualism that is equally extremist. The new international balance of power allows the U.S.A. to strike a more centrist position abroad and relax the grip of private property at home. New ecological imperatives also require us to recalibrate the rights of community and the rights of property owners. We can assume a more mature leadership role by moving our environmental and land use policies and values from their polar position toward the center.

Few humans would deny the value of civitas, as well as of mutual respect and tolerance. But some contemporary critics question the notion of traditional community. They posit that communities of interest, including ones enabled by modern electronic communications, have supplanted what used to be communities of propinquity and place. This is not a new notion in America. Alexis de Tocqueville observed: "Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations . . . religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute."

It is an undeniable fact that telecommunications and computers have changed our lives in many ways and will continue to do so at an increasing rate. However, it is not evident that they have reduced our need for physical community. Indeed, living with a computer screen in your face all day and a telephone in your ear, with radio or CD in the background, may increase the appetite for physical community. As the poet and pundit Gary Snyder has said, the internet is not a community or a commons because you can't hug anyone on it. The world wide web may prove antithetical to community by providing anonymous sources with instantaneous access to vast audiences to which they are not accountable. Never have such hidden voices had such access to such large audiences. Electronic snipers alongside the information highway are not engaging in public discourse, any more than a website can equal an Italian piazza. If anything, electronic communications have increased the human need for traditional neighborhoods with buildings you can kick and neighbors at whom you can wave or frown.

There are three ways to go with these weightless invisible electrons, which have no architectural palpability. One way is to accept, embrace and even celebrate their evanescence and flux, trying to make an architecture and urbanism that is transitory and ephemeral. This is the

Posturbanist city where a physical public realm, indeed the very notion of urbanism, is denied - or at least transformed beyond recognition. Everyday urbanism is committed to a vibrant, authentic public realm, but seems somewhat indifferent as to whether its face-to-face interaction or electronic communication. The third way is to resist the electronic net as the primary public realm, to build a high quality physical world of buildings, streets, plazas, and parks that encourage and dignify human interaction among friends and strangers, rich and poor, black and white, old and young. That is the time-tested strategy that New Urbanism has rechampioned - first with the automobile and now the electron - not to exclude it but to control it.

Traditional notions of the city and of community and its public realm are being challenged by new design ideologies and new technologies. It's confusing and we need to step back, especially in America, and examine what drives us as designers and as citizens. As designers, are we too enthralled by innovation, or worse, the appearance of innovation? Has this mandate for originality, or worse, for novelty slowly ruined our cities? Has it turned them into Post Urban places of entertainment and spectacle? Has Everyday Urbanism, on the other hand, underestimated the value that architectural and urban form can add? As citizens, are we too seduced by private pleasures and personal conceits to cultivate a rich, coherent, and healthy public realm? In our quest for a new *civitas* - a commons that space syntax can help explain and sponsor - are we prepared, like great cultures before us, for the balance and discipline required? Or will technological determinism, the market, and design fashion simply pull us where it wants?

Notes

- 1 Kaliski J, 1999 *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press)
- 2 Zeldin T, 1994 *An Intimate History of Humanity* (New York: Harper Collins)
- 3 Dunham-Jones E, 2000, personal correspondence, January 2
- 4 Giamatti B, 1966 *Take Time for Paradise* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press)