

In the Field

Ideology vs. Pragmatism in New Urbanism

Equipped with the tools of the dispassionate cultural anthropologist—coupled with a curiosity born of years of listening to trash talk fuelled by the debate in 1999 at the GSD between Andrés Duany ('74) and Rem Koolhaas—I traveled to Austin, Texas, with two colleagues to attend the 16th Congress for New Urbanism (CNU) in April. What we discovered was a loosely affiliated group of people who share a strong belief that suburban sprawl is the biggest problem facing American culture, trailed by a group of people who want to sell them things. Unlike other industry associations, such as the AIA or the American Institute of City Planners, CNU brings a wider variety of professionals under a single tent to push a surprisingly broad range of agendas within the strongly principled but flexible framework of the organization.

The culture is both deeply pragmatic in its approach and almost evangelical in its convictions. What's remarkable is that a potent intellectual agenda has emerged precisely at the moment that CNU morphed from a polemical think tank into an industry trade show. There is something profoundly practical about discussing detailed urban-design strategies with traffic engineers, building-supply salespeople, and developers, as participants. In this way CNU has been able to develop a planning methodology and a market simultaneously. Put another way, at this point in the evolution of the organization, there is resistance to overly speculative blue-sky thinking, but not so much that any individual or company cannot benefit from the pixie-dust power of the CNU brand.

In addition to curiosity (every intellectually committed urban designer should attend CNU at least once), we attended the conference to learn more about form-based zoning since our office had recently been awarded a planning commission for Boston's Back Bay. Based on a review of best practices, it was clear that attendance at CNU was the most efficient way to get up to speed. The chance to stock up on pesky AIA Learning Units was also a draw.

The urban design agenda seems to be controlled by Andrés Duany, Stephanos Polyzoides, and Dan Solomon. The three are superb communicators who can turn up the polemic to rouse the crowd. Despite the rhetoric, they are thoughtful urbanists who base their recommendations on the close observation and analysis of existing physical forms and social patterns. As such, their methodologies are mostly pragmatic and empirical, despite the polemic antics of Duany, Polyzoides, and others in the organization.

In fact, it was the disconnect between the expected trenchant rhetoric of the organization and the thoughtful pragmatism on display that was the most striking. As Duany pointed out during an excellent lecture about CNU's stance on green initiatives, its antisprawl polemic has no value at the point-of-sale in American consumer culture. He instead suggested that the marketplace, in the guise of a better lifestyle choice rather than policy, was the best way to change American settlement patterns. Given the marketing savvy of Duany and his colleagues, it became clear that the mostly ironic vitriol and the occasional pep rallies were meant to hold together a coalition that, if represented as a Venn diagram, would only overlap in their shared interest to promote dense, walkable communities. The overall impression was a school of thought that is nuanced, sophisticated, and flexible as a methodology but crude and occasionally adversarial as an ideological movement.

A presentation on urban boulevards by Allan Jacobs and Elizabeth MacDonald exemplified the best of the New Urbanist approaches to design thinking. Their careful analysis of existing boulevards around the world, described with dimensioned plans and sections, photographs, and sketches, made a convincing case that a methodology that includes an analysis of best practices is important. Their approach is closely aligned

with the kinds of empirical urban research done by William Whyte in the 1960s and by Fred Kent currently at the Project for Public Spaces.

In the same vein, Dan Solomon gave a crisply argued accounting of the typological history of the perimeter and slab blocks of the twentieth century. He made a convincing argument that environmental design criteria, carried to the logical extreme, include built-in contradictions. The multidirectional perimeter block—the basis for CNU's urban agenda, for example—would be eroded by the directional bias of solar orientation. William Dunster's BedZED project in England was offered up as an example. Solomon commented that while the sustainable design and social agenda had good intentions, the urbanism that resulted from running the building extrusions in a single direction was an urban "disaster" because front doors did not face each other across streets and the public spaces were poorly designed.

Solomon ended his talk by presenting a new project for a residential complex in China that attempts to reconcile the perimeter-block form with a consistent solar orientation in the living spaces. It achieves this by serrating the edges of the block that face east and west to provide a south-facing window into every unit. In Solomon's example, a perfect balance was achieved between establishing a design principle—the social and urbanistic virtues of maintaining the perimeter block—with a willingness to innovate architecturally to solve the relevant contemporary social and technical criteria.

The range of design thinking of the New Urbanists is impressive. For example, Peter Calthorpe ('79) is focused on the regional scale, while Stephanos Polyzoides and his partner, Elizabeth Moule, drill down to the obsessively considered details of vernacular Mediterranean villages. For them and many New Urbanists, urbanism is a Gesamtkunstwerk that involves the full range of scales, with every architectural move requiring a preexisting precedent. Polyzoides's desire to work within preestablished architectural languages, whether high classical or vernacular, seems to be common among the majority of New Urbanists—but not all, as Solomon's presentation made clear. Perhaps it is the scale of architectural innovation within CNU's urban approach that is the most contentious. There have been Modernist fellow travellers in the past, such as New York architect Walter F. Chatham, who designed contemporary-style houses, in Seaside, Florida. Duany also made remarks during his aforementioned talk that while baby boomers may embrace neotraditional architecture, his twenty-something niece preferred to live in a lifestyle environment that is closer to *Dwell* and Ikea. Duany suggests that New Urbanism needs to accommodate more contemporary-looking architectural expressions to keep abreast of changing tastes.

While seemingly superficial, this shift may lead to profound changes in CNU's priorities when it comes to control of architectural expression. With a liberalization of acceptable architectural styles, the organization can coalesce around its urban-design agenda and leave the implicit ideology of neotraditionalism behind. At the same time, CNU's acceptance of a wider range of contemporary architectural languages may cause more architects to embrace its worthwhile urban-design agenda. Framed this way, the debate between neotraditional and contemporary architecture is not an ideological issue but rather one of pragmatism. By embracing this position, CNU is on the cusp of dropping its ideological underpinnings once and for all.

—Tim Love

Love is an associate professor at Northeastern University and a principal of Utile, a Boston-based architecture and planning firm. He will be the coordinator of the urbanism studio at Yale in spring 2009.



Denton Corker Marshall, Webb Bridge Melbourne, 2006. Courtesy Critical Visions '08.

"Critical Visions '08," Sydney

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) organized a three-day "critical forum" on April 10–12, 2008, to collectively explore and debate alternative responses to some of the most pressing issues that confront contemporary architecture. Held in Sydney, the event was sparked by questions posed by Richard Francis-Jones, creative director of the RAIA National Conference, and included topics such as, how can architecture respond to the critical environmental and social challenges of this moment, which also seem to hold unprecedented opportunities and inventive promise? What future visions and alternatives are we offering? How is the architectural project to respond to this time of simultaneous global crisis and indulgence?

Architects from around the world presented their visions in diverse formats, from keynote presentations and panel discussions to debates. They discussed projects at vastly different scales and forms of practice and research, each carefully defining a possible critical vision for architecture. Speakers such as Kenneth Frampton, who presented his talk in a larger-than-life video, and architects such as Brigitte Shim (Davenport Visiting Professor), Chris Wilkinson, Christoph Ingehoven, Michael Hensel, Francine Houben, Billie Tsien (Fall '08, Bishop Visiting Professor), Qingyun Ma, and Thomas Herzog were featured along with Australian architects and students.

An overarching theme that continued creeping back into discussions was the dialectic of the culture of a place with the expanding globalization of architectural production and the ubiquity of place. For Australian architects, built projects are consciously responding to the challenge of globalization. Wendy Lewin (partner of Glenn Murcutt, Davenport Visiting Professor) presented the firm's work as locally based but showed a broadening of Australian practice in terms of variety and setting. Lawrence Nield discussed how globalization has affected architectural practice making huge offices, false heroes and heroines, and technical exports. John Denton, of Denton Corker Marshall, showed how the firm has used architecture as a form of cultural commentary. Other themes included generative form and digital fabrication, sustainability, climate change and inequity, suburbanization, and humanitarian architecture. The idea of architecture as a cultural export—as exploitation—was debated, but with a future vision that it could be a commodity for intellectual exchange.

The hopeful examples of built work from around the world provided architectural responses that stimulated debate, conversation, and reflection among the participants and audience alike. The quality of Australian architecture for an ecologically sophisticated and sensitive society reflected back to the conference as it was demonstrated that there is a vital and committed architectural culture Down Under. "Critical Visions '08" offered a brief space to pause and reflect on the recent past and future imperatives to ensure the work of Australian architects remains relevant to the communities they serve.

—Brigitte Shim

Shim was the spring 2008 Davenport Visiting Professor and is a principal of the firm Shim-Sutcliffe, in Toronto.

New Zealand's "Concept and Detail"

From May 22 to 24, the New Zealand Institute of Architects organized its annual conference, "Stand and Deliver: Concept and Detail," around the theme of new technology and practices. Four international speakers were featured: Gregg Pasquarelli, of SHoP and Yale's 2005 Kahn Visiting Assistant Professor; Brett Steele, director of the AA; Chris Bosse, of Laboratory for Visionary Architecture (LAVA), in Sydney; and myself. The issues discussed by the principal speakers touched in various ways on the topics of collaboration and the passing of the traditional master architect. Steele spoke of education in the digital, global, and hyper-urban era; Pasquarelli talked about the specifics of how a contemporary building is delivered; Bosse discussed the organic formal paradigms that lead to innovative structural solutions, and I presented how contemporary modes of practice reignite and reorient issues of craft and labor.

Following the talks, both formal and informal, there was a mix of curiosity and skepticism on the part of the New Zealand practitioners, who were anxious to know what is happening in the "other part" of the world. It was impressive to see a room full of 2,000 practitioners sit still for two and a half days paying (it seemed) attention to every word. The skepticism was unexpected and curious, although perhaps it shouldn't have been. From an architecture culture that is deeply individualistic and do-it-yourself, New Zealand architects pride themselves in not being interested in "detail," since it implies fussiness rather than directness. The idea of collaboration doesn't make particular sense to them (less because they aren't against it than they don't want it shoved down their throats), and more significantly, they feel that digital technology gives too much control to the machine. The latter, a clear extension of their pride as can-do makers, is augmented by the fact that all the New Zealand architects I have come to know (and who showed work) are spectacular sketchers who measure their design skills by their freehand-drawing abilities. Hence, the work of the AA students shown by Steele—much of it full-scale and robotic, as responsive artifacts—was viewed by many as architecturally and aesthetically undisciplined. Pasquarelli's talks were well received since they focused on the concrete issue of how to get things done, which goes directly to the Kiwi heart. Even so, there was a sense that this model of practice is not applicable to New Zealand because it takes great capital, a huge office, and a nonexistent industrial infrastructure to make it work. (Despite the number of large firms in New Zealand, with four of the biggest represented by the principal organizers of the conference, the dominant professional paradigm is a small office, with two to ten employees.) Likewise, it was my second talk on the Auckland architect and educator Dick Toy, an advocate for a strict New Zealand regionalism, that warmed the most hearts. Nevertheless, it became clear to me that New Zealand is in the midst of a cultural revolution; that the younger generation of practitioners, who have worked in other parts of the world and returned, are impatient for things to change with the power of new technology. It was they who saw that this year's conference could be more than professional credits and could put real issues regarding the future of architecture, there and elsewhere, on the table. For this they should be congratulated.

—Peggy Deamer

Deamer is professor at Yale.