Presentation on New Urbanism
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I would like to start with a quote from James Kunstler from Geography of Nowhere.

"Americans sense that something is wrong with the places where we live and work. We hear this unhappiness expressed in phrases like "no sense of place" and "the loss of community". We drive up and down the gruesome, tragic suburban boulevards of commerce, and we're overwhelmed at the fantastic, awesome, stupefying ugliness of absolutely everything in sight – the fry pits, the big box stores, the office units, the lube joints, the carpet warehouses, the parking lagoons, the jive plastic townhouse clusters, the uproar of signs, the highway itself clogged with cars – as though the whole thing had been designed by some diabolical force bent on making human beings miserable"

When I saw that New Urbanism was a topic in the conference I called Brian Shupe and asked if I could speak. He asked me what I wanted to speak about. I said I just want to rant. He said "that sounds good". I think I'm off to a good start.

Like most of you I got into this business because I care about the built environment and the natural environment. It depresses and angers me that the majority of what is built today is garbage. Sure, there are lots of attractive individual buildings, and there is some nice landscaping. But are we creating any more "special places", places worthy of our affection? We seem to have lost our way over the last 50 years.

Think of the places that Americans admire and love to visit, and which command some of the highest real estate prices: Charleston, Savannah, Alexandria, New Orleans, Miami Beach, Key West, Santa Fe, San Francisco, Portland, OR, Jackson Hole, Manhattan, Ithaca, Saratoga Springs, Cape May, most of Boston's neighborhoods, Marblehead, Amherst, Northampton, Nantucket, and in our own region York, Ogunquit, Camden, Portland, Portsmouth, Wolfeboro, Peterboro, Woodstock, Peacham, Bennington, and Burlington.

We have made it virtually impossible if not illegal to recreate places such as these. As our houses become ever more technologically sophisticated our public life becomes ever more squalid.

Before coming back to New England I lived in Beaufort, SC, a handsome, coastal community (which like many southern towns) claimed to have spawned the "War of Northern Aggression" or "the recent unpleasantness" (we call it the Civil War) was fomented there.

Beaufort is situated close to two places which offer a stark contrast. Charleston, an hour to the north, represents the best of traditional design - beautiful buildings right on the street, attractive parks and promenades, an ethic of preserving the past, a lively street life, and distinctive neighborhoods. An hour to the south is Hilton Head Island, which represents "the best" of conventional suburban type development.

Hilton Head started to develop in the early 60's when a lot of land was acquired from black landowners (as well as whites landowners), and then converted into some of the nation's first gated communities, ignominiously named "plantations". Palmetto Dunes Plantation and Port Royal Plantation and the others are luxuriantly landscaped and many of the natural and cultural features are meticulously conserved.

And Hilton Head Parkway is, I believe, the premier example of how to create a commercial parkway. The signage, landscaping, architecture, and lighting is exquisite. The wealthy retirees who live there demand it. But except around the clubhouse within each plantation there is not much of a public realm. There are few places to walk other than the beaches and golf courses within each plantation. And there is no diversity.

Most of the new higher priced in the region followed Hilton Head's example. One day, a young man named Vince Graham strolled into the Beaufort County planning office and described the project he sought to build just outside of Beaufort. Vince had traveled around the south to places like Charleston and took careful notes and measurements about these historic places.

Newpoint, as he would call it would have:

- traditional houses in various 19th century type styles with an emphasis on regional low country architecture,

- houses built within a certain number of feet from the street,

- front porches on all houses,

- fences or other edge treatment along all front property lines,

- narrow streets with vertical curbing,

- a modified grid layout,

- a gazebo projecting into the streets to terminate the vista as you entered the development,

- rear alleys for garages, utilities and garbage pick-up,

- street trees (lots of majestic live oaks were preserved just inches from the curb),

- a speed limit sign at the entrance that said "12-1/2 mph or walk"

- several landscaped greens, and

- on the most prime real estate on the bluff overlooking the estuary not million dollar homes but a public park!

Many people criticized Vince's vision, which indeed was radical:

- The fire trucks won't be able to make it down the street.

- Cars will run into the live oaks.

- A bad element will hang out in the park.

- There's not enough room for parking.

- At least nobody complained that the streets would be difficult to plow.

In spite of many obstacles erected by the county (I think developers call it "brain damage") Vince got his project built as a Planned Unit Development. Unfortunately, the streets have to remain private since the county wouldn't accept them. As the houses were erected one by one people were awed by this breathtakingly strange and wonderful new place. Happily other developers in the area are now emulating Newpoint (and saying they supported it from the start).

As Vince has said in comparing Charleston and Hilton Head Island, Charleston is on a small peninsula with about 100,000 people. Hilton Head Island is a much larger land mass with only 30,000 people. Charleston with its charming grid of streets handles the huge increase in population during the tourist season with grace and ease. Hilton Head, where most vehicles are channeled onto the main parkway because the plantations don't allow any road connectivity, is choking on its traffic.

What has gone wrong? Why is this cancer overtaking the country? Of course, the car is the main culprit. Communities used to grow up organically following an unwritten set of rules. Architects, landscape architects, and urban designers designed the more felicitous towns. Now, which profession has the most influence on the form of our communities?

The traffic engineer, who of course is highly schooled in the art of creating places that nurture the soul. As Andres Duany says, "the car must be happy in its way". And the happiness of the car has shoved aside all other values. Wide, straight, open streets with long sight distance and large turning radii are good for cars but death for pedestrian life. It is the tyranny of the traffic engineers that prevents us from putting a tree (or what is known to some in that profession as an "IDO" or "immovable deadly object") near the road because a drunk driver might hit it. They are responsible for the madness that stipulates that tiny cul de sacs with less than a hundred trips a day must have a paved road width of 32 feet when nearby collector roads with 50 times that volume have functioned perfectly adequately with 22 feet of pavement (prior to being improved).

But there are other causes:

- fire chiefs who demand enormous turnaround areas (interestingly, as Andres Duany points out, if fire chiefs took a broader view of public safety other than shaving 1/10 second off their trip for the ladder truck which will visit the subdivision once every 14-1/2 years, they would consider the far greater hazard of overly large streets which encourage fast and reckless driving,

- building codes which discourage multi-story commercial buildings,

- zoning ordinances which stipulate minimum "set back" lines and absolute separation of uses – such that god forbid, the person with a $400,000 home should have to slum with neighbors whose houses cost only $300,000,

- the Americans with Disabilities Act which often makes renovation of historic buildings cost prohibitive,

- people's scorn for having commercial buildings nearby deservedly so given the atrocious quality of our auto-oriented businesses,

- fear of crime and of people who are different

- interest groups, like pavement contractors,

- fear of liability (engineers do not like to deviate from their manuals of national standards),

- loss of design skills (teaching architects today to be self-centered heroic geniuses in the mold of Frank Lloyd Wright and Howard Roark, rather than thoughtful contributors to a better environment for all)

- the television and now the Internet,

- the complexity of creating diverse, interesting, pedestrian oriented communities,

- developers who only know how to do one thing – shopping centers, apartment complexes, cul de sacs, industrial buildings,

- and yes, to some degree the market.

The large house on the large lot isolated from everything around it, and totally car dependent, may be what some people want. But, what about those who don' t drive – young teenagers, elderly, handicapped, low income people and people who do not seek isolation – empty nesters, singles, hip folks like us. The protected cul de sac is okay for the 7 year old learning to ride a bike. But older kids need to explore, to test themselves. What kind of adventure is possible in this sterile environment? Cul de sacs discourage people from walking beyond them onto the adjacent collector roads which have been relegated to auto traffic and cul de sacs are themselves not inviting to others from other nearby cul de sacs because they have become semi-privatized domains for their overly vigilant lot owners (even though they are public streets).

We don't know how much the market really demands this because buyers have not had a real choice. People are thirsting for something better. In surveys the majority of people say they want to live in a town, not a suburb. Hence the huge prices for genuine older neighborhoods and the handful of new communities built in a traditional manner.

There are now hundreds of new urbanist developments in the country. These are wonderful, bold, vibrant places. They are sometimes dismissed as "Disneyfied" or "nostalgic". I take exception to these terms. Nostalgia is aptly applied to the superficial shopping centers with a southwestern or Renaissance theme or the mega-mansions resembling French chateaus. The new urbanism communities offer real neighborhoods, real mixed use, a real pedestrian environment. Unfortunately, we so far have few examples in New England.

Much was learned over the course of two thousand years about what makes a livable community. What extraordinary obtuseness that we in the 20th century are ignoring this accumulated wisdom. The modernist architects who drilled into our heads that traditional stuff is not macho have cowed us. Though it has been discredited modernism's boxes live on! But the brick Georgian style

houses at Kentlands, and the Victorian style houses at Celebration are truly stunning. Human beings need beauty as well as utility in their lives. But if these buildings look nostalgic to you then simplify the designs or apply the details in a postmodern way.

A small band of visionaries led by Andres Duany and Liz Plater-Zyberk rediscovered this better way. As they and others 20 years ago poured through documents showing town plans by the likes of Raymond Unwin and John Nolen and reread the works of Ebenezer Howard, the great British stenographer, they must have felt like archaeologists in the early 19th century unearthing treasures from Greece and Rome. "Wow, this stuff is great. How could it have been forgotten all these years?"

What are some of the elements of New Urbanism, Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND), Transit Oriented Development (TOD), Neo-traditional planning, or simply Traditional Planning?

Traditional neighborhood development VERSUS Conventional suburban development

public realm and community - private realm

neighborhood parks - large private lots

integration - segregation

diversity - homogeneity

vitality - placidity

interconnected street network with short blocks - cul de sacs and collectors

semi-straight logically oriented streets - meandering, curvilinear spaghetti

multi-modalism – it's all about the car

pedestrian oriented and human scale – it's all about the car

buildings oriented to street creating a streetscape - isolated bldgs. surrounded by parking

on street parallel parking - off street parking lots

build to lines - set back lines

minimum height - maximum height

a mix of uses - separation of uses

the parts compose an ensemble - each man in his own castle

density - everybody fights density leading to sprawl

civic art and design - utility only

architecture - commercial buildings as large franchise signs

a mix of housing by type, size, and price - single family only

Interestingly, the need for affordable housing today is in many ways a recent phenomenon resulting from the neurotic need to separate all uses. Affordable housing used to be provided organically – in apartments over stores, in accessory apartments, in two and three family houses intermingled with single family homes, in smaller houses on smaller lots in close proximity to estate lots.

As Vince Graham says, in the conventional suburban development where each person seeks privacy each new house degrades your lifestyle. In the traditional neighborhood development each new house enhances your environment.

People are frustrated. They become NIMBY's and demand moratoria. But development need not be bad. Developers created the places we love. New Urbanist developers are fondly called "Town Founders".

Over time this movement is getting stronger. We are still in the first generation where individual demonstration projects have been built by enlightened developers through creative means – Planned Unit Developments, lack of zoning, or endorsement from the occasional progressive community. In the second generation, we must facilitate the easy adoption of new urbanist ordinances by replacing Herbert Hoover's standard zoning enabling legislation with a new paradigm.

3 things.

1) Do what you can to create good new places. Many will be hybrids. In a single family development you may not be able to incorporate multi-family housing, or commercial uses, and probably not public transit. But at least push to make it pedestrian friendly.

2) Do what you can with the places that will inevitably be conventional suburban stuff (such as auto-oriented strips), through landscaping, architecture, signage, lighting. But this is not really planning; it is just mitigating the bad impacts and window dressing. Of course, this is a lot of what we as planners are forced to do these days.

3) But the existing special places are fragile – downtowns, older neighborhoods, scenic areas. One thoughtless auto-oriented development can ruin them. To create a fine pedestrian setting it must be carefully managed. On a commercial strip it doesn't much matter what you do. No matter how ugly it gets people will still drive to a destination. But within a special place like Portsmouth, Burlington, VT, or Nantucket, a parking lot on the street diminishes the experience. If there are too many parking lots and oversized signs, people will stop coming and stay in their cars. Let them louse up the new commercial strips if they must but fight like hell when they try to ruin the few good places. We are not creating many new ones.

Regulation is necessary. We are already doing it anyway, just the wrong kind. Nantucket has not been destroyed because the whole island is subject to full architectural design review. They did it by declaring the whole island a historic district. Granted they are being loved to death by mega mansions but nonetheless it is a gorgeous place. You don't need to declare your entire community a historic district to bring about quality development but you must take a stand.

Here are some things to do:

- encourage narrow streets

- push for connected streets both within and between developments

- require some meaningful open space like greens, parks, or squares

- require a logical orientation to streets

- encourage mixed use, but only with good design, and discretion – use special exceptions, design review, conditional uses, etc.

- encourage mixed housing

- buffer parking lots and put parking at the side or rear

- reduce parking; have flexible parking standards

- insist on vertical not sloping curbing, protect pedestrians

- insist on proper sidewalks with a lawn strip and street trees 30 or 40 feet on center

- do some stuff with single family if possible – prohibit snout houses

- put the TND at least on even footing with conventional stuff. Find a way to make it easy to do - allow it by right or through a PUD, give density bonuses

- establish design guidelines for commercial buildings

- encourage build to lines not setbacks

- fight for 2 way traffic patterns not 1 way

- allow second story residential downtown

- encourage alleys

- allow accessory apartments

- establish a local historic district

- incorporate traffic calming

- promote compact development both in the big picture (citywide) and within individual developments

- find ways to link the 2 dimensional plan with the 3 dimensional design of buildings

- require open space subdivisions as advocated by Randall Arendt (formerly called cluster)

- open space is NOT preserved by requiring large lots (unless you are Lancaster County, PA and require 25 acres minimum). Clustering is the way to do it.

- promote local, home grown businesses

- show them good examples

- do slide shows

- educate, educate, educate - planning board, developers, architects,
engineers, fire chiefs, landowners, and most of all yourself. Read books on
new urbanism and traditional planning

- remember small is beautiful.

- fight, especially don't let them ruin existing good places.

- join the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU)

- go to a CNU conference

Let us as planners be more than handmaidens to the engineers, fire chiefs,
lawyers, and unimaginative developers. Let us be passionate advocates for
something much better, something whose quality has been demonstrated over
thousands of years.

I would like to end with a quote from James Kunstler from "Home from
Nowhere":

"Human settlements are like living organisms. They must grow and they will
change. But we can decide on the nature of that growth, particularly on the
quality and the character of it, and where it ought to go. We don't have to
scatter the building blocks of our civic life all over the countryside,
impoverishing our towns and ruining farmland. We can put the shopping and the
offices and the movie theaters and the library all within walking distance of
each other. And we can live within walking distance of all these things. We
can build our schools close to where the children live, and the school
buildings don't have to look like fertilizer plants. We can insist that
commercial buildings be more than one-story high, and allow people to live in
decent apartments over the stores. We can build Main Street and Elm Street
and still park our cars. It is within our power to create places that are
worthy of our affection."