

After reading so many criticisms of New Urbanism I am beginning to wonder if it really will solve world hunger and bring peace on earth. I tend to side with Ellis (2002, p. 284) when he concludes that “New Urbanists are justified in holding to their principles, continuing to build, and paying close attention to results on the ground”. New Urbanism may not be the panacea, but few, except perhaps G&R, would argue it is not an improvement of conventional suburban development patterns. So this week we have three interesting analyses of “results on the ground” that I think have been worthwhile to mull over. Not necessarily as criticisms of the entire New Urbanist movement, but as balanced evaluations of what seems to be working, what needs reconsidering, and where we might want to go from here.

When Skaburskis says things like, New Urbanist development “may also increase sprawl by inducing households to leave their high-rise apartments earlier by the availability of lower-priced townhouses in the new urbanist development”, I wonder if he realizes that the houses these families leave behind do not disappear. Similarly, he claims Cornell only drew 14.4% of its households away from conventional suburban developments. But that does not mean the high density housing its residents would have otherwise chosen is now empty. That said, it is interesting that the current residents of Cornell tend to come from high density environments. His results also indicate that residents still cling to the dream of eventually moving to less dense single-family detached homes. If he could show that living in the New Urbanist development encouraged this dream, then we would have a problem. He does not suggest this. As a result, he concludes with the bizarre assertion that New Urbanist developments should cater more to existing suburban development trends and increase single-family detached homes in their residential mix. Although I feel his conclusion is flawed, I would like to expand on this issue of mixing, but with a broader definition of uses and on a longer time scale, which we started to touch on in the last class.

Although Southworth’s (1997) theoretical analysis of two New Urbanist developments focuses on walkability, particularly connectivity, most interesting to me are his concluding reflections on the neotraditional paradigm where he criticizes neotraditional

models for being “sanitized versions of the small town” (p. 43) for their lack of mixed uses. He later suggests that, not only are New Urbanist developments in this sense “anti-urban”, but that their relatively homogeneous land uses are neither allowed nor encouraged to evolve over time resulting in a lack of “identity reflecting the needs and tastes of individual inhabitants”. He is thus connecting ‘inauthentic’ reflections of community identity to neotraditional developments’ inability to adapt.

You may remember that last week, Ellis also briefly spoke of the “alleged ‘inauthenticity’ of New Urbanist communities” (p. 278). An entire site, built from scratch, will have very few opportunities to reflect a local historical identity. Recognizing this, Ellis takes a more positive view in considering the potential for a New Urbanist development to change over time and address these accusations of ‘inauthenticity’. Neotraditional neighbourhoods “stand a higher chance of evolving in interesting ways through time than conventional projects, because they mix uses and blend different housing types together” (p. 278). He may well have it right, but Southworth feels this potential is limited. It is interesting, assuming that such a capacity to evolve is important not only for reasons of place identity but also sustainability, how little this theme of long-term adaptability is mentioned by New Urbanist advocates. Would the CNU even want to promote adaptability as it implies uncertainty in the future: the developer’s boogeyman.

What is the potential for New Urbanist developments to adapt to changing community needs over time? How can we evaluate this? Ellis cited a faith in their mix of uses, but what mix of uses can New Urbanist developments realistically support? How can buildings be made more flexible to future needs? What might an adaptable urban form look like? These are all interesting questions which remain largely unexplored. They depend somewhat on what we mean by mixed use. I have found ambiguities around this term frustrating. Its definition is often assumed, yet there are many possible interpretations and some receive more attention than others. Grant (2002) touches on this but in a rush to address her central question she outlines a simplistic typology that describes more how mixed-use might develop than the concept itself. As I have hinted, there are dimensions of scale, time and even the resolution of uses. A paper by

Hoppenbrouwer & Louw (2005) does a nice job of sorting out these often implicit dimensions, which I hope to unravel further in my final paper.

Although enlightening, this theoretical framework for mixed-use does not help us evaluate whether a particular mix of uses is good or bad (i.e. discuss mixed use within a normative framework). To open this discussion we need to debate the compatibility (e.g. industrial with residential) of a mix, the appropriateness of a mix (e.g. jobs/housing balance) and how both are perceived by local residents. Grant presents the interesting finding that, in Canada, even if mixed use is supported functionally and politically, there have been significant challenges to actually initiating mixed uses due to perceived neighbourhood incompatibilities by residents.

So who wants mixed use? Skaburskis notes that mixed land use was not an important attribute for those who moved to Cornell. Furthermore, Grant makes the interesting finding that residents in some cases have resisted mixing despite timid market interest and the removal of zoning barriers: convenience stores in Bois Franc, a private school in Calgary, and bars in Nova Scotia. She later highlights the case of an industrial park in Nova Scotia where, although mixing was feasible, business owners, councilors and planners were reluctant to let in housing for fear of residents “destabilizing the business environment” (p. 76). Business preferred zoning as a guarantee about the future. But are we not better off with a community that at least could support changing uses in the future even if it is not realized today?

It is interesting that Grant points out the support for mixed use from the political right, as a form of deregulation. When in Brazil, I saw the results of a more or less de-regulated land use environment under tremendous growth pressures and in a socio-economic context of huge disparities. The results are, well, mixed. Autobody shops beside houses, detached houses beside 20 storey towers, the rich beside the poor, the poor under highways, and land speculators abound (note: this has not by any stretch resulted in social cohesion: They are ‘physically close but socially distant’ – a paradox frequently cited in Brazilian urban geography literature). So what kind of mixed use should we

encourage here in Canada? In my opinion, mixed-use is not about de-regulating, but rather figuring out how to encourage form that is supportive of mixed uses and regulating it a way respectful to changing community needs. This could be one of the big challenges that contemporary planners will face for some time to come.

Reference List

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