

Pessimism, Nihilism, Sorkinism: A Response to “The End(s) of Urban Design”

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In *The End(s) of Urban Design*, Michael Sorkin criticizes practices of urban design that apply prepackaged solutions to the design of complex settings, including New Urbanism. Unfortunately, Sorkin focuses on shallow examples and uses generalizations or tenuous references to advance his arguments. In addressing the design issues raised by Sorkin, this paper first attempts to supplement his criticisms of New Urbanism through a more detailed critical exploration of some of the high-profile projects of Andres Duany, including the Kentlands, East Beach, and Seaside. Second, the paper returns to the nature of Sorkin’s largely pessimist – if not nihilist – paradigm, and questions the merit of his approach in the context of effective architectural criticism.

In *The End(s) of Urban Design*, Michael Sorkin criticizes practices of urban design that apply universal solutions or a prepackaged, formal approach to the design of complex settings. Using New Urbanism as the target of his criticisms, he argues the utopian ideals driving this form of urbanism—a model that rejects the sterile setting of modernism—ultimately lead to the same dead end, and the same environments deprived of social and economic diversity. Sorkin’s concerns and comments certainly have some merit. However, as a way to constructively advancing the practice of design, *The End(s) of Urban Design* is far from successful. While Sorkin has strong opinions about New Urbanism, he presents little material of substance to allow readers to formulate their own opinions on the subject. Whether a reader agrees or disagrees with Sorkin’s perspective, the article makes very little effort to extend itself beyond mere criticisms. Compounding this, he uses shallow examples of New Urbanism such as Seaside and Celebration as vehicles for his critiques.

This tendency toward generalization and stereotype infects much of the work, with little attempt to present specific details about any project or to be consistent across analyses. References to Andres Duany’s work are made without ever mentioning his name. Conversely, Rem Koolhaas is cited but without discussion of any of his work. Adding to the confusion, references are made to “carpet bombing in Vietnam,” modernism, Kevin Lynch, and 17th century Rome, among others. At the end of the day, if a reader encountered this essay without prior knowledge of the subject, he or she would be left relatively uninformed and potentially misinformed. In addressing the design issues raised by Sorkin, this paper first attempts to supplement his criticisms of New Urbanism through a more detailed critical exploration of Duany’s projects, including the Kentlands, East Beach, and Seaside. Second, the paper returns to the nature of Sorkin’s criticisms, questioning the merit of his oversimplifying approach.

A Supplemental Criticism of the New Urbanism of Andres Duany

To understand the physical presentation of Duany’s architecture, one must not look much further than one of his major sources of influence. In 1909, Raymond Unwin’s *Town Planning in Practice* provided an extensive look at European city forms pertaining to public spaces from Pompeii to Paris. Duany’s works draw heavily from Unwin, who believed “very much the beauty of buildings result from working within defined limitations” (Unwin 1909). Indeed, Duany’s works *The New Civic Art* and *The Smart Code* are arguably a repackaging of Unwin’s artistic principles. Thus, if one is not inclined towards traditional form and aesthetics, one will see only these surface features and label New Urbanism a victim of its own conservative ideals.

Socially, however, Duany diverges from his predecessor. Unwin’s spatial and formal patterns represented a concern for social balance by engaging “the landlord and tenants, parson and flock, tradesman and customer, master and servant, farmer and laborer, doctor and patients; all were in direct relations and shared common interests forming a network of community life” (Unwin 1994, xii). Since most of Duany’s patrons are private developers, these socioeconomic concerns fall short of being realized in his communities. Quite the opposite social conditions are evident in even in his most celebrated projects, Seaside and the Kentlands, despite the rhetoric surrounding New Urbanism.

Seaside, Florida, a resort town where comparisons to Disney World often ring true, serves as an easy target for criticism. When Seaside turned twenty years old, management estimated that ninety percent of its residents actually did not live there but only used it for a vacation home. Seaside itself is not even a town; it is a privatized subdivision with privately owned streets within the town of Santa Rosa Beach (Marshall 2001). At the subdivision’s inception, its 80 acres were subdivided into relatively affordable lots. However, those lots were to be developed

by builders and designers, and even if an architect was not involved this would already price homes in a middle class range. Not surprisingly, Seaside's residents do not reflect the predominantly working class make-up of surrounding Walton County in western Florida.

Seaside's status as a resort also brings into question the fundamental operating idea of its downtown, since its activities are supported largely by visiting tourists and not town residents. As Neil Smith claims, "Seaside reminds me of nothing more than the suburbs of capitalism... transplanted into a poor rural county in western Florida. Seaside is not the compromise that results from an effort to work within the belly of the beast; Seaside is the belly of the beast" (Smith 1993, 35). Seaside's standing as a destination goes beyond the tourist definition of the word; the subdivision represents a status symbol as well. Money is not generated there as much as it is transplanted to this capitalist utopia by those who have the means.

To extend on the pessimists' perspective, the Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland, serves as a better example for criticism. Developer Joseph Alfrandre bought into the ideas behind Seaside and wanted to reapply its principles to compete with other developments along Interstate 278 in Maryland. Like Seaside, this subdivision is also socially and racially homogenous. The attempt to create housing for various incomes is again blunted as homes are priced only for the upper spectrum of the middle class. As some houses prices here reach seven figures, the Kentlands is notably more expensive than even its affluent surroundings in affluent Montgomery County. The working midtown or lively main street that was intended to be central to the town's plan was never realized because investors did not think that the Kentlands would be able to support such a concept. This program was instead relocated to the eastern outskirts of the development in the form of a shopping plaza, similar to what would be expected in a suburban setting. The only difference is that the K-Mart and other stores are falsely disguised behind Jeffersonian columns (Marshall 2000). The town's paucity of public transit can be explained through its lack of compactness. Within its 1500 acres, the Kentlands's 350 households result in a density of less than four units per acre, a figure that is common among conventional suburban subdivisions. This explains why the bus system runs on the edge of the development, not through it. In addition, despite the town's location just thirteen miles outside of Washington, D.C., its buses do not provide a direct connection to the city (Varsa 2007). The light rail that was intended for the Kentlands Boulevard was also never delivered after twenty years and multiple charrettes.

Perhaps the development best suited for a case against Duany's New Urbanism is in Norfolk, Virginia, a city which has historically been an experimental ground for urban renewal. The site for the New Urbanist

development of East Beach was initially composed of mostly 18th and 19th century homes. While some were run-down Section 8 homes that could be demolished, others could have benefited from restoration. Principle 9 regarding "[t]he block, the street, and the building" of New Urbanism's Charter emphasizes "preservation and renewal of historic buildings, districts, and landscapes [to] affirm the continuity and evolution of urban society" (CNU 2001). Instead of preservation and renewal, what is evident here is a relatively recent case of what James Baldwin might label "negro removal." Fifteen hundred homes were demolished in order to make way for East Beach, a waterfront development with roughly one-third the density.

Duany's firm claims to make the waterfront "a more accessible and significant landmark for the community" (DPZ)—but who is this "community"? Since Duany's project was privately funded, no affordable housing was required to be built after previous residents were removed. Thus, no coherent plans were made for its former residents, who were priced out of their own community and given the option to move out or request funding for three months' rent. Those who requested the grant were put on a waiting list for public housing (Marshall 1995). While it is true that the demolition of the area took place prior to Duany's involvement in the project, Norfolk still provides another case where New Urbanism's principles and Duany's practice contradict one another.

One could further highlight this schism between principle and practice by pointing to gated communities such as Aqua or Windsor in Florida. In other areas like Georgetown, Connecticut, or Warwick Grove, New York, New Urbanist communities are designed for residents in their mid fifties or older. This presents another aspect of exclusivity: the communities often exclude not just young adults but also children and teenagers, thereby avoiding the need for school taxes altogether. The problem is not just one of developments that cultivate a sense of collective wealth. Collective poverty can be found in Duany's lower income projects such as La Estancia Farmer Housing and Wimauma in Florida. Half-hearted attempts are made in developing these sites, which visually amount to little more than neglected senior housing projects.

Duany's inability to reproduce New Urbanism's principles in these projects can be traced back to comments he made during the Seaside Debates. "The New Urbanism is a comprehensive model for solving many problems. It will not solve racism or poverty, the root of which lies elsewhere....[O]ne must never experiment with the poor; they are already under enough stress. Experiment with the rich because they can always move out" (Bressi 2002, 31). A more honest statement would have mentioned that the poor cannot afford his experiment, and that it is not about

the rich moving out, but about the poor being removed for the rich to move in. Another of the underlying principles of New Urbanism, regarding “[t]he neighborhood, the district, and the corridor,” seeks to “bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.” Clearly, this is contradicted in most of these developments.

A Rebuttal to Sorkin’s Critiques

Naysayers of New Urbanism have repeatedly used the above arguments, denouncing the movement’s privatized greenfield developments, its exclusive atmosphere, and its historical nostalgia. They also cite the fact that there is nothing new or urban about it. The pessimist will rarely ever acknowledge New Urbanism’s successes within the context and limits within which it operates, however. The “end(s)” of Sorkin’s theory, denouncing such a movement without making specific references or providing suggestions on how to improve it, only make matters worse. No single planner will ever solve the world’s problems, so planning’s limits should be noted and its successes within these limits acknowledged.

One must first acknowledge that Duany has taken on suburban development, a field that has long been criticized and yet has seen little improvement. Compared to conventional post-WWII, automotive-based, cul-de-sac sprawls, New Urbanist developments seem to present a superior alternative. Suburban development is inevitable. The developers of Seaside and the Kentlands could have opted to hire the designers of Levittown or A.A. Taubman, and their projects would have never received as much criticism. In the majority of Duany’s projects, one at least sees the attempt to produce mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented space which has the potential to improve residents’ quality of life. If one is content with living in Seaside or the Kentlands and can walk or bicycle, most vehicular trips can be virtually eliminated. In theory—if not always in eventual practice—shopping areas, community facilities, and even extended family are within walking distance. The public spaces are also mostly successful by virtue of being centrally located, allowing for maximum social interaction. Additionally, the scale of the developments and their aesthetics are pleasing to the human eye (unless one is a modernist and wishes to fault Duany for an Ecole de Beaux Art education). Even within

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what Lewis Mumford might call “the bastard estheticism of a single uniform style, set within a rigid town plan” (Mumford 1961, 312), Seaside’s design guidelines allow for architectural variations found in the contrasting styles of buildings by such designers as Steven Holl and Leon Krier. Most importantly, surveys have shown that compared to nearby developments, well thought-out designs have brought about a stronger sense of pride and social capital among community members within these developments (Kim 2000). Arguably, the users of the development should judge what is best for them.

The pessimist perspective, however, rarely acknowledge these points in support of New Urbanism. Sorkin’s essay contains no recognition of the successes (however partial), nor does he ever present specific cases to back his critiques. It approaches nihilism to say that nothing good has ever been done by New Urbanists and that the Sorkin-ist approach, despite its easy targets and lack of detail, should be accepted as the defining perspective on the subject. The only things the readers are left to contemplate are generalizations and tenuous references.

Sorkin’s assessment of Battery Park provides a good starting point. Here, Sorkin compares Battery Park and New Urbanism with 17th century Rome. Yes, the underlying forms of New Urbanism predate the order that Sitte advocated in German planning or the civic art brought to light by Unwin. Having spent a year studying in Italy, however, this reader began to wonder whether the reference is appropriate. The Italians had two terms in their approach towards urbanism. Risanamento, or urban renewal aimed at preserving the urban fabric, and sventramento, or the “gutting” of the urban fabric to restore spatial order. By looking at some of Duany’s plans for Seaside,

the Kentlands, Masphee Commons, and Fanin Station, one sees some connection to Rome, but this was Rome in the 16th century, not the 17th century. Pope Sixtus V ordered the radial gutting of streets leading to Castel Sant’Angelo

along with those leading to Piazza del Popolo. Aside from clearing congestion, the resulting panopticon was to serve as a mode of city surveillance. A prison in Cuba, Presidio Modelo, designed with a central guard tower amid a circular prison cell arrangement, is perhaps the best formal realization of this concept. Duany’s reversion of the panoptic metaphorically suggests effective surveillance

by residents, as an empowerment of its user, unlike the Baroque boulevards which may have perpetuated social separation. Strangely, even Sorkin acknowledges some of Battery Park's success, noting that "vehicular traffic is negligible" and "its scale... reasonable" (Sorkin 2003). So why was the comparison made to Corbusier's Plan Voisin, and its origins traced back to Imperial Rome?



Castel St. Angelo: Panoptic

Source: Google Maps

Piazza del Popolo: Panoptic



Another of Sorkin's generalizations has to do with supporting the "minority view" of Kevin Lynch. Along with Boston, Los Angeles, and Jersey City, Lynch gives praise to Florence, Italy. Note that the interpretation of "formal typologies" (a criticism commonly directed at Duany) and "sequential series of landmarks" (Lynch 1960) is supported by Lynch, without acknowledging how the paths, nodes, or landmarks of Florence came about. If American urban renewal and East Beach are guilty of "negro removal," then the group targeted for eviction in Italy was the Jews. Between the Arno and the Duomo, Piazza Della Republica in Florence was created as a public space with widened paths connecting the river to the church by ripping through and removing a significant segment of a Jewish ghetto. Nowadays, that former slum is one of Florence's main landmarks and its paths are heavily traveled by tourists.

Seaside's accommodation of tourism is also

used by academics and critics to question the authenticity of the development. One need not look beyond the city limits of Ann Arbor, Michigan, to question the legitimacy of this argument. The two main active public spaces in Ann Arbor exist in the form of corridors found along State Street and Main Street. The former is primarily the domain of non-resident students, while the latter is mostly frequented by middle-aged out-of-towners. This fabric took years to develop, and continues to evolve. Should Duany be disparaged for achieving on 80 acres in a short period of time what towns and cities struggle to accomplish in countless years and often endless square miles? Furthermore, could not Seaside develop unplanned "everyday urbanism" over time, as do so many other towns and cities?

Another flaw in Sorkin's line of criticism against NU can be seen in his paper "Starting From Zero" (2003), where he castigates any proposed scheme for Ground Zero that involves rebuilding on the footprint of former towers, supporting the idea of a memorial to the point where there should be very little built on the site. Once he realizes that this idea is unlikely to receive support, his scheme shifts from this to a more elaborate plan for lotus leaves springing from the ground to midrise towers, with the entire site encased in a giant glass dome. The thing that remains consistent in his plans is that the footprints are to be left relatively undeveloped. Sorkin's writing on the plans for the World Trade Center site are similar to his critiques of New Urbanism, both in terms of his dismissal of all design ideas that are not his and his disinterest in economic concerns in favor of extensive preservation. The idea of preservation, both physical and social, often comes into question with New Urbanist developments. But at what point should financial concerns influence design? If an area like Norfolk, Virginia, were to preserve all of its impoverished population or a brownfield site like Georgetown, Connecticut, were to attempt to return to the majority of its outdated industrial uses, both areas would likely falter. Redevelopment based on preservation does not always result in improvement, and can often result in further bouts of decay.

The Role of Architectural Criticism

When architects seek better solutions to existing designs, they should set examples with their own work. When that work falls under the contemplation of an extreme pessimist, prone to oversimplifications and reluctant to deal with specifics or offer constructive suggestions, dialogue becomes lost in a framework of generalizations. Manfredo Tafuri was credited with the idea of "operative criticism," whereby a concern is shown for propaganda and capitalism's detriment to architecture and history. He urged architects to practice and leave the field of writing to critics, so that they would stop reinventing

history through their own personal agendas. The term could also be applied to critics calling themselves architects who present their perspective through thick lenses. One would be led to believe from all the moaning about others' built work being "disengaging from the existing city" that Sorkin Studio would boast exemplary projects of its own. Instead, the studio features work that has never left the drawing board and visions so divorced from reality or any city's complex ecology that some are titled (perhaps appropriately) "Somewhere in America." The End(s) of Urban Design follows the thinking that there is no perspective beyond that of the writer, and it neither allows the readers to formulate their own opinions about the subject nor encourages constructive input to further the field of urbanism.

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