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**The Spectacular Towne: A Critical Review of The New Urbanism**

by  
**M. Sean Stanwick**

A Masters Degree Project submitted to the  
Faculty of Environmental Design  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

### **The Spectacular Towne: A Critical Review of the New Urbanism**

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In response to the auto-based post-war suburbs, a planning and architectural paradigm known as the New Urbanism, is gaining widespread (inter)national popularity. By utilizing the traditional American small town as a model for development, the New Urbanists offer alternatives to, what they claim is, a placeless urban context. This is achieved primarily through the restoration of traditional planning techniques and by adopting architectural images reminiscent of pre-war America. As several examples are now sufficiently established, a pragmatic review is thus possible. This thesis examines the physical results and implications of these developments. In seeking to match theory with reality, the philosophy and goals of the movement are summarized and possible sources of popularity are examined. Conclusions reached indicate that, while the proponents of the New Urbanism maintain a genuine faith in the viability of the small town model, the deliverables fail to live up to its stated intents, and that the authenticity of the model itself is under question. Further, this thesis suggests that the popularity of the New Urbanism resides largely in its position as an extension of the postmodern themed environment as exemplified by Disneyland and Las Vegas.

Key Words: New Urbanism, neotraditional design, themed environment, nostalgia, community, architecture, urban design.

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**Introduction**  
**Overview of the Project**

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*Thesis Statement*

Capitalizing on a powerful sense of nostalgia, the New Urbanist town remains an inauthentic creation and exists largely as an extension, and a by-product, of the entertainment-based, postmodern themed environment.

*Project Overview*

This Masters Degree Project (MDP) is an examination of the New Urbanism planning paradigm in the context of the current North American sub-urban realm. Included is a review of the contextual influences, the movement's mandate, its stated intents and deliverables. To achieve this, the MDP will first examine the sub-urban condition in which the New Urbanism currently resides. Upon determination of the forces leading to the development of the movement, the movement itself is then reviewed. Complementing this, is a cursory overview of a New Urbanist development. Through a pragmatic review of the New Urbanist small town model, possible influences are identified and reviewed. In doing so, a relationship is then established between the New Urbanism and these various influences. From these relationships, conclusions as to the success of the movement are drawn, its authenticity as a small town questioned, and potential consequences drawn as theory is measured against reality.

## ***Background***

Most would agree that our cities are in the midst of a rapid evolution. One might even say that the traditional definition of a city no longer applies to our contemporary urban landscape. In this evolving city, suburbia means little, as it is virtually impossible to define the boundaries. While the traditional urban core still exists, the 'city' and 'suburb', once distinct entities unto themselves, have in fact merged into a largely singular entity resulting in a wholly unsustainable endless urban field on a potentially infinite system of interstates and cul-de-sacs.

In an attempt to redevelop the 'sustainable community', a growing architectural movement known as Neo-traditionalism --*the New Urbanism*-- is gaining (inter)national popularity. By reviving traditional planning techniques, the New Urbanism hopes to restore a sense of community to a placeless suburbia. Relying heavily on an historical architectural aesthetic, the aim is to recreate the traditional town. As the name suggests, the New Urbanism is both progressive and reactionary in that it responds directly to the typical auto-dominated suburb. Designed around traditional forms and promoting a higher density, the ultimate goal is a pedestrian-based, integrated community.

At issue however, is whether or not the final product of these efforts is in fact the authentic town it is promoted as being. While the mandate of the movement draws from solid intentions and longstanding traditions, this thesis suggests that the New Urbanism is simply a by-product of North America's propensity for theming, entertainment and consumerism.

This thesis centres itself around the notion that the New Urbanism does not produce an *authentic* town as its proponents claim. In order to approach this review successfully, a definition of authenticity must first be provided. Part of the challenge in the determination of what is

authentic is that it is often muddied with an endless list of associated terms --fake, congruence, genuineness, realness. By and large, these terms are subjective and relative in nature and approach authenticity from the realm of deep philosophy. It is important to understand that it is not the aim of this thesis to question the authenticity of the New Urbanist experience. Knowing that a relative approach to authenticity and experience will not adequately serve the needs of this thesis, it therefore adopts a *pragmatic perspective* as it relates to the physical characteristics of the New Urbanist small town model. In other words, this thesis does not question the authenticity of the experience or interpretation of the New Urbanism, but rather *questions its authenticity as a real town.*

This particular approach to the issue of authenticity is appropriate as the majority of this review focuses on the pragmatics of the small town model proposed by the New Urbanism and less on experiential or social issues. Further, the New Urbanism goes to great lengths to promote itself as an authentic town, and as such, only when the physical reality is compared to the associated theory can its authenticity as a town be determined. Areas reviewed include architectural and planning concerns, questions of sustainability, context and execution. As they relate to the New Urbanism, these issues are largely physical in their manifestation and implementation, and as such, any critique of its authenticity must also adopt a physical, pragmatic stance.

In reviewing the authenticity of the New Urbanist small town model, this thesis finds support for a pragmatic approach in the writings of David Lowenthal. In *Authenticity? The Dogma of Self Delusion*, he writes that "authenticity usually attaches to one of three...goals: faithfulness to original objects and materials, to original contexts, or to original aims."<sup>1</sup> Essentially, the thesis concurs with Lowenthal, and in applying his words, asks of the New Urbanism: is the town that it proposes indeed an authentic town when the above criteria are applied?

Again, the position of this thesis is that New Urbanist communities are not authentic towns and that the claims made by their proponents are unsubstantiated. In order to determine the authenticity of the model, issues of history, context, materials and overall intent will be addressed. The thesis will illustrate that traditional towns functioned in specific ways, developed as a result of certain economic, social or geographic factors, and evolved incrementally over time. These towns have a specific reason for being, and for being the way that they are. It is these characteristics that makes them authentic as towns. This thesis seeks to determine if the New Urbanist town shares similar characteristics of authenticity. If it indeed does, then it will approach the same level of authenticity as a traditional town, if it does not, then its authenticity must be questioned.

Complementing this, the thesis further asks the questions: are the physical and social processes faithful to the time period being revived; does the town function in the same manner as the traditional town it is supposedly based on; and do the physical results support the claims made by the proponents? In asking these questions, the thesis can then accurately assess the authenticity of the model as a real town.

For the purposes of this review, it is also necessary to place the New Urbanism contextually within the larger realms of architectural thought and criticism. While the New Urbanism maintains loose ties with the modernist paradigm --those ties being issues of the irrelevance of context, and a reliance on a modernist residential model-- it is the position of this thesis that it resides largely within the framework of the postmodern paradigm. This is evidenced by the willingness of the New Urbanism to expropriate from the past whatever elements it requires and its ability to collage them together to complete the overall image. Further, the New Urbanism relies heavily on a mix of styles, eras and materials combined in a largely superficial manner designed to blatantly imitate and evoke a sense of the past whether it be real or imaginary.

The postmodernism this thesis refers to deals less with the distrust of science, or the break from the rigid, mechanistic tendencies of the modernist period. Instead, it focuses on the postmodernism of fragmentation --the borrowing of images and signs from the past regardless of time or method only to be reused and recombined without consideration to era, process or meaning. Further, it deals with the postmodern condition of simulacra in which style and appearance have priority over content; and where images and what they appear as are more important than their usefulness or appropriateness.

It should be noted that while the New Urbanism appears to fit well within the framework of the postmodern, there are conflicts between the two paradigms. As outlined by Stuart Sim in *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*, we see that postmodernism supports an awareness of its surrounding context, that it promotes a self-conscious playfulness while maintaining a genuine cautiousness of science and technology.<sup>2</sup> The thesis will illustrate that the New Urbanism largely ignores context in favor of developer profit potential; that it truly believes itself to be authentic; and that contrary to its mandate of restoring a simple past, it utilizes high technology within a disguised modernist residential model --the typical suburban home-- as a primary selling feature.

Nevertheless, it shares with the postmodern the ideology of the simulation, where referential depth, time, and history are suspended, manipulated and "simultaneously combined to form a hybrid combination."<sup>3</sup> Further, there exists within both an interplay of images from a variety of sources, eras and locales. As such, it is these larger connections that place the New Urbanism within the framework of the postmodern, and as will be illustrated, will have a profound impact on its physical and perceived authenticity.

### ***MDP Goals and Objectives***

The *goals* of the project are to conduct a critical review of the New Urbanism. The intent is to determine if the final deliverables are commensurate with the claims of its proponents. Further, this review seeks to question the level of authenticity of the proposed New Urbanist small town model. The following *objectives* have been developed to achieve the goals outlined above.

- ▶ To conduct research on the North American urban / suburban context;
- ▶ To develop an understanding behind the motivation, and history of the New Urbanism;
- ▶ To identify and review sources of popularity for the New Urbanism;
- ▶ To develop an awareness of the nature of verisimilitude in the North American context by applying it to the New Urbanist model.

The *scope* of the project is limited to an interdisciplinary review of the New Urbanism from an architectural and planning perspective.

### ***Qualifiers***

For the purpose of the MDP, the following qualifiers have been developed:

1. For the purpose of this review, *Neotraditional Design and the New Urbanism are to be interpreted as the same thing.*
2. *This thesis acknowledges the fact that the New Urbanism is a physical product of, and for the most part, reflects the traditions, myths and values of the United States. Although many of the underlying planning principles are generic in nature and have been adopted*

by other countries, the initial inception stems primarily from longstanding traditions, ideologies and social patterns inherent within the American context. While the New Urbanism has successfully been exported to Canada, and other countries, the primary referent within the thesis will be American in nature.

3. The primary aim of this thesis is to review the New Urbanist paradigm, identify sources of popularity, and illustrate inconsistencies. While this thesis is cognizant of other design alternatives and recognizes the potential for further research, *it makes no attempt whatsoever to offer or review these alternatives.*
4. *This thesis makes no attempt to review the cultural, philosophical or behavioural consequences or implications of the simulated or themed environment.* In its review of theming and simulation, the thesis recognizes that the themed environment exists, but aims only to show that the New Urbanism is a product of this condition.

### ***Research Process***

The process of research involved a comprehensive literature review, site visits, the establishment of key working definitions, and the development of a written framework on which the MDP is based. Throughout the development of the MDP, this has proven to be a continuous and non-linear process. It proceeded as a symbiotic process, meaning that each element informed the other, and no one element singularly informed or affected the overall course of the entire document.

Further, although fully aware of the fundamental pragmatic theory that surrounds the New Urbanism, and knowing that this thesis resides within an academic context, this thesis is largely

a product of certain personal convictions as influenced by the inherent emotive qualities of the movement. As such, a somewhat subjective, and perhaps narrative framework was deemed necessary. While sustaining the academic framework, this document also provides an idiosyncratic narrative of this author's New Urbanist experiences while on site visit.

### *Literature Review*

A comprehensive literature review of relevant and current sources has served as the foundation for the MDP. Topics researched include suburban contextual development, Neotraditional design, nostalgia, authenticity, and the nature of theming and entertainment, all in the North American context.

Key sources include books, periodicals, Masters theses, Doctoral dissertations, the Internet, and point advertising.

### *Site Visits*

Complementing the literature review were site visits to several New Urbanist developments in various stages of completion, throughout various provinces and countries. These site visits were conducted at various stages during the research process. Canadian sites include *McKenzie Towne*, Calgary, Alberta; *Cornell*, Markham, Ontario; and *Kettle Valley*, Kelowna, British Columbia. In the United States, *Kentlands*, Gaithersburg, Maryland was also visited. In addition to visiting specific New Urbanist developments, several traditional, American small towns situated within the eastern coast states were also visited.

Clearly, the intention of these site visits was to provide a first hand experience of the New Urbanism in a variety of geographical contexts. Further, these visits advanced the research as residents were observed, construction methods were witnessed, and most important, afforded the author with a tactile, first-person experience of the site. While no one site is directly compared to another, these sites provide an overall experience of the New Urbanist movement. Given that the New Urbanism is as much a physical experience as it is a personal one, these site visits proved to be invaluable to the research and writing process. Clearly, the information gathered complemented and shed light on the material collected from other sources.

### *Project Structure*

The structure of the MDP has been designed as follows:

- ▶ **Chapter 1** provides an historical overview of the predominant forces behind the development of the current suburban realm. In describing the context in which the New Urbanism resides, it then provides a review of the movement itself. Included is an outline of the movement's goals, objectives and implementation strategies.
- ▶ **Chapter 2** identifies and reviews nostalgia as a possible source of popularity for the New Urbanism. Considered are issues of tradition, community and family, architectural concerns, Hollywood imagery and technological influences.
- ▶ **Chapter 3** outlines the propensity towards theming, simulation and entertainment in the North American context as a contributing factor in the development of the paradigm.

- ▶ **Concluding Observations** summarizes the intentions and ultimate delivery of the New Urbanism and draws final conclusions. Issues include a pragmatic review of the model and a placement of the New Urbanism within the postmodern paradigm. In doing so, this chapter ultimately challenges the authenticity of the New Urbanist small town model.
  
- ▶ **Appendix "A"** provides a narrative in the first-person of the Kentlands site visit.
  
- ▶ **Appendix "B"** provides a copy of the Charter of The New Urbanism.

## Chapter One

### The Urban Condition: An Overview

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This chapter provides a cursory review of the urban conditions in the American and Canadian contexts. By illustrating patterns of urban growth and change, the forces which led to the development of the New Urbanism are thus reviewed. Being both a part of, and a product of, the larger process of urbanization, the New Urbanism is then reviewed. Complementing this review, is a brief description of a completed New Urbanist development. The intent is to provide a framework around which further discussion and criticism are based.



#### The City in History

Throughout history, the city has functioned both as a place of commercial exchange and social interaction. Teeming with life, the centre was alive with groups of different races, religions and social status exchanging goods and services. Comprised of a collection of people, places and things, it is an artifact based on ideas of memory and permanence. As William Kunstler writes, the city "is a repository of cultural memory"<sup>4</sup>, a living entity undergoing a constant social and physical evolutionary process.

If we consider Kunstler's description, it is the European city which typifies the notion of the city as a living entity fostering social interaction and a rewarding urban lifestyle. Without a doubt, the European city exists as a physical manifestation of a culture proud of its history and urban achievements. These cities are both adorned with, and are at the same time, monuments to both

their culture and history. To the Europeans, "the city is synonymous with civilization."<sup>5</sup> Clearly there is a sense of social and physical connectedness between the residents and the architecture that defines the spaces they inhabit.

While the Europeans, for the most part, enjoy a shared appreciation of urban life, the human factor in the (North) American urban realm was part of the equation only insofar as it served the needs of the modern city. Rather than centres of social interaction North American cities were largely monuments to capitalist intentions and modern industrialism. Thus we omitted the framework of urban spaces that would lend themselves to a meaningful urban context.

Instead, most American cities were designed around a network of streets based on the grid. The grid was both idealistic and practical. Idealistic because it represented a democratic system of land division and the potential for unlimited urban expansion. Practical because it was easily surveyed, provided a non-hierarchical system of streets while also providing familiarity and easy way-finding.

Unfortunately the urban grid also produced negative results. Ignoring topographic concerns, it fostered a monotony of repetitive spaces. Thus, meaningful urban and social spaces were lost to the need for efficiency and expandability. Unlike the Europeans, American culture historically did not place great worth in the notions of history and civic spaces, nor an architecture which supported it. Instead, Americans valued progress and the freedom of physical and cultural mobility.

As the American city evolved it became apparent that the new urban form was somewhat less than memorable. While Americans had created a thriving metropolis dedicated to industrialism, it had little urban history to celebrate and was of a scale and space that was incomprehensible

to its inhabitants. Further, many American cities were soon becoming congested, socially unstable and failed to provide a decent quality of life. As such, Euro-envy grew as the population yearned for a tradition that was uniquely their own rather than an approach that was at best improvisational.<sup>6</sup>

In response, for a brief period between 1893 and 1918, Americans decided it was necessary to revive the ailing industrial city. Turning to Europe for ideas, architects "rediscovered the notion of civic space and the principles of civic art, and stood dazzled...as though they'd found the missing ingredient in American life."<sup>7</sup> Born of a changing opinion towards the quality of urban and civic life in America, the result was the City Beautiful Movement of 1893.

Based on the writings of Ebenezer Howard in his essay titled *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, and later retitled *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, the movement was centred around Howard's notion of sustainable, fully planned communities in a totally natural setting. Combining Neo-classical architectural styles with Baroque planning techniques, the movement was fascinated with the natural aesthetic and the development of a monumental civic and public realm.

...city beautiful plans typically sought to establish formal civic centres, in which architecture and public space were conceived as a unified whole, and efficient networks of arterial streets to speed traffic through traditional street grids.<sup>8</sup>

While the Garden City Movement produced some physical results; the most notable examples being Kingsport, Tennessee; and Mariemont, Ohio,<sup>9</sup> the ideals of the romantic golden-age were unable to merge successfully with the realities of the twentieth century. The growing popularity of the automobile would ultimately prove to be a major factor. "All of the money that had gone into the great building projects...was afterward channeled into refitting the city to accommodate

the cars, and building highways."<sup>10</sup> Further, financial support for urban beautification eventually ceased as public cynicism grew in the post-World War I years.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the efforts of the Garden City Movement, dislike for the city was, for the most part, grounded in the fact that generally it was not the best place for habitation or for raising a family. Robert Stern writes that "Americans have always been ambivalent about cities; as summed up in that old saying: it's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there."<sup>12</sup> Americans, having vast amounts of land and now the mobility to explore it, eagerly fled the clutches of the ailing city in favor of life outside its borders.

### **Universal Dispersal**

As described by Joel Garreau, in *Edge City: Life on the Frontier*, the rush to live outside the city limits would have a profound impact on the development of the modern city. Garreau describes the development of the suburban areas as the first of three critical phases of outward urban movement. In addition, Garreau further suggests that a straight line can be drawn from the creation of the suburbs through to the development of a new emergent urban form --*Edge City*. *Edge* because it places the majority of the development contextually on the outermost edges of traditional cities. *City* because all the necessary civic amenities are located somewhere within its vast area.<sup>13</sup> The table below illustrates the three primary phases of suburban movement as described by Garreau.<sup>14</sup>

<i>Urban Phase</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
The Suburbanization of America	Substantial post-World War II shift of our primary residences into the outlying countryside.
The Malling of America	As significant numbers flee the cities, retail markets follow, reinforcing suburban domestic ideologies and assume new roles in the emerging suburban patterns.
A Physical Shift of the Economy	As employment opportunities leave the city and relocate elsewhere, our points of creating wealth shifts to the outlying areas.

*Figure 1: Three Phases of Suburban Movement*

Awareness of these phases of movement is critical as they are reflective of significant patterns of urban development and illustrate the re-combination of traditional urban elements in a non-traditional pattern. In addition, this thesis contends that these patterns, along with the New Urbanism itself, represent the larger process of urbanization in the North American context.

### *The Suburban Experience*

The 1980 census revealed that almost 40 per cent of North Americans now live outside of the metropolitan areas in what is traditionally known as the *suburbs*.<sup>15</sup> Further, in the United States, the suburb-to-suburb commute accounts for 40 per cent of the total commutes, while suburb-to-city comprises only 20 per cent.<sup>16</sup> Largely characterized by a single family residence on a clearly defined lot, the suburbs were promoted as a complete community of individual homes, neighbourhood amenities, schools and retail services. Utilizing the single family home as its primary urban element, the suburbs would eventually dominate the landscape, and would become for many, the tangible realization of the American Dream.<sup>17</sup>

Before the 1920's, the majority of suburban development was centered primarily around streetcar stops. The streetcar was an efficient and flexible mode of transportation and encouraged growth within a half-mile of the line. Streetcar-suburbs resembled the pre-automobile city and were characterized by individual homes on small lots superimposed on a tight-knit pattern of streets.<sup>18</sup> Early examples, including Riverside, Ill. (1869), and Llewellyn Park, N.J. (1853), utilized Garden City ideals and promoted romantic notions of family life in a natural setting.<sup>19</sup>

As the automobile proved itself to be an efficient and inexpensive mode of transportation, it essentially became the great liberator, filling in the gaps between streetcar stops and thus promoting residential development in the far reaches beyond the city limits. Based chiefly on the automobile, these developments featured individual homes on increasing lot sizes being fed by major arterial roads.<sup>20</sup> Later versions such as Levittown, N.J. (1948) would ultimately define future suburban patterns of mass produced, affordable residential developments over a large area.

Current suburban patterns are generally defined by similar elements as the garden suburbs although with slight variations. Rather than secluded enclaves, modern residential suburbia is characterized by a uniform sprawl of virtually identical architecture on a curvilinear street system whose primary defining element is the two-car garage. The following table illustrates the defining physical characteristics and offers suggestions as to why the suburbs developed in the manner they have.

<b><i>Defining Physical Characteristics</i></b>	<b><i>Development Factors</i></b>
Uniform Sprawl, Clear Lack of Centre or Edge	Zoning, land availability and auto movement promotes sprawl.
Low Density	Zoning dictates density amounts and lot coverage.
Individual Homes on Individual Lots	Notions of individual ownership combined with zoning regulations prohibiting mixed-uses per lot.
Separation of Uses, Types and Costs	Zoning isolates and groups like-uses.
Primarily Auto Accessible	Segregated-use zoning limits proximity to commercial uses.
Wide Curvilinear Arterials, Feeder Roads, Cul-De-Sacs	Ease and speed of traffic movement within and out of residential areas. Cul-De-Sac considered a safe place for children to play. Historical origins from romantic landscape designs. <sup>21</sup>
Little Provision for Pedestrian	Nature of system serves only the automobile.
Uniform Architecture, Height and Size, Deep Setbacks	Efficiency of planning and construction, zoning regulations stipulate lot coverage, house location and groups like-structures.
Predominant Two Car Garage	Ease of auto accessibility from street to lot.
Large Front Lawns, Token Landscaping	Result of deep setbacks, lot coverage stipulations.

*Figure 2: Suburban Physical Characteristics*

James Kunstler writes, in *Home From Nowhere*, that "Americans have opted for suburbia out of sheer hatred for the historic crumminess of American cities, and particularly the fear of the underclass that lives there."<sup>22</sup> Granted, the anti-urban sentiment is strong in the North American cultural mind set, the popularity of the suburbs can nevertheless be attributed to four fundamental reasons. As identified by Peter Calthorpe, these include the search for a more *secure* environment, a quest for increased personal *privacy*, the desire for *personal ownership*, and notions of upward *mobility*.<sup>23</sup>

Further, Americans were enticed outward by cheap available land, low cost construction techniques and a newly constructed system of national interstates. After returning victorious from World War II, the United States was a growing industrial nation buzzing with optimism. "America was not just the motherland of industry, it was the only land of industry, for the other advanced nations were bankrupted or bombed to rubble. America's institutions stood intact....A great building boom lay ahead."<sup>24</sup>

In the minds of many Americans, the suburbs were symbolic of the search for the mythical Garden of Eden. However, the new Eden would take a form that was slightly more in line with the twentieth century. Americans were neither willing to sacrifice the conveniences of modern living nor were they willing to live near any form of urbanization. In essence, Americans sought, and ultimately received, a mediated urban experience in a controlled natural setting. As will be reviewed later, it is this desire for the mediated experience that is present within the New Urbanism as well.

Nevertheless, while residential developers capitalized on the severing of the home from the city and used it as a selling feature, the division of uses can be primarily attributed to the implementation of segregated-use zoning policies. As both a form-giver, and perhaps a form-taker, the zoning practices of use-separation were perhaps the single most influencing factor in the physical development of the suburbs.

The separation of dwelling from workplace...was the great achievement of the nascent planning profession....The suburbs of today continue to separate the naturally integrated human activities of dwelling, working, shopping, schooling, worshiping and recreating.<sup>25</sup>

As a form-giver, zoning not only determines the siting of commercial and residential uses, but also dictates the location of various building types, setbacks, heights, street size and even income groups. As a form-taker, zoning has stripped the urban realm of its ability to function, as the critical ties that bind a city together are severed. As a result, the modern suburban neighbourhood is characterized solely by individual buildings on large lots separated from any other use.

While most of the zoning laws in North America have only been in effect since World War II, the standard practice of separating uses into specific zones harkens back to a time when filth ridden, heavy industry was indeed a threat to public health.<sup>26</sup> As a reaction to industrialism, the logic behind the system was that it was unhealthy for industrial and residential areas to be located in proximity to each other. In theory the system of separating uses seems logical. However, in the modern context, the premise of use-separation has perhaps not been as successful. While zoning does indeed work on a personal level by providing ample space, it is this excess of space that fragments and perforates the urban context.

Ultimately, the consequence of this situation is, as Christopher Hume writes, that "you have to burn a liter of gasoline to buy a liter of milk."<sup>27</sup> James Kunstler goes so far as to suggest that zoning policies have had a profound impact not only on the urban realm but on our psyche as well.

It soon becomes obvious that the model of human habitat dictated by zoning is a formless, soulless, centreless, demoralizing mess....It bankrupts families....It corrupts and deadens our spirits.<sup>28</sup>

Whether or not the effects of segregated-use zoning are so extreme as to corrupt our psyche is debatable and not within the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, the impacts of zoning on the urban realm is clear. Rather than a thriving urban environment, this pattern has led to a fragmented urban fabric while promoting a total segregation of uses and ultimately forcing auto reliance. As will be described later, it is this pattern that the New Urbanism directly challenges.



It is critical however, to note that not every American city followed these patterns of urban development nor did every American city succumb to the effects of suburban flight. Many cities did, and still do, exist as exceptions to these patterns. As examples, Boston or Savannah maintain an architectural aesthetic which is not entirely modernist nor industrial. While monuments to capitalism, these cities also support a significant proportion of residential activity within their borders.

In addition, while the typical planning approach favored the grid system, there are many American cities which worked successfully within its monotonous pattern. New York's Central Park is a notable example of a significant urban space created within the confines of the grid system. It should also be mentioned that there always were significant numbers of people who lived outside the city borders as many people were wealthy enough to afford the 'cottage in the country'.

Nevertheless, for the most part, the overall nature of the American city would ultimately forge an anti-urban perception in the national mind set. It is the cultural viewpoint of the American urban condition which this thesis supports as being one of the influencing forces behind the New Urbanism.

### *The Canadian Condition*

It is also relevant at this time to remember that Canadians followed similar migration patterns out of the city in search of the suburban lifestyle. However, in the Canadian context, the urban realm has not suffered the same level of density decline as that of the United States. One such reason may be that Canadian cities were prosperous enough to have maintained a solid economic base. As cited by Yeates and Garner in *The North American City*, other factors for the migration differences can be summarized as follows:

- ▶ On average, Canadian suburban homes cost more to purchase;
- ▶ Large numbers of white immigrants arriving in the 1950's and 1960's moved to the central core thus replenishing the area.
- ▶ Larger support for, and development of, public transportation systems.<sup>29</sup>

That is not to say that in Canada, the urban landscape is healthy and strong. While Canadians do maintain a strong sense of regional pride, they too remain somewhat indifferent to civic beauty.<sup>30</sup> Several urban areas exist as a sea of sprawl and are designed entirely for the

automobile. One notable example is Calgary, Alberta, at one time Canada's largest *city*, simply because it included thousands of acres of sprawl within its limits.

### **The Post-Suburban Environment**

The suburban condition is an excellent indicator of urban and social change. The original garden suburb, characteristic of the post-World War II period, represented the physical manifestation of the privatization of life and reflected the prevailing social structure. Unfortunately, we have created an emergent urban form which satisfies few, if any of the original promises. Expensive, unsustainable, and repetitive, the *cottage in the country* has been replaced by a repetitive field of garages and banal uniformity.

A wholly unsustainable model of development, the suburban experiment has proven to be costly, ineffective, and discourages pedestrian interaction. Jean Baudrillard writes "if you get out of the car,...you immediately become a delinquent, as soon as you start walking, you are a threat to public order."<sup>31</sup> As such, direct human interaction has thus been reduced to a view through the windshield at 40 kilometres per hour.

Characterized by a dissolution of the urban physical order, challenged is the essence of urbanism itself, as crucial urban design issues are now open to radical reconfiguration. In the emerging city, sense of place is abandoned in favor of an un-differentiated uniformity. We have built a fragmented and dissolved fabric that lacks the necessary urban qualities of architecture and space. While this metropolitan area may contain all of the elements required for city status, albeit in a detached form, it lacks many of the fundamental qualities of urban space; an

identifiable centre and edge, development at the pedestrian scale and a discernable public realm. Suffering from a total dissolution of traditional urban hierarchies and no clear sense of place, the new city ignores legitimate uniqueness in favor of a continuous urban field.

Several diverse idioms have been coined to describe the current urban situation: exopolis, technoburbs, superburbia, disurb, suburban activity centres, or even numerically as district 287.<sup>32</sup> Lending further insight is the work of Michael Sorkin. He writes that the manner in which the elements of a city are juxtaposed is of crucial importance, as proximity defines order.<sup>33</sup> For Sorkin, the legibility and clarity of these orders has become manipulated and blurred.

If we interpret and apply these concepts it becomes clear that we have created an urban realm where neither architecture nor social values play a critical role in the creation or definition of place. Unfortunately, both the city and the suburb are now joined in a mutually negative trend resulting in the elimination of community and human scale. In practical terms, these trends have created on one hand, an over-dependancy on the automobile and a wholly inadequate infrastructure system leading to increased isolation and pollution. On the other side, current suburban models have generated urban disinvestment, rising land values and economic hardship.<sup>34</sup>

These patterns of development have also created a strong sense of nostalgia for the 'good old days.' Our fragmented lifestyle has generated fear and uncertainty and, as such, we long for a more stable life-pattern. As there is little stability in the post-suburban, postmodern environment, only segregation, speed and detachment, nostalgia has perhaps become a national condition. In response to a placeless suburban realm, and utilizing nostalgic sentimentalities,

the presence of the New Urbanism comes as a welcome alternative. The following section thus reviews the movement, its intents and initiatives.

### **The New Urbanism**

In response to the current suburban sprawl and placeless development patterns, a growing architectural and planning movement known as the New Urbanism is gaining widespread (inter)national popularity. Founded in October 1993, key players include design team Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Dan Solomon, Stefanos Polyzoides, Elizabeth Moule and Peter Calthorpe. What started out as a loose group of ideas, the New Urbanism is now an internationally membered organization and mandated by a recognized charter and a guided by a specific set of design codes. Founded on the desire to affect change on the built environment, the movement has dedicated itself to the restoration of homes, blocks, streets, neighbourhoods, cities, regions and environment.<sup>35</sup>

We stand for the restoration of existing urban centres and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighbourhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy.<sup>36</sup>

Rising out of opposition to the environmental degradation and erosion of the built environment the intention of the movement is to restore a sense of community and place to decaying (sub)urban areas. By reviving traditional planning methods and re-creating a historical architectural aesthetic situated within a historically tested model of development --the traditional small town-- the New Urbanism directly addresses issues of community, sustainable development and place-making.

The New Urbanism views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income...loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge.<sup>37</sup>

From this, the New Urbanists have set within their mandate the identification of specific goals which directly target the poor condition of the current suburban context. These goals are summarized in the following:

- ▶ Restore *traditional neighbourhood form* to create a sense of place;
- ▶ Provide a framework geared towards the *reduction of auto-dependance*;
- ▶ Increase the ability for *pedestrian use* and interaction;
- ▶ Construct a more *sustainable, cost-efficient model* of suburban development.

Ultimately, these issues combine to forge the keystone of the movement, that being the *restoration of a sense of community* to a placeless suburban context. According to the New Urbanism, it is precisely this which we long for in our daily lives. Psychotherapist Thomas Moore writes, "One of the strongest needs for the soul is for community....The soul yearns for attachment, for intimacy and particularity. So it is these qualities in community that the soul seeks out, and not like-mindedness and uniformity."<sup>38</sup> Cognizant of this need, the New Urbanism thus seeks to re-establish the community within the suburban context.

### *Implementation Strategies*

The New Urbanism is hardly a new concept, based as it is on the restoration of pragmatic planning and architectural ideas that have existed for some time. What is unique is that the New

Urbanism represents, for the first time in many years, a specific concentrated revival of these ideas in lieu of the placeless suburban sprawl that currently plagues metropolitan regions.

Throughout the 20th. century several theoretical proposals have been developed to regulate urban growth. The New Urbanism has its roots in early planning examples including the Garden City Movement (1893); Clarence Stein's suburban model for Radburn, New Jersey (1957); the Neighbourhood Unit scheme proposed by Clarence Perry (1957); and the Congress Internationaux d'Architecture Modern / CIAM (1928-1956).<sup>39</sup> Focusing on adverse urban, social and architectural conditions the New Urbanism continues a pattern of like-minded design professionals who have forwarded urban design proposals.<sup>40</sup>

In order to achieve the movement's goals, the implementation strategies are outlined in *The Charter of the New Urbanism*. Evolving from the *Ahwahnee Principles: Toward More Liveable Communities* (1991), the charter represents a declaration of the movement's philosophies, design principles and shared goals. In addition, the charter identifies that the implementation of urban change is a two-fold procedure involving a specific set of design codes and the creation of a physical framework to which those codes are applied. For a copy of the *Charter of the New Urbanism* please see Appendix "B".

Designed to guarantee unity within the community, the New Urbanism applies a specific set of design-based codes. Within this, a specific distinction is made between the urban code and the architectural code. "If the urban code is the skeleton and large muscles of the town, the architectural code is its small muscles and skin."<sup>41</sup> The urban code stipulates the hierarchy of the streets, type and size of blocks, location of neighbourhood centres, transit stops, parks, squares and most importantly, the role of the building in relation to the public realm of the street.

The architectural code is secondary to the urban code, and is offered in recommendation only. It aims to outline design norms such as facade treatments, cladding materials, window proportion, porch dimensions and roof pitches.

Further, the New Urbanism identifies the need for a supportive physical framework to which these codes can be applied.

...physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.<sup>42</sup>

The scope of the framework extends to include three exclusive, yet highly inter-connected areas of development. These are: *The region, metropolis, city and town; the neighbourhood, district, and the corridor; and the block, the street and building.* In defining each of these primary areas, the New Urbanism proposes stipulations for directing urban planning, design development, and implementation strategies. These are summarized below.

#### *The Region, Metropolis, City and Town*

The New Urbanism views the finite metropolitan region, consisting of geographic boundaries composed of villages and towns, as the basic economic and social unit of contemporary society. Therefore, any new development within the region should be infill as opposed to peripheral expansion. Further, any new development which neighbours urban areas should be directly integrated with existing urban patterns whereas noncontiguous growth should be in the form of individual neighbourhoods or towns. These areas should incorporate specific edges and be planned for a balance between economics and residential growth.

### *The Neighbourhood, District, and the Corridor*

The neighbourhood, the district and the corridor are essential in the (re)development of metropolitan areas. Neighbourhoods should be recognizable, limited in size and most importantly, pedestrian friendly. Similar to the region, there should be a diversity of population, commercial use, housing types and price range, all being served by an inter-connected transit system. The district is viewed as a functionally specialized urban area. Examples include a theatre district where restaurants and bars support the night life or tourist districts where hotels and entertainment are situated. The corridor is the both the connector and the separator of neighbourhoods incorporating both natural and man-made elements. Examples include conservation areas, open park space and public squares.

### *The Block, the Street and the Building*

The primary function of urban architecture is to define civic areas and streets. The block is viewed as the area where the urban and public realms intersect. Limited in size and shape, this arrangement provides effective lot coverage allowing buildings to act as physical and visual street walls. Safe, useable streets and plazas can easily cater to the needs of both the pedestrian and the automobile. By devising a specific pattern and hierarchy of streets, levels of urban connectedness and ease of movement can be increased. This is further enhanced by maintaining the physical character of the street through proper building scale and attention to architectural detail. As such, buildings should be designed according to their type not exclusively by their function with historic buildings and areas being preserved.



While the members of the New Urbanism are generally in agreement as to the overall aims of the movement and for the most part, respect the terms of the design codes, it is important at this time to outline the existence of a philosophical division of approaches within the movement. There are those who rely heavily on returning to traditional forms of local planning and architecture as a means of affecting change, while others believe that comprehensive change must be initiated from a regional perspective. While the two approaches vary in methodology, they nevertheless maintain a shared vision for the repair of the urban realm. These are summarized in the following.

#### *Traditional Neighbourhood Development*

In offering design alternatives and solutions at the local level --the neighbourhood, block, street and building-- the New Urbanism applies what is known as the Traditional Neighbourhood Development approach (T.N.D.). Promoted primarily by design team Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, the T.N.D. scheme aims to revive basic planning and design concepts present in the traditional American small town. Centering itself around the *small-town* model, the T.N.D. is characterized primarily by close-knit communities, a commercially viable town centre and the application of a historical, architectural aesthetic. Ultimately, it is these characteristics, the New Urbanism believes, that will foster community development in the suburban context.

We advocate the structuring of public policy and development practices to support the following principles: neighbourhoods should be diverse in use and population, communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped physically defined by universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be defined by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology and building practice.<sup>43</sup>

The basic premise of the T.N.D. approach appears both simplistic and logical. By persuading builders to abandon typical suburban patterns in favor of compact neighbourhoods it is hoped that the framework will foster an increased sense of community and provide a network of quality public spaces. As such, diversity will prevail over uniformity, character over banality, and ultimately community over sprawl.

Proponents of the New Urbanism maintain that suburban residents rarely interact in ways necessary to promote a sense of community. This is not the fault of the resident but rather a product of the surroundings. The system is clearly not geared to foster social interaction between neighbours. The infrastructure supports the automobile while the needs of the pedestrian remain unfulfilled.

The traditional small town however, embodies those physical characteristics necessary to foster community growth and development. Summarized below, these represent the most common physical features of the T.N.D. approach as well. It is the application of these inter-connected principles which the New Urbanism uses to attain the goals previously described:

- ▶ Definable neighbourhoods of limited size and scale, with increased density;
- ▶ Human / pedestrian scaled developments (walkability);
- ▶ Fully-functional town centre;
- ▶ Traditional architectural aesthetic;
- ▶ Modified system of streets;
- ▶ Mix of land uses with greater range of types and costs.<sup>44</sup>

At the centre of the T.N.D. scheme is the close-knit, neighbourhood unit. Historically, the neighbourhood played a key role in the development of physical and social relations. Furthermore, it was the neighbourhood unit which bonded residents and provided the network for social stability.

The neighbourhood was an anchor for the individual, providing emotional, spiritual, and intellectual support. When a neighbourhood has an animated public life, residents benefit. They obtain greater opportunities to find companionship, develop friendships, and form ideas. They are led toward balanced lives. Their ability to co-operate in solving community problems and carrying out community improvements multiplies.<sup>45</sup>

It is, in part, this mixture of uses that created diversity within the small town and ultimately helped foster community growth. The New Urbanists further justify the restoration of the small town model by reasoning "if you give Americans a traditional neighbourhood to live in...they will behave like neighbours....Give home owners front porches, and they will eschew the television, the air conditioning and the Internet and talk to each other."<sup>46</sup>

For the New Urbanists, the original small town represents the historical pinnacle of planning practices. Andres Duany maintains that

...urban planning reached a level of competence in the 1920's that was absolutely mind-boggling. Instead of segregating uses as cities do today, early twentieth century [towns] contained mixtures of stores, homes, and workplaces in the same neighbourhoods.<sup>47</sup>

A critical characteristic of the New Urbanist neighbourhood is its limited size and increased density. Modern suburbs contain one or two residential units per acre while New Urbanist proposals increase this density and call for up to six units per acre.<sup>48</sup> By increasing the density, holes in the urban fabric are repaired and the traditional urban form restored.

By utilizing a variety of commercial uses and building types within the neighbourhood, a healthier community is created as well as the potential for increased physical and social connections. In addition, a mixture of housing types including apartments, duplexes, and single family dwellings provides housing for families of different age and income groups. A design element revived from the past, the use of granny-flats tucked away over the garages, allows the generational family to remain closely connected. The New Urbanists firmly believe that it is the tight-knit, family unit which ultimately creates the ties that bind the community together.

This mix of uses is achieved in part through the revision of current segregated-use zoning policies. For the New Urbanism, zoning is "not the cure for the disease, it is the disease."<sup>49</sup> In order to affect change on the suburban landscape, the New Urbanists have launched a concentrated effort aimed at reforming the current zoning policies. By changing the rules of the development game, the New Urbanists propose a set of *prescriptive* rather than *proscriptive* zoning techniques. *Prescriptive* in that the New Urbanists offer design and planning alternatives to the current patterns.<sup>50</sup>

By altering the policy of urban segregation, the New Urbanism hopes to restore critical urban connections within the neighbourhood context. Ultimately what this means is that by increasing the density and incorporating a mix of commercial and residential uses in one neighbourhood, the pedestrian is no longer forced to rely on the automobile for daily trips.

Give suburbanites a mix of housing types, from condominiums to rowhouses to detached houses, and a mix of people will occupy them....Give two-income families a walkable grid of narrow streets, sidewalks, and corner stores, and they will rid themselves of one car.<sup>51</sup>

Although the automobile is not eliminated from the scheme, its role as a means of primary transport is potentially reduced. Street patterns are thus conceived as an integrated network allowing for ease of movement within the neighbourhood. Rather than a hierarchical street network, traffic is allowed to filter slowly through the neighbourhood.<sup>52</sup> As such, curvilinear streets and dead-end cul-de-sacs, are replaced by a narrow, walkable grid system with avenues terminating at key civic vista points. Complementing the street network are parks, open squares, T-intersections, roundabouts and tree-lined avenues.

The result of this alteration in typical street patterns is that the street is no longer used solely for auto movement, but rather, for creating quality pedestrian and urban spaces. In addition, a critical relationship between the building and the street is also re-established. No longer seen as an isolated object, the building as a defining element is restored. The restoration of this relationship is a critical factor in the health of the New Urbanist community.

Complementing this relationship is the use of a traditional architectural aesthetic. Architectural styles proposed by the New Urbanism are reminiscent of a time when community relations were

strong, and social interaction flourished. The aesthetic is unmistakably New England and employs a variety of styles ranging from Colonial manor to Cape Cod to Georgian townhomes. Without a doubt though, the keystone detail is the addition of large, useable front porches. Gabled roof lines, ornate cornice details, and romantic colors further support the movement's goals of placemaking and community creation.

In sum, the T.N.D. is applied primarily on a local scale and specifically targets the development of individual streets, towns and neighbourhoods. Relying heavily on historical architectural styles, the T.N.D. recreates a romantic version of the traditional American small town fully equipped with white picket fences, columnar porches and children playing ball in the street. Ultimately the intent of these planning and architectural strategies is to entice us out of our cars and away from the computer in the hopes of returning the pedestrian to the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood to the community, and ultimately the community to the region.

### *Transit-Oriented Development*

It is important at this time to remember that the New Urbanism advocates not only the development of traditional small towns but considers larger metropolitan regions as well. Peter Calthorpe's proposal for the Transit-Oriented Development (T.O.D.) addresses and applies these issues on the metropolitan and regional scale.

The Pedestrian Pocket, later renamed the T.O.D., suggests that change must be implemented at a much larger scale. Seeking to alter the way entire regions are developed, Calthorpe's T.O.D. utilizes modern means of transportation in the development of a regional network of suburban

areas. Located along transit lines, the individual stops act as catalysts for (re)developing and maintaining the sustainable community.

In essence, Calthorpe proposes "a new vision of contemporary society, one that embraces appropriate, sustainable technology...[and] mass transit."<sup>53</sup> Further, the communities he envisions are promoted primarily as infill within the existing suburban fabric. Calthorpe posits that

...strategic interventions could affect a remarkable change in suburbia; that structure, legibility and a sense of place are still possible; that finite centres of community are achievable and that affordability, decongestion, open space, and mixed uses are all mutually compatible.<sup>54</sup>

While promoting the notion of suburban infill, Calthorpe recognizes that these interventions may not be able to handle the rate or quantity of growth. When this occurs new growth areas and satellite towns may be developed. If planned well, the T.O.D.'s can "help structure a metropolitan region by absorbing growth, supporting transit, and creating greenbelts."<sup>55</sup>

According to Calthorpe, the city, its suburbs, and associated natural areas must be treated as an economic, socially and ecologically integrated whole. He further suggests that it is the failure to do so that has resulted in the fracturing of the urban realm. The solution requires that we treat the design of regional areas in much the same way as local neighbourhoods. They should include discernable edges, as defined by growth boundaries or greenbelts; a circulation system designed for the pedestrian (supported by regional transportation networks); a formative public realm; a diverse population and a hierarchy of civic and private facilities. In developing a regional network, the framework for quality urban areas and neighbourhoods is thus created and sustained.<sup>56</sup>



Through either the T.N.D., or the T.O.D., or a combination thereof, the New Urbanism offers within its mandate, alternatives and solutions to the current suburban development pattern. If the New Urbanism is about both the pieces and the whole, it can then be said, that the T.N.D. reflects the individual urban pieces, while the T.O.D. is concerned with development of the whole. While the nomenclature may vary between the T.O.D. and the T.N.D., there is uniform agreement with respect to the physical makeup of the neighbourhood unit. Both propose a more sustainable model of urbanism that seeks to restore a sense of place to a placeless suburban pattern, reduce auto-dependance and increase pedestrian accessibility.

Within its mandate, the New Urbanism maintains a clearly defined social and physical urban vision: that being the existence of a logical progression of local spaces through to regional areas. The individual block is part of a complete neighbourhood, the neighbourhood is part of a well-balanced town while the town lies within a metropolitan region. Peter Calthorpe writes,

...the New Urbanism is not just about the city or the suburb. It is about the way we conceive of community and how we form the region --it is about diversity, scale and public space in every context.<sup>57</sup>

From this, a single word can be used to sum up the New Urbanist approach to urban design: *connection*.<sup>58</sup> First, the entire process of urban change and restoration involves public, private and government interaction and co-operation. Second, in order for residents to easily access other neighbourhood areas, streets are connected to each other through an integrated network.

Third, to connect residents with retail and civic amenities, neighbourhoods are designed to encourage development within walking distance. Fourth, neighbours are connected to other neighbours. This is accomplished through architectural styles and exterior patterns. Narrow streets, picket fences, porches, balconies and terraces are all designed to foster social interaction. By mixing housing types and price ranges, neighbours of varying age and income status are thus connected to one another. Fifth, new developments are connected by means of integrated transit systems.

### **Site Review: Kentlands, Maryland, U.S.A.<sup>59</sup>**

For the purposes of this thesis, a completed New Urbanist development will be reviewed. The selected site: *Kentlands*, Maryland. This specific site was chosen as it is generally considered the flagship of the movement and successfully illustrates the mandate and intents of the New Urbanism. Further, this site will be referred to throughout the document as a base point for discussion and criticism.

As Kentlands is a newly created, year-round, fully operational community, it thus afforded the author with the opportunity for an on-site, first-hand tour. In addition, this provided an opportunity to observe whether or not the claims of the New Urbanism are indeed manifesting themselves into reality. Given the nature of this review, this is highly beneficial as an experience rooted in the physical realm is far more profitable than information translated through non-tangible means. For a detailed description of the on-site tour of Kentlands, please see Appendix "A".

Opened in June, 1990, Kentlands is located in Gaithersburg, Maryland, 13 miles northwest of Washington, D.C. Covering an area of 352 acres, Kentlands is constructed on what was originally the Kent family farm. Owned and developed by the Great Seneca Development Corporation, principal planners are Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk.

The master plan of Kentlands is designed around six primary neighbourhoods, each including residential, civic, cultural, office and retail uses. Street patterns, following the design guidelines of the New Urbanism are narrow with ample sidewalk space and are organized in a grid pattern thus eliminating the typical cul-de-sac. In keeping with the mandate of the New Urbanism, diversity of age and income is promoted through a range of housing types and sizes. These include 467 single-family units, 508 townhomes, 292 condominiums (multi-family), and 240 apartments (multi-family). Constructed by several different developers within the site, base prices for these units range from \$239,900 to \$1,000,000. Rental space is also available and ranges in price from \$850 to \$1,420 per month.

Architecturally and aesthetically, Kentlands is as one would expect of the flagship New Urbanist development. On the surface, there appears to be a healthy mix of traditional style homes of varying sizes and price ranges, townhouses and cottages sited on a narrow network of treed streets. Architectural styles vary from house to house, but centre around Colonial, Classical Revival, Georgian, and Cape-Cod shed style. Numerous (mature) trees flank the narrow streets and complement the picket-fence aesthetic throughout the development. Essentially a picture perfect, ready-made traditional town, the look and feel is unmistakably Norman Rockwell.

Approximately 800,000 square feet of retail and office space are also allotted for the overall site. Originally planned as a regional centre with anchor stores and linked to the town's main street,

the completed development has instead followed typical suburban retail patterns. As such, there exists no commercial town centre but rather the retail outlet has assumed the typical mall form and is situated on the outer edges accessible only by a major arterial.

Also included in the plan are a variety of civic, recreational and cultural amenities which assist in defining the individual neighbourhoods. These include three lakes (Helene, Inspiration and Lynette), a wetland preserve, several greenbelts and numerous public-squares. In addition, an 800 student public school, a health club, a local fire station and cultural centre are also proposed.

While all the necessary amenities for small town life are included, the lack of a defined town centre makes orientation and wayfinding somewhat difficult, while the narrow streets are not auto-friendly. Further, the overall level of nostalgic imagery, small-town nomenclature and detailing both promotes the New Urbanist mandate, yet also highlights the inherent flaws present within the New Urbanism --its overt superficiality. Nevertheless, Kentlands remains an excellent site for review, as only in a functioning example can these situations be observed.

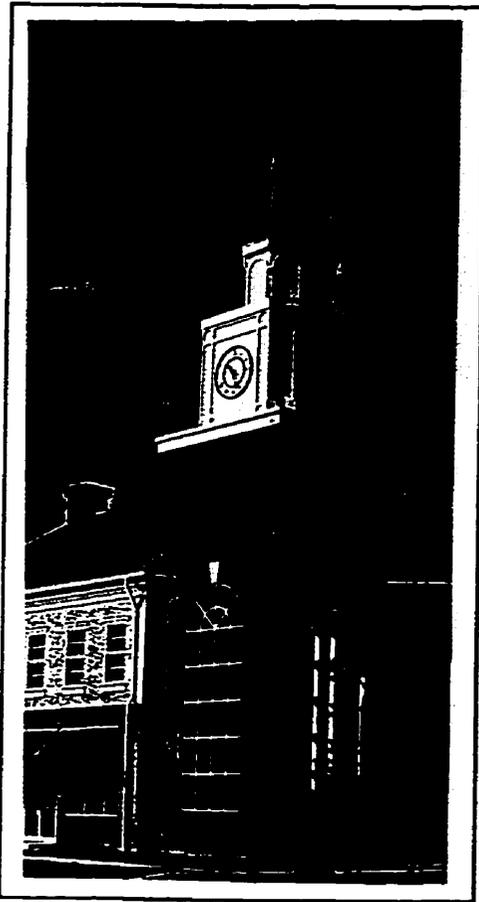
## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the nature of our cities is changing. The post-World War II residential shift, combined with the relocation of commercial and job markets have given rise to a new type of urban form. Identified not by the skyscraper, the body of this new city is the detached, single family suburban dwelling with the mega-mall at its heart, and the automobile, and more recently the Internet as the lifeblood. Yet, in this evolving city, suburbia means nothing, as it is almost impossible to define the boundaries --city and suburb have in fact, merged into a single,

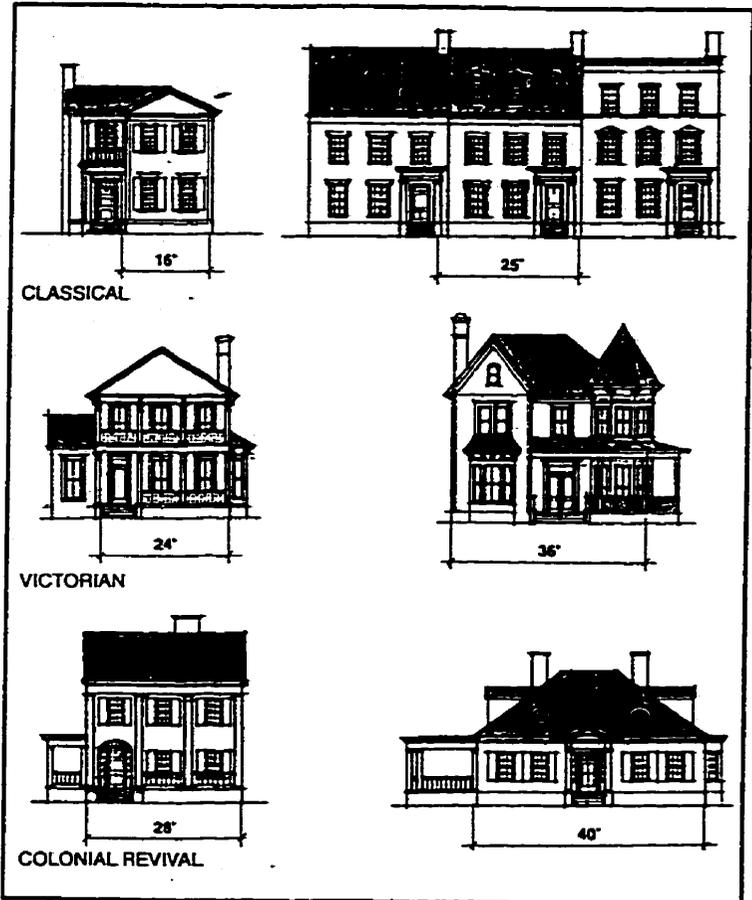
unidentifiable entity. Sense of place, as a result of the dissolution of urban hierarchy, is abandoned in favor of an endless urban field on a potentially infinite grid.

In the absence of a sense of place and community, the New Urbanism directly addresses this condition. As part of the process of urbanization in the North American context, it is as much a state of mind—a psychological paradigm—as it is about planning or architectural expression. Reflective of a much larger agenda, the New Urbanism is about reconstructing communities that have been virtually forgotten or ignored for almost fifty years. At the heart of the movement is a rediscovery of traditional planning ideas and architectural styles. Designed with both the family and the community in mind, the New Urbanism is a place where human scale replaces industrial proportions and where proximity to work, shopping and homes replaces automobile dependency. It is a place where community presides over placelessness and where homes replace houses.

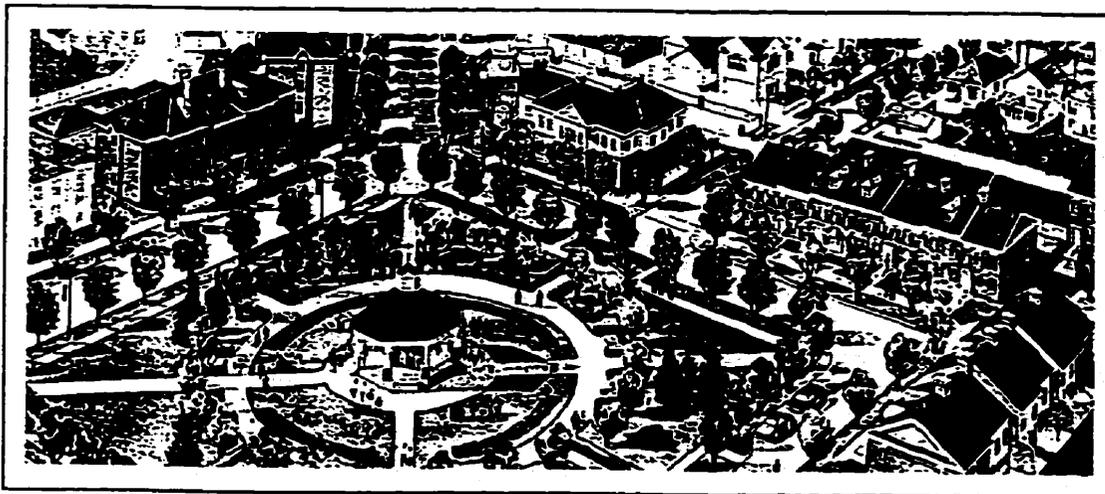




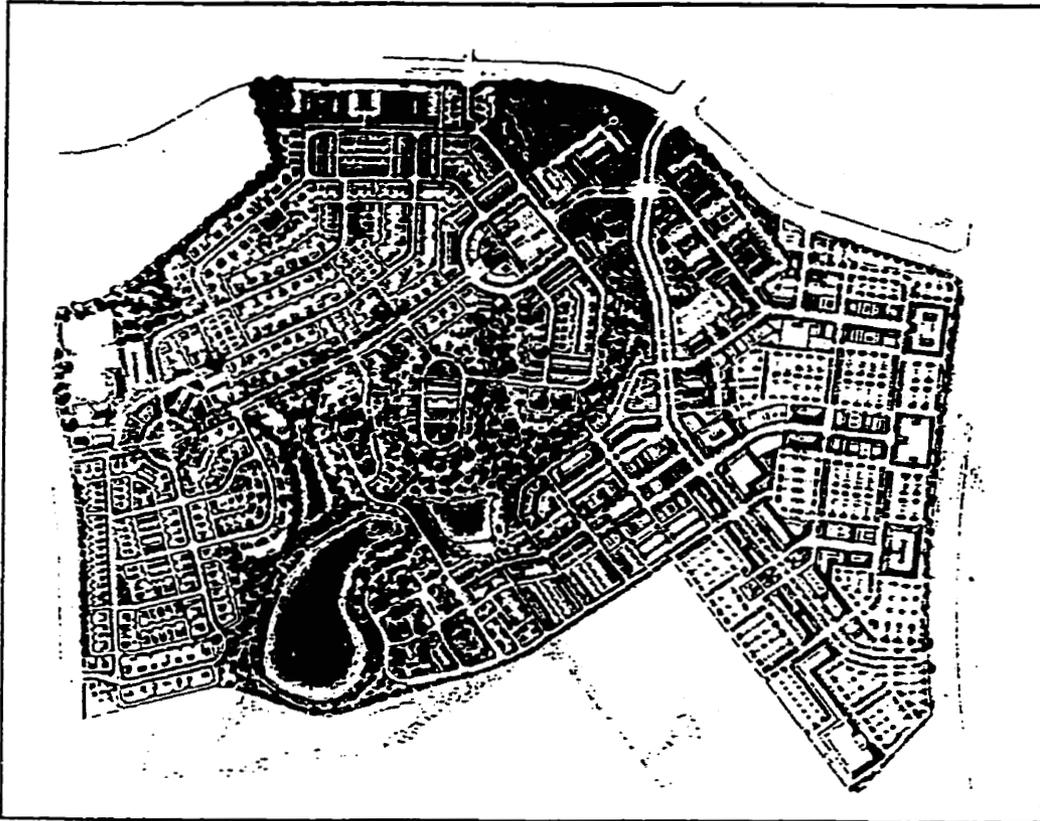
*Promotional Material, McKenzie Towne, Calgary, Source: Carma Developments, (1997)*



*Sample of Approved New Urbanist House Styles, Source: Huxtable, A., (1998)*



*Town Center Concept, McKenzie Towne, Calgary, Source: Carma Developments, (1997)*



*Site Plan, Kentlands, Maryland, Source: Katz, P., (1994)*



*Typical Home, Kentlands, Maryland, Source: Katz, P., (1994)*

## Chapter Two

### The Nostalgia Trip

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The traditional small town is the form on which the New Urbanist mandate is based. It is the fundamental qualities of small town life that the New Urbanism aims to restore. Supporting the resurgence of a traditional aesthetic and a revival of abandoned planning techniques is a powerful homespun nostalgia. A characteristic of the postmodern era, this chapter reviews nostalgia as a source of popularity of the New Urbanism. In doing so, it will define and trace the roots of this nostalgia, identify who is supporting this sentimentality, and review several fueling forces.



#### An Edenic Renaissance

According to the New Urbanists, all that was good about community life could be found in the small town of yesterday. As such, the New Urbanism promises a "restoration of the aesthetic and communal values of pre-World War II America."<sup>60</sup> As the physical manifestation of 'the good life', the small town represents family values, notions of a close-knit community, and a national pride based on a foundation rich with history and longstanding traditions. Searching for a misplaced home, we long for a place where the barber knows our name and the grocer has the weekly order ready. In an era of high mobility, forgotten history and postmodern pastiche, we have become nostalgic for longstanding traditions, family values and friendly architecture.

Before any discussion of the North American nostalgic condition can be conducted, it is helpful to first understand the definition, and roots of nostalgia as a concept. The word *nostalgia* is closely related to the English term *homesickness*. Originally coined by a Swiss physician in the late seventeenth century, the term comes from the Greek *nostos*: 'to return home', and *algia*: 'a painful condition.'<sup>61</sup> In essence, nostalgia can be interpreted as a powerful desire to either return home, or for a time gone by.

North America, specifically the United States, is awash in nostalgic sentimentality. It permeates society through architecture, television, advertising, clothing, and of course, old movie heroes. The recent increase in popularity of country music supports this idea. Ralph Lauren has based a multi-million dollar fashion industry around the image of an American country lifestyle.<sup>62</sup> Norman Rockwell immortalizes it through his paintings of the good life. Postmodern architecture once again brings to life images of a Classical tradition reminiscent of traditional America. Even the small town itself has been brought from the back of the shelf, dusted clean and given the exalted position of a suburban panacea.

Mario Jacoby, author of *The Longing for Paradise*, posits that nostalgia is based primarily on the notion of separation. According to Jacoby, you only long for something after you have been separated from it. "The yearning begins after the loss of Paradise."<sup>63</sup> From zoning to the automobile to the Internet, we have clearly created a landscape based entirely on separation. If we interpret Jacoby's definition, the return to the small town of yesteryear can be likened to the perpetual search for the mythical Garden of Eden.

The ideas linked to nostalgia are generally 'not of this world' --at least, not of the world as we know it today. They may focus on the 'world of yesteryear' and everything meant and implied by 'once upon a time'. But most of all, they deal with the world as it could or should be....I contend that nostalgia is ultimately a longing for...the elimination of suffering, conflict, and malaise in an ultimate 'unitary reality', which is graphically symbolized in the archetypal image of Paradise.<sup>64</sup>

The term Paradise is commonly associated with the Old Testament's Garden of Eden and has its etymological roots in the Old Iranian *pairi-daeza*, meaning walled or enclosed.<sup>65</sup> Historically, people largely associated Paradise as being

...somewhere on earth, picturing it sometimes as an island, sometimes as a garden to the East, sometimes on a mountain reaching to the sky....It has [also been] described as a closed city or citadel, replete with towers and gates, sealed off from the rest of the world by dark,...terror-filled areas or inaccessible, snake-infested mountains.<sup>66</sup>

In applying Jacoby's definition we can see similarities between Kentlands and its suburban, 'terror-filled' surroundings. From this, we can conclude that this search for *Paradise lost* has taken many Americans directly into the outstretched porch-fronts of the New Urbanism. When you combine the overwhelming nostalgic sentimentality for small-town life with the current residential alternatives, the New Urbanism is certainly *Paradise found*.

From the writings of the Bible, we learn that the Garden of Eden (Paradise) represented all that was pleasing, a state of bliss existed between man and beast, and that God would fulfill all the needs of its inhabitants. Many Americans long to return to a Paradise lost to the spoils of modernism. In the case of the New Urbanism, Paradise is called Kentlands --a residential oasis in the suburban desert-- with the buyers acting as a collective Adam and Eve.

It is precisely this longing for a suburban paradise as found in the ideas and imagery of a small town, that the New Urbanism relies on. Supporting the link between the romantic ideals of the Garden City and the New Urbanism, Sociologist Thorstein Veblen wrote "country towns had a greater part than any other American institution in shaping public sentiment and giving character to American culture."<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, this dependence on the small-town nostalgia takes a dual role within the movement.

First, by imposing a physical framework on the landscape, the New Urbanism seeks to change the patterns of suburban social behavior and revive an abandoned livelihood. Nostalgia for the original small town makes the re-creation possible as consumers are ready and willing to buy into the *idea* of New Urbanism. Residents of New Urbanist communities quoted in a sales brochure claim that first they bought the small town *concept*, then they bought the *home*.<sup>68</sup>

Second, small town nostalgia is big-business. Developers are cashing in on the popularity of the small town aesthetic and using it as a marketing tool to sell the house as a product. Large kitchens and bay windows aside, --a standard residential selling feature-- the Rockwellian imagery alone will sell the house. Front porches, country colors and skillful nomenclature bountifully adorn residential sales brochures. This homespun nostalgia practically guarantees that the New Urbanism will be a big seller.

It is helpful at this point to understand exactly who is populating this new suburban Paradise. For the most part it seems to be baby-boomers --those born between 1946 and 1964-- who long to return to the very home they once rebelled against. "The baby-boomers...seem the most attracted to nostalgia, and for good reason. During the late 50's and 60's, the dominating urge...was to head away from home."<sup>69</sup> In this case, home represented a feeling of urban

alienation and was synonymous with traditional values; values which were incommensurate with the political and social climate of the United States at that time. Vietnam, race riots and political disdain clashed with the bucolic image of suburbia and the family values it supposedly represented.

Nevertheless, as the nation was maintaining economic stability, the return to home and the prospect of a day-job was always there.<sup>70</sup> However, as history has shown, economic prosperity will not necessarily last forever. In fact, it is not unrealistic to assume that this is the first generation whose children will not have it as good as their parents. According to Richard Lingeman, history suggests that a renewed interest in the small town comes about as a result of social and political instability.<sup>71</sup> In an era of high unemployment and frequent mobility combined with the meteoric rise of computer technologies, it is of no surprise that many seek the social stability and cultural security of the traditional small town.

There's a terror of technology, of social and economic conditions that we seem unable to handle. So we look back to times when things were simpler. A busy nation with its eyes on the future doesn't have time to think about where it's been --but if you lose momentum and aren't forced to look ahead, you think about what you left behind.<sup>72</sup>

This collective image of home is exactly where America is looking. The inherent problem with this notion is that home no longer exists. In suburbia, *neighbourhood* is nothing more than a nostalgic catch-phrase used to sell a house, cleverly disguising 'houses in a field' as 'homes in a community.' As a result, America --specifically the baby-boomers-- paid the price as Eden was unmercifully paved over in the wake of progress and the automobile.

To summarize, the nostalgia that the baby-boomer generation is experiencing can be directly associated with an uncertainty of the future combined with the instability of the present social and physical context. The rising suspicion that the quest for personal satisfaction will not necessarily guarantee a better life has forced many Americans to look to the past for solace. As such, notions of small-town life combined with deeply ingrained images of a paradise-lost further enhance this nostalgic sentimentality.

### **We The People**

To clearly understand the popularity of the New Urbanist small town, we must examine the historical roots of the small-town myth. The small town is as much a part of the American tradition as apple pie and the Star Spangled Banner. Its roots are lodged firmly in the American Dream and has references that can be traced as far back as Thomas Jefferson.<sup>73</sup> While the actual small town has been severed from society, the *small-town myth* persists stronger than ever.

By definition, myths are "popular images that help to unify a society by creating the ingredients of a collective memory and a collective self-image. Most people believe them to represent if not actual reality, then a kind of idealized reality."<sup>74</sup> For many Americans, the small town represents a uniquely American tradition --the notion of rural living on the edge of the frontier. In the wake of placeless suburban sprawl, belief in the small-town myth has been idolized to the point of national obsession. The popularity of the New Urbanism lies in the fact that it makes this idealized version of rural life appear as reality.

From its inception, America was viewed as *the land of the new beginning*; a fresh start in a new land separated from the old world (Europe).<sup>75</sup> The traditional small town played a significant role in the development of the nation. Most small towns originally served as anchors in the westward expansion, and as such, they are often associated with the early history of the country. In the modern context, the New Urbanism symbolizes this renewed beginning; a clean and sustainable existence separated from the spoils of the filth-ridden city, or more appropriately, the auto-dominated suburb.

Americans have traditionally maintained an anti-city disposition, while the image of independent rural living has sustained a prominent position in America's cultural memory. As nostalgia for rural America grows, the small-town myth has become synonymous with the most fundamental myth: *The American Dream*.

In the United States, many would have identified one of the social ideological supports for the creation of new communities as being the 'American Dream' of rural independent living. This 'Dream' is seen to be attainable in [small town] living which incorporated the 'rural' virtues of American past.<sup>76</sup>

From this definition, it is clear that the myth of the traditional small town is rooted firmly in the collective American experience of the rural frontier life. This can be traced as far back as Thomas Jefferson when he promoted the pastoral aesthetic and "felt that piling ourselves up into high-density cities is not only unhealthy, but essentially un-American."<sup>77</sup>

Americans are united by their myths, whether it be the American Dream, the small town, or a disjointed union of the two. It is likely the only nation that prides itself on the fact that its history and traditions are based entirely on a dream.

America is a memory....The memory is contained in names of people, of places, of events and institutions. The memory is contained in stories Americans tell one another in speeches and broadcasts, in shows and pictures....It is contained in the way Americans behave [and] it is contained in the rituals they perform.<sup>78</sup>

The New Urbanists promote, and sell, a heritage and an idealism which is based on the uniquely American tradition of small town, rural living. As these traditions are based on local histories, patterns of behavior and are constantly modified by circumstance, it is the application of these characteristics which supposedly forms the pedestal on which the New Urbanist community rests.

The New Urbanism claims to be based on, and embody, these very traditions. A glance through the promotional material of Kentlands supports this fact. What happens however, when Americans discover that the pedestal on which the New Urbanism rests is perhaps not as solid as first thought, and in fact, fails to live up to its own image? While this thesis recognizes that the traditional small town did, and does still exist in the American landscape, Kentlands --and in fact, all New Urbanist towns-- however, exist as representations of the myth of the small town and not one specific town. In addition, there is no historical path or route to Kentlands, as the town, its traditions, history and memories are entirely conjured and manufactured. Here, circumstance is wholly prefabricated. Therefore, we can conclude that there was no legitimate *there* from which the town came. Without a clear point of origin, the validity of its history and tradition becomes highly suspect

This potentially ambiguous existence of the New Urbanist town goes directly to the foundations of the New Urbanism. A deeper meaning holds myths as "exaggerated or simplified representations of human traits and situations, paradigms of society and morality, that are based

on some underlying truth."<sup>79</sup> In reality, the validity and relevance of the small-town myth is suspect as it is based on a model which has, for the most part, been reduced to cloudy illusions and hazy references. Yet, the New Urbanists willingly promote this ersatz history as a marketing tool to sell the idea of the town. Unfortunately, the *raison d'être* behind the New Urbanist town itself becomes questionable when based on a potentially exaggerated myth and deprived of any legitimate past from which to draw.

The New Urbanism represents a culturally inherent idealism and a nostalgia for a misplaced tradition; a tradition which is the cornerstone of the nation: *The American Dream*. It is unlikely however, that the New Urbanism can live up to its own image, yet the small-town myth will undoubtedly endure as Americans hold fast to its memories. Zsolt Viragos in *Cultural Myths, Made in the USA* writes that "the tradition of a superior virtue and strength...has survived the decline of the small town itself."<sup>80</sup> As such, the durability of the myth can be accredited to an enduring search for community in a homogeneous, postmodern drive-away nation. It is also traditional values; it is the American Dream; and it is the revival of history that perpetuates this nostalgia for the small town.

### **Here's My House, But You Promised Me A Home**

Numbed by the effects of life behind the windshield, the suburbs have left residents desperate for a sense of community. Domestic comfort is a need that sits at the core of our society and it must be satisfied. If a sense of community can not be found in current models, it is not unusual to seek refuge in the traditions of the past. The New Urbanism supports the small-town nostalgia by promoting itself as an embodiment of the fundamental American traditions of community and family.

Past decades have witnessed the disintegration of traditional connections between family, neighbourhood and town. This breakdown can be attributed in part to economic forces, and a suburban model which has proven to be highly ineffective. Marred by parking lots and unchecked sprawl, the suburbs, which promised a return to traditional values and life in the country, has left many residents' expectations unfulfilled. In searching for an alternative, Americans cling to nostalgic images of an idealized small town to provide them with the community they seek.

However muddled and generalized the image is, it exerts a powerful allure. For the idea of a small town represents a whole menu of human values that the gigantism of corporate enterprise has either obliterated or mocked: an agreeable scale of human enterprise, tranquility, public safety, proximity of neighbours and markets, nearness to authentic countryside, and permanence.<sup>81</sup>

Unsatisfied with the suburban lifestyle, Americans long to live in a neighbourhood where, as illustrated previously, the barber knows your name. Suburbia has, for the most part, failed to deliver on its promise of a sustainable country life. Peter Calthorpe writes "contemporary suburbs have failed because they lack,...the fundamental qualities of real towns. [As such] what we now have is isolation, congestion, rising crime, pollution and overwhelming costs."<sup>82</sup> In response, many Americans seek alternatives in the nostalgia of the small town. "The small-town life that Americans long for when they are depressed by their city apartments or their suburban bunkers is really a conceptual substitute for the idea of community."<sup>83</sup> In the American tradition, the idea of neighbourhood and the small town are one in the same.

Again, one need only review the sales brochures of Kentlands to appreciate the level of community that is being offered. Creative wording such as *olde towne* and *olde tyme*, portray Kentlands as being the quintessential new / old home town. The use of wording is a critical

aspect in promoting the small-town nostalgia. "Language is not just a medium,...it is a reflection of how we think. We use words not only to describe objects but also to express ideas, and the introduction of words into the language marks the simultaneous introduction of ideas into the consciousness."<sup>84</sup> By flooding our consciousness with nostalgic terminology, the New Urbanism exists in our imagination as the town that every American dreams of living in.

Yet that is precisely what Kentlands is: the town of every nostalgic dream. Based on loosely interpreted traditions and created entirely from scratch, the New Urbanism is an expected response to a wave of nostalgia in a time of postmodern superficiality and urban upheaval.

This acute awareness of tradition is a modern phenomenon that reflects a desire for custom and routine in a modern world characterized by constant change and innovation. Reverence for the past has become so strong that when traditions do not exist, they are frequently invented.<sup>85</sup>

Inventing a community is precisely what the New Urbanism has done. Kentlands' history and traditions are entirely prefabricated and sold to longing consumers. Existing primarily in the imaginations and myths of the American Dream, the traditions that Kentlands are based on exist mostly in the nomenclature of its advertising. Mario Jacoby writes that "we all tend to paint for ourselves a picture of the 'good old days' that does not accord with the facts. There never were any good old days, there never was an intact world....The harmonious world which is now regarded as lost...never really existed."<sup>86</sup>

Another assumption is that the small town model can foster a return of family values. However, just like the invented traditions of the New Urbanism, the traditional family on which it rests is perhaps also a fallacy. According to Stephanie Coontz, author of *The Way We Never Were*, the

typical family consisting of a housewife, a working father and 2.3 children rarely existed and that the family unit is largely a nostalgic invention. She feels that America's nostalgia for the traditional family unit is based primarily on television characters as opposed to legitimate models. "Our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950's television sit-coms."<sup>87</sup>

What then is the root of this nostalgia for the traditional family? Aside from 'Father Knows Best' imagery, it can be attributed to a search for stability in a turbulent postmodern society. Feeling social and economic uncertainty, we cling to the family model for security and comfort. The problem however, is that fewer than 10 percent of American families actually meet the standard definition of working father, housewife / mother and 2.3 children.<sup>88</sup> This evolution can be attributed to dual working parent families, proportionately higher incomes, changing social values, increased divorce rates and frequent mobility.

Yet, the traditional family unit remains the cornerstone of the New Urbanist mandate. Proponents continue to promote their developments around the traditional family as a catalyst for community growth. However, a recent survey conducted by John Schleimer<sup>89</sup> of four significant New Urbanist communities, indicates that while the promotions are aimed at the family, it is not necessarily the family that is responding. While some residents consist of young and mid-life stage families, the statistics do not support the New Urbanist's claim of a family-based population. The results are summarized in the following:

- ▶ 75% childless and;
- ▶ 35% divorced or single;
- ▶ 50% DINKS (double income, no kids);
- ▶ Established median income is \$112,000 U.S., with 18% less than \$65,000 U.S.

The basic purpose of the New Urbanism is to promote social difference and family diversity within the ideal community framework. While these statistics do indicate the presence of young families, they also indicate that the New Urbanism is clearly attracting a single class of upper income buyers. This indicates that the claims of social diversity and a residential family mix are perhaps overstated. As such, what is in fact promoted is residential exclusivity which ultimately inhibits the development of a functioning, integrated community.

Historically, a causal relationship can be drawn between the way people live and the locations they choose. In much the same way as we moved to the suburbs with the expectation of healthy, clean living in the country, residents are moving to Kentlands with notions of community, a restoration of family values and increased neighbourly interaction. Included in this is the expectation of a safer environment, as the model and the traditional aesthetic promotes and allows us to believe that life will be safe, family oriented and friendly.

Further, the New Urbanism actively promotes a specific way of life. The inherent problem is that the small-town lifestyle neither exists nor accords with modern circumstances. Clearly the values and attitudes of postmodern society are not commensurate with those of the time when the traditional small town flourished. Nevertheless, we continue to accept the notion that the New Urbanist framework can foster community interaction, regardless of the fact that demographics, social attitudes and transportation patterns are entirely different. In addition, this thesis suggests that residents are neither able nor willing to significantly alter these patterns for

the sake of a simulated small town lifestyle. From this, it appears that buyers are interested only in the *idea* of the small town and not the real town itself.

### **If You Copy It, They Will Come**

Nowhere is the presence of a nostalgia-based aesthetic more obvious than in the architecture of the New Urbanism. The traditional detailing not only perpetuates nostalgia for the traditional small town, but it is largely responsible for its overall allure. In the vast suburban landscape of garages and sterilized landscaping, it is largely safe to assume that the decorated porches and gables will be the preferred aesthetic of potential residential buyers.

While there is no specific architectural style that the New Urbanism adheres to, its developments thus far indicate a preference for the Classical and vernacular styles. As a source of nostalgia, the vernacular aesthetic is entirely in keeping with the image of early America. This is precisely the nostalgic image that the New Urbanism strives for: traditional rural American values nestled firmly in a timeless architecture.

The New Urbanism, is in large part a revival of the Classical and vernacular planning tradition as it existed before International-Style Modernism perverted its methods and objectives.<sup>90</sup>

To those cognizant of historical styles, the New Urbanism employs of a hodge-podge of Colonial revival to Victorian estate to Georgian town homes; every architectural style that could possibly be associated with the American small town is present. To the average consumer, the overall aesthetic, albeit superficial, is unmistakably small-town. If one were to envision the typical

American town, images of wide-gabled porches, columnar arcades and white picket fences immediately spring to mind. Combined with clapboard siding, window shutters, a pre-selected color palate and a plethora of American flags; the illusion of a fully functioning American small town is now complete.

This street-friendly mix of styles, colors and scales are specifically designed to enhance the curb appeal of the town thus attracting a wide range of buyers. The final product however, being largely postmodern in its execution suffers from nostalgic excess and is overtly superficial. If we borrow the words of Lewis Mumford, "we [have] succeeded in compelling every passer-by to stop and gaze upon our new house, but this gaze is too often that of baleful fascination, as one finds his eyes riveted by the antics of a drunken man."<sup>91</sup> While its designers and developers cling to nostalgic styles, the perfect architectural image of the New Urbanism is indeed unsettling. The writings of Roger Scruton --although not written directly of the New Urbanism-- further illustrates this condition.

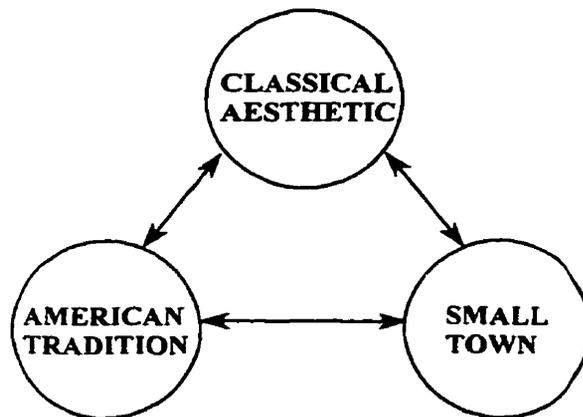
Here we find details lifted from a tradition that was once understood, and treated with as much respect as might be considered appropriate....However,...it is not a fault of vocabulary: these columns, cornices, mouldings, window frames are all derived from the same extended classical language and could be expected to occur together. But there is something wrong in the way they are combined. The details are in some way out of control: there is no overall conception into which they fit, nothing which seems to give reason for their existence.<sup>92</sup>

Nonetheless, the New Urbanist town remains in the eyes of many, the physical manifestation of those values synonymous with the traditional small town. A sense of neighbourhood, community, and increased family values appear tangible and accessible through the re-created vernacular styling. Given that the Classical vernacular aesthetic is most commonly associated

with the small town, and that these values are inherent within the myth, the aesthetic must therefore support these values.

We should remember though, that architecture alone --especially postmodern-- cannot create a sense of community and that these values are merely *implied* by the overall aesthetic. Peter Calthorpe himself admits that "building a community is a 200 year phenomenon."<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, the New Urbanists use the aesthetic as a vehicle to actively promote these values.

Louis Mumford wrote that "architecture is a statement of present conditions as well as a record of the past."<sup>94</sup> These words can be directly applied to the New Urbanism. The Classical aesthetic promoted in Kentlands makes clear and direct associations with the history and traditions of the United States and secures the New Urbanism within the postmodern paradigm.



*Figure 3: Relationship Between New Urbanism, Classical Aesthetic and the American Tradition.*

Further, the Classical vernacular aesthetic is commonly connected with the myth of the small town, which in turn has become synonymous with the American Dream, which itself is expressed through the vernacular style. This uni-directional, three way relationship is illustrated by this diagram (left).

The New Urbanists were wise to re-create the vernacular styles as these associations are firmly planted in the heart of the American sentimentality. If the image of the small town is to be complete, the visual aesthetic must be in keeping with common perceptions of the myth. In much the same way as a soundtrack enhances a movie, the architectural detailing ultimately helps to complete the overall experience. By capitalizing on the nostalgia of the rural small town, wrapping it in images of the vernacular and promoting the American Dream made real, the success of the New Urbanism is virtually guaranteed.

Nevertheless, the New Urbanists claim that their developments are genuinely about creating beauty and harmony where none exists. It is about creating a place that is reminiscent of family values, where residents feel at home and that responds to basic human needs of community.

The [architecture] is based consciously on deep human emotional and psychological needs: the need for greenery, sunlight, places to be with other people, spaces to be alone, spaces for the young and the old to mix, for excitement, [and] tranquility.<sup>95</sup>

To date, the New Urbanists have been successful in re-creating the model of the traditional small town. However, for the entire package to be complete, the traditional architecture is an absolute necessity. While the town may be based on tested planning methods, the overall aesthetic is created largely through the architecture. As such, given its roots in the history of America, and the associations with the predominant myths and nostalgic sentimentalities, the use of the vernacular will undoubtedly enhance the popularity of the New Urbanism.

### **If You Revive It, They May Not Come**

The New Urbanism relies heavily on the use of the Classical and vernacular styles to address issues of community and to complete the overall aesthetic of their small town model. Further, the use of these styles in the postmodern context reclaims architectural and environmental references previously lost to modernist methods of suburban residential planning.<sup>96</sup> Yet, with so many overt references, is the New Urbanism indeed an authentic *revival* in the true sense?

This thesis adopts a pragmatic approach to the notion of architectural revivalism. In doing so, it takes into consideration the overall intent of the movement and its proponents, its faithfulness to the objects themselves and their associated materials, and issues of time period revived.<sup>97</sup> It is via these factors that the New Urbanist paradigm as a revival is reviewed.

Clearly one of the aims of the New Urbanism is to restore a positive aesthetic to suburbia. Further, the New Urbanists maintain that the thematic content is indeed a revival of traditional styles and not intended to be used solely as a marketing tool. Yet the use of a traditional aesthetic does not automatically qualify this as a revival. One need only look at any typical suburban home to see abstract historical references. Yet, while residential developments were themed to increase their sales potential, they did not rely entirely on commercialism related to that theme for their sole reason for being.<sup>98</sup> The New Urbanism, on the other hand, in order to succeed relies heavily on consumers first buying the small-town concept, and to do that requires an attractive theme. Further, what isolates the New Urbanism, is that for the first time in a residential context, there exists a consistent, strategic attempt at simulated thematic coherence. Thus, it is this reliance on commercial overtones that makes the New Urbanism as a revival suspect.

Richard Louv, on the nature of theming in the residential context, writes,

The use of illusion and psychological packaging is, of course, not new to the housing industry; but never before has illusion, and the confusion between what is real and what is myth, so permeated housing.<sup>99</sup>

Witold Rybczynski writes, "historical revivals...faithfully imitate the appearance of a particular style. They were based on scholarly study of the past and usually reflected an admiration not only for the furnishings, but for the mores of the period."<sup>100</sup> However, the research indicates that residents are largely not interested in the finer points of the period being revived by the New Urbanism. One need only review the floor patterns of the houses. The literal translation of exterior form to interior plan produces houses that simply don't sell. Residents are only nostalgic for houses that *look* like a Colonial style house, not ones that *function* like one.<sup>101</sup> The fundamental homogeneity among the house plans is cloaked in simulated diversity as residents prefer homes which incorporate the 'traditional style' with all the conveniences of modern living.

The idea that buyers are only interested in the nostalgic aesthetic as an external applique is further supported by John Schleimer. The following table indicates relative room importance among recent New Urbanist residents.<sup>102</sup>

<b>Room Importance (Relative Scale of 1.0)</b>			
Kitchen	1.0	Foyer	0.69
Family Room	0.96	Second Bedroom	0.68
Master Bedroom	0.86	Recreation Room	0.66
Breakfast Nook	0.84	Den	0.59
Master Bath	0.82	Solarium	0.41
Main Floor Landing	0.81	Library	0.39
Dining Room	0.71	Nanny Suite	0.21
Living Room	0.70	Pool	0.17

*Figure 4: Relative Room Importance*

From this, we can conclude that consumers are neither interested in the roots of the vernacular style, nor in the traditions which lent to their development. Most New Urbanist buyers prefer the spacious kitchen, museum-like family room, palatial master bedroom, and an overemphasized entrance. Clearly, residents are only nostalgic for the *image* that the homes convey but not the physical form which created that image in the first place.

While the developers of the New Urbanism deliver on the consumer's needs, the issue is that the porches and Colonial revival homes inherently *pretend* to be authentic versions of the traditional style. In keeping with the postmodern paradigm, these are designed to infer an inherent Americanism, yet they exist largely as copies of a copy of a tradition. In most cases, to meet the nostalgic needs of the consumer, the developers need only apply the authentic shady-porches to the street side of the house; a visit to the back alley reveals typical construction techniques and vinyl eaves troughs. Unfortunately, this reveals the New Urbanist homes as nothing more than typical modern suburban boxes with a postmodern, Colonial-esque facade attached to the front. It is this superficial attempt at verisimilitude combined with an unquestioned nostalgia that inevitably turns these homes into postmodern, animated caricatures.

Builders at Kentlands have failed to make some of the houses look as authentically historical and regional as the tantalizing sketches initially produced. Fake muntins in the windows and other modern short-cuts detract somewhat from the atmosphere—especially if one had been led to believe the development would look like a newly minted eighteenth-century Annapolis.<sup>103</sup>

Further, if we consider the time period that the New Urbanist revival is based on, inconsistencies appear. As described previously, architectural styles and periods vary from street to street. In addition, the traditional small town, and the associated aesthetic which is supposedly revived, is itself generated largely from hazy traditions and exaggerated myths. New Urbanist communities are neither reviving one specific time period nor a specific architectural style. Assembling images and styles from a variety of eras, and geographical locations, they are in fact reviving only the generic image of the small town. It becomes clear then, that a hodge-podge revival of a myth based on cloudy traditions is hardly a revival at all.

It is important to mention though, that while the New Urbanist version of its architectural revival may be superficial and perhaps overstated, it nevertheless lies within a significant physical framework. A physical infrastructure the New Urbanists rely heavily on. Streets are indeed narrower than current suburban models and are laid out in a more traditional pattern. In addition, density is increased while facilities for the pedestrian (sidewalks) are provided. This is critical as it is this framework which the New Urbanism is hoping will legitimize the movement's initiatives.

Nevertheless, when combined with a caricature-like architecture, the New Urbanism is largely reduced to that of a stage-set; an imitation consisting of a sham of gables, clapboard siding and decorative doo-dads hung on the facade like a theatrical scrim. By no means a revival in the true sense, the use of the vernacular aesthetic is in fact nothing more than a postmodern attempt to disguise a modern suburban tract home. Unfortunately, what we are left with, after the

superficial facade and the revivalist rhetoric are peeled away, is perhaps, nothing more than postmodernist nostalgic icing on a poorly baked modernist cake.

### **The Reel Thing**

Without a doubt, the largest promulgator of small-town nostalgic imagery is the entertainment media. Hollywood movies and re-runs of television sit-coms flood our consciousness with images of a past that exists only on the screen and in our imaginations. The movie industry does more than entertain us as it provides a source of historical images that sometimes substitute for reality. While we know these to be fictional, we willingly allow ourselves to be bombarded with images of the way we never were.

The relationship between the movies and reality is symbiotic as the two feed off, and inform each other. 'Is it live or is it memorex?' has become the anthem of the nation. In an era of perpetual verisimilitude, we have become masters at fooling ourselves by creating historical images that are so lifelike we can no longer decipher what is real and what is illusion. The words of Bono, lead singer for the pop group U2 rang true when he sang "it's true we are immune, when fact is fiction and T.V. reality."<sup>104</sup>

In the minds of many Americans, movie and television dramas are the final chapter of history, the most lasting impression they have of what past life was like, what little of it they may have been exposed to.<sup>105</sup>

America looks for heroes in its nostalgia, and the movies never fail to deliver. John Wayne will live forever amongst the tumbleweed and western dust. Forrest Gump, has become a national hero; a fictional spokesman promoting the American Dream. Where else but in America, can an annoying simpleton hit it big and make millions both on and off the screen. In electing

Ronald Reagan, not just any movie actor but a western star, to the office of President clearly indicates the nation's willingness to fool itself into believing that old movie heroes can indeed be real-life heroes.

Americans are willing accessories to a great hoax, played out by themselves, on themselves. "We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so 'realistic' that they can live in them."<sup>106</sup> Even the small town is raised to hero status as an entire movie *genre* is dedicated to its continued survival in the national mythology.

In the Frank Capra films of the thirties and forties, America is told that the small town is the best place to be. Period films including *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and *It's a Wonderful Life* depict a society taken straight out of the works of Norman Rockwell. In total contrast to the present context, these idealized versions paint a picture of a safe, conflict-free existence where good triumphs over evil, and where homespun values prevail.

Class is not a factor of life because everyone is middle class. Ethnicity is not a factor because, everyone is White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant, except perhaps for the Black maid and the Latino delivery boy. Sexism is not an issue because women know their place.<sup>107</sup>

Later, nostalgia-based films such as *American Graffiti*, and television shows including *Happy Days* or *The Waltons*, enhanced --and even participated in-- the desire to return to a glory-filled past. Regardless of the decades they span, these movies share an underlying image of community and promote an abiding Americanism.

However, we must not forget about the small town depicted in *Peyton Place*, the sinister site where gossip thrives and dark-corner sex is everywhere. This is the town we all love to read

about. The deceit of the situation thrills us, yet it is exactly these internal conflicts which are eliminated from the script of Kentlands; that exists in some other independent residential development. The town the New Urbanism sells has a 'G' rating.

...the controlled simulation of urban life extends to instant suburban town centres, [and] refashioned metropolitan civic centres....In all these cases, the messy vitality of the metropolitan condition, with its unpredictable intermingling of classes, races, and social and cultural forms is rejected, to be replaced by a filtered, prettified, homogeneous substitute.<sup>108</sup>

The homespun images that these films illustrate go directly to the heart of America's nostalgia. The small town of the movies has become the focal point for the development of a uniquely American identity. Ironically the innocence depicted by these films could only exist if America ceased development somewhere in the 1860's. Nevertheless, it is the nostalgic image of the small town rather than its authentic realization that guarantees its place in the minds of the American imagination.

Of course, the entertainment industry is more than willing to participate. Remember, nostalgia is big-business. Like the movie studios, the New Urbanism deals in artificial experience and instant gratification. "The make-believe media...are far more interested in presenting contrived and sensationalist shortcuts than in developing stories of depth and subtlety."<sup>109</sup> In fact, the making of any New Urbanist community is convincingly similar to that of producing a movie. Entering Kentlands is like stepping onto a Universal Studios back-lot sound stage: there is a fully decorated stage set, a script, a director, a producer and plenty of investors.

If it can be said that Kentlands is physical realization of the small town genre, it can also be said that its residents become the star actors --a postmodern version of the flaneur.<sup>110</sup> The movie starts when you drive down the prefabricated main street. Even though you are entering a toy-

town, the illusion is decidedly convincing. By the time you reach the model home, where eager sales agents, playing the role of town crier, greet you at the door and inform you of the latest 'happenings' in the town, the full effect of the illusion has taken hold. Once you buy in, --or get the part-- the director, played by the New Urbanists, guides the actors through the porch scene and on to the location-shot set in the town square. In essence, life in Kentlands becomes a continuous performance piece scripted from beginning to end. Fully equipped with nostalgic gas lights, props and extras --played by visitors from other towns-- the residents are playing themselves and starring in the role of their life.

As pop artist Andy Warhol once said:

It's the movies that have really been running things in America....They show you what to do, how to do it when to do it, how to feel about it. Everybody has their own America, and then they have the pieces of a fantasy America that they think is out there but they can't see.<sup>111</sup>

Rather than an idealized version of a community, life in Kentlands could be likened to watching television or arriving late to a movie. By moving in, you are walking in on something already in progress: history. While it provides the observer / participant with a fragmented experience, it makes no difference as it can be continued and repeated at your leisure. After all, if 'history can be made', it can certainly be paused. When you leave for work you are in effect changing channels; when you return you can pick up the program exactly where you left off. If the existence of an ersatz history and tradition is the cassette tape, then Kentlands is the VCR, pausing the experience until you are ready to press play.

The New Urbanists have reduced small town life to a theatrical event, where they create the props and we are the sole participants. "Architecture and theatre use similar means to design places of pleasure and spectacle, manipulating scenery, ornament and facades, to underscore the

sentiment of their play."<sup>112</sup> Rarely questioning what is shown to us, we often mistake movie illusion for fact. All the while, Americans actively play the lead role in the biography of the United States as told through the camera lens and shot on location in a fabricated small town.

The latest Jim Carrey picture could not illustrate this situation more poignantly. Shot in Seaside, Florida, *The Truman Show* finds a young man discovering that his idealized life in the quintessential small town has been the subject of a long-running televised performance. In addition, the town itself is nothing more than a collection of stage sets populated by a community of actors. The irony of this situation is that Seaside, the birthplace of the New Urbanism, is in itself a community of stage sets and facades. Even more ironic, is that in order for the movie to appear real, plywood facades were added to the fronts of many of Seaside's buildings. What is equally disturbing is the fact that once filming was complete, many residents opted to allow the sets to remain in lieu of the 'authentic' original seaside facades.

*The Truman Show* is a movie about a fictional town with a fictional history shot in a largely fictional town, with its own history being entirely fictional as well. In keeping with the writings of Baudrillard, Sorkin and Huxtable, this clearly illustrates "the power of films to reduce authentic experience and place to those...connected with the theme park."<sup>113</sup> If ever there was an example of the crossover between life and art imitating or manipulating each other combined with the power of cinematography to influence our perception of the real, *The Truman Show* is indeed it.

### **Meet Me On The Porch@New Urbanism.com**

While it is true that the automobile was a defining force in the postwar residential era, we must now be willing to factor other technologies into the residential equation. The computer has played a major role in not only the definition of the public realm, but in our perception of it. In

a society where information and change move at lightening speed, our longing for safe and familiar spaces increases. It is in the nostalgic image of the small town that we seek these securities. The New Urbanism is aware of this yet, by embracing high-technology, a fundamental contradiction exists between the movement's mandate and the inherent nature of the computer.

Recent technological advancements, particularly the Internet, have dramatically affected the way the public realm is understood and perceived. The Internet has allowed society to venture into the realm of cyberspace to experience the outside world and each other. In fact, the very nature of public interaction is no longer what it once was. Who you are is no longer relevant on the Internet as one is afforded the luxury of adopting an entirely new personality, gender or race without fear of conflict or question. "More and more of the instruments of human interaction and of production and consumption, are being miniaturized, dematerialized, and cut loose from fixed locations."<sup>14</sup> While millions of people continually work and socialize in cyberspace, it is undefinable as it is both everywhere and nowhere.

The speed and nature of computer-based exchanges will also have dramatic implications on the way we inhabit the environment. Actual place is no longer a factor in a virtual world; your address is now pinned not to a place but to a *www.com* location. Visiting a tropical island from the comfort of your own home is now only limited by the power of your computer video card. The distinction between home and work is also affected as teleconferencing, real time video feeds and E-mail remove the need for direct interaction. Even the traditional marketplace is under siege as the Home Shopping Network allows us to purchase whatever we need without ever having to leave the home.

What this ultimately creates is the dislocation of ourselves from the built environment as we increasingly retreat inwards to experience the outside world. As uncertainty and apprehension of where and how we live increases, we long to return to a 'real-life' community-based situation.

Thus, in an attempt to restore security to our cyber-based lives, we seek a nostalgic reassurance in past traditions and forms. As a familiar retreat from the fragmented dislocations of the postmodern, the New Urbanism is clearly perceived as a panacea.

However, as we seek the security and community of the small town, the lure of the virtual community is equally as powerful. While the computer has the potential to disrupt the familiar order of things, we readily allow it to enter our lives. We love its potential to entertain and inform; after all, it is exciting to explore the World Wide Web. Electronic mail provides the user with a safe exchange while virtual reality can transport you to anywhere you want without ever leaving the comfort of your own home. Essentially, the computer provides a safe and convenient means of interacting with other members of society as well as providing a source of home-based entertainment.

New Urbanist towns are actively marketed as the place where the past and the future meet. While the exterior may ooze olde-towne, peel back the paper-thin facade and the interior is unmistakably high-tech. Selling a curious blend of old and new, the New Urbanism actively "combines deep porches and fibre optics, [with] the old swimming pool and terabyte broadband networks."<sup>115</sup>

Yet, it is the union between the New Urbanist paradigm and modern technology that illustrates a fundamental contradiction. Unfortunately the potential impacts of the computer are not commensurate with the intended role of the town. The contradiction lies in the fact that the inherent nature of the computer has forced us inwards to experience the outside world while the aim of the New Urbanism is to bring us outside.

On one hand, the New Urbanism promotes a town model devoted entirely to community development and they have applied titanic measures to achieve this. Yet, on the other hand,

high-level technology is wired into every home, and is in fact, used as a selling feature for the town. Recent advertisements claim to offer 'Smart Ready Homes utilizing such technologies as digital T.V., internal LAN networking, and multiple phone lines supporting high speed access to on-line services through the community Intranet.' It seems obvious then, that the inclusion of a technology which promotes such an inward movement into the home contradicts the basic premise of the town itself. The question is then, where does one find a sense of community in a hot-wired neighbourhood? It is most likely located somewhere in the ambiguous zone between Kentlands and [www.kentlands.com](http://www.kentlands.com).

Why then does the New Urbanism include such technologies when it fundamentally contradicts the very nature of the town? First, as illustrated earlier, buyers prefer a traditional home with all the modern conveniences. The modern residential package does not include the typical pre-war floor plan, but rather, high speed Internet connections, large foyers, and a spot for the big-screen T.V. Second, developers know that the town will not succeed unless it can maintain a significant workforce within its borders. Knowing that the 'town framework' will not sustain a local workforce, they must rely on the computer-based, work / home relationship. Re-establishing this fact is critical, for without a significant internal workforce, Kentlands --or any other New Urbanist town for that matter-- will remain a decorated suburb.

In a time of virtual interactions in virtual places, the traditional small town with its potential for real-time exchanges appears very secure and appealing. In a world where nothing is as it seems, we seek security in the familiar forms of the past. Unfortunately, not even the forms offered by the New Urbanism are what they seem. Nevertheless, the false-front facades meet with our unified approval and we willingly accept the idea.

It is a consensual hallucination that [we] have created....With this equipment, you can agree to share the same hallucinations. In effect, [we are] creating a world. It's not really a place, it's not really a space. It's notional space.<sup>116</sup>

In developing its own Internet web site --[cnu@lsu.uky.edu](mailto:cnu@lsu.uky.edu)-- the New Urbanism exists partially in this 'notional space' and in fact, promotes the very form of interaction it was supposedly designed to combat. Can we assume then, that while residents of Kentlands are surfing the Internet to experience other virtual worlds, those less fortunate forced to live in a typical suburban development across the highway will be logging-on to [www.kentlands.com](http://www.kentlands.com) to experience an 'authentic community'?

## Conclusion

It seems that what is drawing residents towards the New Urbanism is a somewhat misplaced nostalgia and an unchallenged faith in the media. Baby-boomers support this nostalgia through the myth of the American Dream as promoted by the entertainment industry and ultimately made 'real' in the form of towns like Kentlands. Longing for a sense of community, a return to traditions lost in the wake of modernism, and stable family which to rely on, Americans are desperate to return home. It is the home that many long for, yet remains elusive.

Unfortunately, America can no longer return home. At least, not the nostalgic home that exists in the images of Norman Rockwell. For the most part, it never really existed in the first place except in our imaginations and myths. It can however, return to something that represents, or even better, imitates home. To compensate for our accelerated lifestyle, we surround ourselves with hazy traditions, ersatz imagery, electronic simulations and plywood imitations of what we think is home. By selling a residential paradise in the form of a re-created small town, a nostalgia hungry America willingly permeates the present with images of the past. While one

can not physically return to the imaginary paradise of the golden years, it can certainly be rebuilt.



Advertisement, 1943, Source: Albrecht, D., (1992)



Norman Rockwell, Source: Finch, C., (1975)



McKenzie Towne, Calgary, Source: Carma Developments, (1998)



Promotional Material, Celebration, Source: Disney Corp., (1997)

## Chapter Three

### Just Like the Real Thing...Only Better!

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This chapter seeks to review the current trend in simulated and themed environments within the postmodern context. In reviewing a variety of themed environments and by providing a cursory review of the history behind their development, it aims to show how the propensity for theming is a contributing factor in the evolution of the New Urbanism. Further, it seeks to show how the New Urbanism maintains direct links with the themed environment, which is itself, a product of the postmodern context.



#### Monuments of Unreality

The thesis has illustrated that the widespread popularity of the New Urbanism can largely be attributed to the presence of a nostalgia for the small town. The New Urbanism however, is further indicative of a much larger condition; it is both a reflection of, and a creation of, a growing trend in the North American, built landscape: the propensity for the simulated or *themed environment*.

Coined by Mark Gottdiener in *The Theming of America*, the themed environment can be interpreted as a physical location or structure which relies on exaggerated symbolism to entice the user into consumption or to provide a simulated experience in lieu of an authentic event or place. Very much a postmodern construct, the themed environment commonly relies on a

superficial facade designed to disguise an otherwise ordinary object and, in acting as a symbol of something or somewhere else, thus conveys a detached meaning to its users.<sup>117</sup>

In 1972, Robert Venturi in *Learning From Las Vegas*, discusses early examples of the themed environment and comments on the development of a new form of architecture. Venturi reviews the emergence of the commercial strip as being indicative of the postmodern tendency to reduce architecture to simply a support mechanism for a system of referential symbols and signs. In what Venturi describes as the 'decorated shed', exaggerated symbolism aimed at the passing automobile has supplanted genuine architectural meaning. Suggesting that the building has been reduced to a graphic sign in space, he posits that the postmodern urban landscape is characterized not by architecture but by the sign. As examples, Venturi cites the gas station, the motel and the golden arches of McDonalds as being familiar symbols over and above the architecture which supports them.<sup>118</sup>

On a journey through America in search of the absolute fake, Umberto Eco in *Travels in Hyperreality* also describes the propensity for simulation and theming. In citing numerous examples ranging from freak shows to wax museums to Disneyland, Eco notes that the levels of illusion in the North American context are numerous and include everything from art to history and even nature. In this he describes the proliferation of the desire for the replicated over the real and how the reduction of meaning in the original creates a situation in which the original has perhaps become inferior. In addition, Eco comments on our willingness to fabricate a false experience in lieu of the real and then willingly believing it to be authentic.<sup>119</sup>

Yet, moving beyond the isolated examples as described by Eco or Venturi, it is virtually impossible to exist in the current North American society without coming into contact with some form of themed event. Restaurants such as Planet Hollywood or the Hard Rock Cafe, increasingly offer specialized themes which complement the type of food they serve. Retail

stores and mega-malls employ overarching motifs and commonly adopt several urban themes under one roof to increase sales. Theme parks and theme-cities, Disneyland and Las Vegas being the apogees, offer a blending of physical space with the worlds of entertainment, movies, and commodification. Residential developments of every shape and size are increasingly associating themselves with the nostalgic aesthetic --a widely used and popular theme in itself-- to sell homes. Clearly the propensity for theming has become an obsession as only in the themed environment would a public library curiously mimic the Colosseum, the Sphinx re-appear as a casino, and a suburban housing development imitate itself.

Not only limited to the North American experience, the popularity of the sham has now gone international. Disney has transplanted its Magic Kingdom to both Europe and Asia. Another example, a proposed Italian theme park, modeled after historic Rome promises an 'authentic' experience by offering ancient Italian food cooked without electricity. Curiously, a participant in the project proudly describes the project as being *just like a fake Las Vegas*.<sup>120</sup>

While the propensity for the theming has gained a strong foothold in the present, the use of themes is hardly a new sociocultural phenomenon. Umberto Eco writes that "the pleasure of imitation, as the ancients knew, is one of the most innate in the human spirit."<sup>121</sup> In tracing the historical roots of theming, Mark Gottdiener further suggests that early instances of theming occurred when nature and the land were viewed as meaningful or signifying places. "During early times, everyday life consisted of fully themed spaces where every tree, stone, place and or individual had a connotative symbol attached to it."<sup>122</sup> Ultimately, this process of material objectification, discourse, and belief would lead to the development of complex legends and myths.

...humans have always been symbol-producing beings and from the earliest times of cave painting and artifact production, they have endowed the environment with themes and signs that held power. Over time this practice, produced elaborate discourses or myths. They were empowering stories that people handed down through the generations and that eventually formed the core of organized religious systems.<sup>123</sup>

In the modern context, Gottdiener suggests that the themed environment has roots in several areas. Early links can be traced to worlds fairs and expositions which offered a stimulating contrast to the harsh realities of the industrial city. In addition, early suburban developments promoted motifs of success and personal affluence by offering scaled down replicas of historical mansions situated amongst miniature versions of luscious landscaping.

While these examples have not singularly created the themed environment, they have clearly assisted in laying the social and physical groundwork for its development. This has been achieved primarily by fostering associations between symbols of fantasy and the perception of the built environment as diversionary.<sup>124</sup>

In *The Culture of the Copy*, Hillel Schwartz suggests that the proliferation of theming is a direct result of our taking stock of ourselves in times of uncertainty. "This has happened in every era that has approached an end. As we get near the millennium we naturally are trying to take measure of who we are."<sup>125</sup> Schwartz further posits that while this is indicative of a cultural behavioral pattern, there are also factors which are unique to this generation. Schwartz writes "everywhere around us we see the world of fiction blurring into the world of real life. The more we see the blur, the more we struggle for a steadier notion of the real."<sup>126</sup>

Ada Louise Huxtable supports this and adds that a straight line can be drawn between the invention of place in the American history and the themed environment. As storytelling and place-making have maintained a significant role in the development of the American culture, she

maintains that in this context, the evolution to the themed environment is simply a product of the time and culture.

When place becomes story, designed as an appealing visual narrative, when the primary concerns are stage setting, anything is possible. When the story line selected, and everything coordinated to reinforce the illusion of reality --or of borrowed reality-- the result is...the themed [environment].<sup>127</sup>

Regardless of the source, it can be seen that the use of themes historically relied on meaningful symbols and was in fact 'hypo'significant --meaning the factory was a sign for production.<sup>128</sup> Again, while theming is not a new concept, the concern is that in the postmodern themed context, we see a 'hyper'significance; where an overarched symbolism with a detached meaning has supplanted the original referent. No longer is a bank a symbol of banking, nor is the Sphinx a symbol of Egypt. Today, the Sphinx is replicated, stylized, transplanted to the Las Vegas desert and is now a symbol of gambling and entertainment.

The important difference now is that our themed environments are imitations or simulations of substantive symbols. Today's signs possess superficial rather than deeply felt meanings. They are fundamentally disconnected from [that] with which they are associated. As pure images, their major source of inspiration is the fickle and rapidly changing fashionable world of mass advertising, television and Hollywood culture.<sup>129</sup>

Derived from the popular images of Hollywood, television and mass media, the postmodern themed environment is characterized both by the merging of material forms with commercial culture and the increasing level of verisimilitude employed to promote this merging. From this, the forces driving the themed environment include *the incessant need to be entertained* and *the imperative to consume*; which in themselves are critical elements in the postmodernist agenda.

...our environment is increasingly characterized by systems of signs that seek to motivate consumption and are tied to the pursuit of profit. At the very same time, these sign systems also entertain. It is precisely this confluence of commercialism and entertainment that characterizes the themed environments of our society.<sup>130</sup>

An applicable description of *entertainment* suggests that it provides an escape or a distraction from the realities of daily life. Supporting the notion of being elsewhere both socially and temporally is what generates the popularity for the themed environment as entertaining. Mark Gottdiener writes, "most people prefer to be entertained rather than confronted by some awesome tragedy of human experience. Simulations carry us away to the fantasy world that individuals crave."<sup>131</sup> As will be reviewed later in the chapter, the offer of an alternative reality, albeit a simulated one, is clearly visible in the New Urbanism and is in fact a major selling feature.

Without a doubt, themes are direct marketing strategies designed to liken the images of the entertainment media with the notion of commercialism. Disneyland was established as a vehicle to sell related merchandise while mega-malls increasingly use themes to enhance consumption. As the theme-park shopping experience rapidly becomes the norm, it should come as no surprise that the latest hot spot is aptly named *Planet Hollywood*. Serving a wide variety of typically average fare, the food, for the most part, is irrelevant and is secondary to the larger themed experience. All the while, the only thing being nourished is our insatiable appetite for the unreal. Neil Postman writes "entertainment has become the natural format for the representation of all experience"<sup>132</sup> and as such, our built environment is being slowly transformed into one large entertainment venue.

The level of verisimilitude required for the sake of keeping ourselves entertained is staggering. No longer satisfied with plaster imitations of a brown derby hat, or a giant roadside donut, it has evolved into a national spectacle. Jean Baudrillard describes [North] America as "a primitive society of the future...increasingly regulated by absorbing simulacra."<sup>133</sup> Disney-esque imagery spills past the gates, cities are imitating cities, towns imitate towns and virtually every object,

place, or event is subject to recombination as a stylized, all-inclusive rendition located somewhere else. Edward W. Soja, in *Variations on a Theme Park* posits

...everything is possible and nothing is real. Creatively erosive postmodern geographies are being invented at a furious pace in every urban region in the country. Everyday life seems increasingly to have moved well beyond the simpler worlds of the artificial theme parks. The theme parks now visit you...the disappearance of the real is no longer revealingly concealed. This ecstatic disappearance is fast feeding a new mode of social regulation...where even everyday life is thematically spin-doctored and consciousness itself comes in prepackaged forms.<sup>134</sup>

However, what has evolved as a result of this uneasy merging is that the fundamental role of architecture has been reduced and our perception of it altered. In much the same way as a cigarette is a device designed to deliver nicotine, architecture is now simply another means of delivering entertainment. Evolving to meet the needs of the entertainment starved "it is no longer about the architecture *of* entertainment, it has become architecture *as* entertainment."<sup>135</sup>

Surrounding ourselves with a thicket of unreality for the sake of entertainment, we have self-hypnotized ourselves into believing that our own simulations are real, and readily reward those who convincingly pull the wool over our eyes.

Consumers are less interested in whether something is a fact than in whether it is convenient that it should be believed. What seems important is not truth but verisimilitude. In this new world, where almost anything can be true, the socially rewarded art is that of making things seem true....The greatest effort goes into the realization not of dreams, but of illusions.<sup>136</sup>

Neil Postman suggests that North Americans are perhaps the best entertained and perhaps the least well-informed culture in the world.<sup>137</sup> In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley feared a society which was numbed by the effects of that which they loved.<sup>138</sup> In North America, it is precisely that which we love that threatens us. We love to be entertained, and to be entertained requires a theme, and a theme begets simulation. Yet, as the need to be entertained increases, so too must the level of simulation. But in allowing ourselves to be constantly fooled by our own increasing illusions, what are the potential impacts?

While the postmodern themed environment has created a qualitatively new source of entertainment, in doing so, it has reduced architecture and meaning to superficial surface images. Baudrillard reminds us that it "is the duplication of the sign which destroys its meaning."<sup>139</sup> As expressed by both Baudrillard and Eco, the fake is now replacing reality such that reality is no longer preferred and in fact, appears inferior to it. In much the same way as a photocopier blurs the image with each successive copy, the original referent becomes blurred to the point that it becomes irrelevant and eventually discarded.

We have created a world which exists as, to borrow a term from Umberto Eco, *hyperreality*, where the desire for the real is replaced by the desire for the simulated and the themed. In the world of the hyperreal, the artificial experience has replaced the genuine, and in many cases has become the preferred way of life. The question remains however: what is the place of the New Urbanism in the *context* of the hyperreal? Through an examination of three primary examples of theme-based, entertainment environments: Disneyland, the mega-mall, and Las Vegas, this inquiry suggests that the New Urbanism shares with these individual sites *similar mandates and exists as an extension, and a product, of the themed environment.*

## The Ride of Your Life

Disneyland is viewed by many as the pinnacle of theme parks. In many respects, it has rightfully earned this title. Disney's imagineers have gone to great lengths to guarantee that the illusion is seamless and the experience complete. The staggering level of verisimilitude that is evident in every aspect of Disney's world, whether it be within the park itself, in film, or on television, clearly supports the overall entertainment experience. Yet, the implications of such a perfected illusion on the larger realm of the built environment is equally significant. By promoting a sanitized entertainment experience, the potential for external influence outside the gates, particularly in the case of the New Urbanism, is enormous.

Inside the gates, Disney's mission, apart from using the imagery to sell Mickey Mouse hats and Magic Kingdom sweatshirts, is above all, to *entertain*. Historically, the theme park has its roots in state fairs and expositions of the early 19th. century. Relying on commercial undertones, they were intended to be seen as a pedestrian-based distraction from the realities of daily living.<sup>140</sup>

As market fairs that enlarged and developed fantasy themes, as pedestrian and open-air environments, and as diversions offering entertainment rides and attractions, they worked out the important articulation between fantasy marketing schemes and a built environment that was diversionary and [entertaining].<sup>141</sup>

For the most part, the popularity of the modern park lay in the fact that it offered a unique vacation experience. It was designed as a collection of familiar images and spaces situated in one convenient location devoted, on the surface, to family entertainment. At the time of its construction in the 1950's, it was a unique and compelling form of entertainment. Disneyland offered more than hair-raising rides or specific attractions, the park itself was the show.

People not only visited the park for the rides or merchandise that it offered, but also for admission to the park itself. Experience of the themed built environment, for Disneyland, is its own reward....Here, the built environment itself, as with other themed milieus, is a form of entertainment. Each structure provides its own fantasy. The park itself is architecture that entertains.<sup>142</sup>

The popularity of Disneyland as its own attraction can be attributed to the direct connections between the park and Disney's film and television ventures. Many of the characters and motifs seen in the park were already familiar. As the physical realization of the movies, the park gave visitors the opportunity to directly interact with the characters seen on television. As Mark Gottdiener writes, "advertising and the close link between Disneyland and the many films of the Disney Company fueled the popularity and acceptability of the images and fantasies upon which the park experience was based."<sup>143</sup>

There is never an attempt to market the Magic Kingdom as reality; it is promoted as an escape from reality, a theme park devoted to family entertainment. In fact, it is the temporary separation from daily life --the vacation getaway-- that the park relies on. This fantasy-like, inauthentic quality, achieved by blending common cultural imagery with appealing simulations of idealized architecture and spaces is what augments the overall Disney allure.

While the park offers the participant with a physical distraction from the outside world, it is nevertheless, an extension of movie and television imagery. It is this physical realization of the familiar movie images that present dangerous consequences. As the process of Disneyfication spills out past the gates, the surrounding context is beginning to look curiously less like itself and more like the park which imitates it. It is at this point that Main Street, U.S.A., the quintessential simulated home town, begins to play a significant role in the review of the New Urbanism.

The latest incarnation of the New Urbanism is an obvious extension of Main Street, U.S.A., situated curiously outside the Disney gates. Aptly named *Celebration* --Disney's Floridian version of Kentlands-- the influence of its theme park parent is unmistakable. Whether people are buying into the myth of the small town, the myth of Disney, or the myth of Disney's small town, Celebration exists as an *extension of the theme park*; a fabulous rendition of the experience of Disneyfication, suspending the participant in a serially realized apparatus of simulation.<sup>144</sup>

As an extension of the theme park, Celebration transforms the concept Main Street, U.S.A. from a singular entertainment element into that of an entire town. This is achieved through three basic processes. First, both utilize similar architectural styling as a means of delivering the nostalgia-based aesthetic. While Main Street, U.S.A. maintains a 7/8 th. scale, Celebration is a full-scale, live-in version with fully-operational front porches. Second, they are both seen as representative of the cultural values lost to the modern suburban context: those being a sense of community interaction and rural living. Third, both are designed around, and rely heavily, on the myth of the small town and its associated nostalgic sentimentalities as a source of popularity. Main Street, U.S.A., is seen as 'representative' of the ideal town in which to live. Celebration then, as an evolution of Main Street, U.S.A., is perceived as the 'physical realization' of that myth.

According to Michael Sorkin however, Celebration has sinister underpinnings in that it offers a sanitized version of a simulated reality. Its ageographic existence presents a cheerful version of reality geared towards entertainment by "stripping urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work....There are no demonstrations in Disneyland."<sup>145</sup> As there will always be those who do not correspond with the image of the perfect neighbour, break-ins and neighbourly disputes are inevitable. There is no personality or character-screening process required to move into Celebration. While it is these elements of conflict that allow a community to grow and develop its character, it is these very same incidents that will shatter the perfect Disney image.

Here is urban renewal with a sinister twist, an architecture of deception which in its happy face familiarity, constantly distances itself from the most fundamental realities. The architecture of this [town] is almost purely semiotic, playing the game of grafted signification, theme park building [and] the idea of pure imageability.<sup>146</sup>

Nevertheless, the fact that Celebration is an evolution of Main Street, U.S.A. and is a Disney creation, virtually guarantees its success. There are those who will automatically assume that because it is Disney, it will be a residential Utopia. The Disney they know maintains a virtually spotless image as visitors to the park, polled about what they like best, cite first the cleanliness.<sup>147</sup> Disneyland has set a dangerous precedent for itself as expectations rise high for Celebration to equal the pristine imagery of its counterpart. Incoming residents are attracted to Celebration because they know they can rely on Disney's presence to guarantee certain community standards. "If it was anyone other than Disney, we would have never done this....We just feel that they represent first class all the way. Anything they do is quality."<sup>148</sup>

It is this appearance of a quality product that enhances another aspect of Celebration as an extension of the theme park. Both Main Street, U.S.A. and Celebration share a sub-level postmodernist mandate devoted to the commodification of the image. As a product of the entertainment industry, both rely heavily on the myth and imagery of the small town movie genre to sell related merchandise. At Disneyland, Mickey Mouse hats are being sold, whereas at Celebration both an entire town and a lifestyle are for sale.

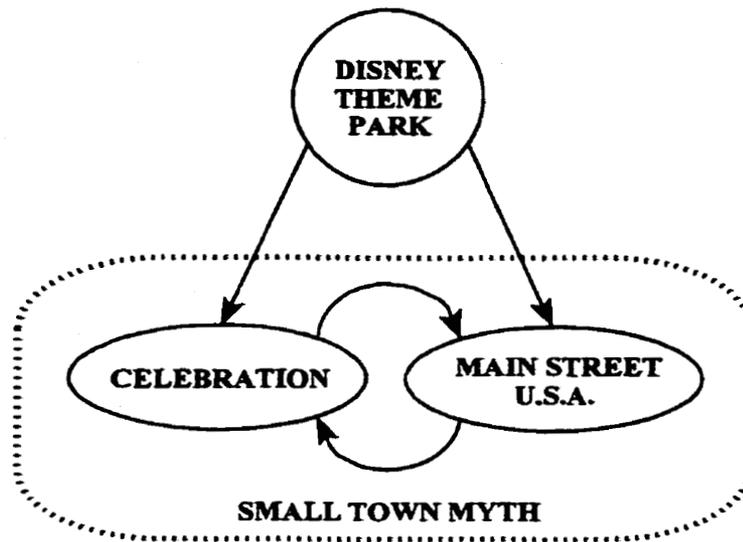
It is important to remember that Disneyland was originally conceived as a vehicle to reinforce the merchandising efforts of the Disney Corporation. Throughout the park, opportunities to purchase Mickey Mouse paraphernalia are abound. While Disney makes substantial efforts to promote Celebration as a functioning town, it nevertheless has its underpinnings rooted in the idea that the entire town, and not just Mickey Mouse hats, are for sale. "In the master-planned communities of today the community is a commodity. It is community for sale."<sup>149</sup> The town,

an extension of the parent which created it, has thus become the product offering itself as its own reward.

Unfortunately, when Disney creates a mythical town that surpasses the quality of its parent, it ultimately eliminates any desire for the original on which both were based. By improving on the myth in the form of an ersatz reality, the original it is based on is no longer needed. Umberto Eco writes "[Disney is not] giving you the reproduction so that you will want the original, but rather, [they] are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original."<sup>150</sup> What this ultimately stimulates is the need for more simulation to the point that the original is no longer preferred.

Disneyland not only produces illusion, but --in confessing it-- stimulates the desire for it...Here we not only enjoy a perfect imitation, we also enjoy the conviction that imitation has reached its apex, and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it.<sup>151</sup>

Unfortunately, Celebration bears a strikingly similar resemblance to Main Street, U.S.A., thus increasing the possibility of confusion between the two. Both Celebration and Main Street, U.S.A., offer an escape from reality in a significantly improved, revised version of the small town. Actively promoted as an alternative from the ills of everyday reality, Disneyland offers a family vacation from daily activities while Celebration promotes a lifetime vacation from the suburbs. Interestingly, Disney's developers also promote Celebration as a model timeshare vacation destination; in case it fails as an authentic town. It is the shared intent and similar myth-based imagery, combined with the fact that they are both Disney creations, which ultimately leads the public to associate Celebration with Main Street, U.S.A. The following diagram graphically illustrates this concept.



*Figure 5: Associations Between the New Urbanism and Disneyland*

Supporting this notion is the fact that both Celebration and Main Street, U.S.A. operate on the same fundamental principle: an inversion of reality. Like the theme park, things in Celebration function differently than in the real world. In suburbia, the car is a necessity whereas in Celebration, walking is actively promoted, and in the case of Disney, mandatory. Crime is advertised as virtually non-existent so the threat to public safety is removed. Family relations are inverted as the children now dictate the daily activities as opposed to the parental figures. Formal clothing is no longer required as the entire experience is based on entertainment and leisure.<sup>152</sup> In sum, both the theme park, and Celebration are viewed as a safe, entertaining diversion from reality and as such, the potential to liken one with the other exists.

The oddity of this association is that one is a theme park and the other is supposedly a functioning town. Yet, like its theme park parent, Celebration offers an exciting ride for your entertainment dollar. The entire process of looking for, and buying a house is wholly

entertaining as it is overtly orchestrated as a safe and non-threatening, scripted process. This pre-planned scenario likens the overall experience to that of a ride at the *fun-house* at the local fair.

An example of this can be seen in the sales offices of Cornell in Markham, Ontario. The sales office, located in a strip-mall, blatantly recreates the quintessential town-scene as its storefront. Highly visible from the street, the sham is pathetically obvious as even the idealized clouds in the sky are painted on the plywood facade. Once inside, the experience ranges from the visual to the tactile. There are no sales agents, just a down-home information girl whose only role is to lead you into a theatre to experience the town by film. In a skillful effort to continue the entertainment experience, the screen rises and in an instant you are standing in a miniaturized

version of Cornell with pre-recorded birds chirping in the styrofoam trees. As you walk along the imitation cobblestone streets and visit copies of model homes, sales agents willingly talk *olde-towne* and even give you samples to take home; pieces of the life you can have, or perhaps reminders of how unsatisfying yours is.

Before you know it you have completed the loop and are cast back into the parking lot, left only with your nostalgia for the authentic town you just left behind. Of course, the information girl is there to ease your transition back into reality. But who wants to live in reality; no matter how beautiful your suburban home is, nothing can compare to the tranquility of a simulated town inside a strip-mall. This is a copy of a small town copied from an imitation of a town copied from a borrowed tradition situated in a strip-mall designed to sell itself as a real community. Here, postmodernist folly has run wild. If nothing else represents the direct connection between theming, consumerism and our insatiable appetite for an entertainment, this certainly does!

While the imagineers develop and promote Celebration as an authentic town, we are unfortunately left with a largely fictional creation, based on an entirely simulated model, based

on a loosely interpreted myth. Unfortunately, we neither investigate nor question its authenticity, we simply believe it to be true. In a recent episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a computer-generated, holographic image of Professor Moriarty leaves the holodeck to join the other crewmembers. The only reason for his ability to exist in the real world was that he believed he could. In a similarly bold effort, Main Street, U.S.A. has left the park grounds unnoticed and developed into a fully functioning holographic-like image of a town. The only reason for its success: we believe it can.

### **Madame Maya's Retail Pleasure Dome<sup>153</sup>**

From its inception, the mall has existed as a highly efficient vehicle for the distribution of goods to a suburban market. However as the proliferation of theming and simulation sweeps the built environment, the mega-mall has begun a curious evolution. In a blending of Disney-esque imagery and urban theming, the mall now offers goods in a highly theatricalized manner. Employing a unique mix of entertainment and consumerism, developers have stretched the role of the mega-mall such that the function it serves is now under question.

While its mandate to sell goods remains, the reliance on theming, particularly urban-based imagery, has dramatically increased. This reliance on theming can be attributed to the fact that the mall, which is essentially a private space, must disguise its fundamental role as a vehicle for sales and offer a more entertaining environment than the public space of the city.

The central city remains a public space that allows free interaction among a variety of people for any number of reasons. The mall is a highly regulated, private commercial space that is expressly designed to make money. This instrumental function of the mall, for realizing capital, must be disguised because it would not be attractive to consumers.<sup>154</sup>

An excellent example of this can be seen in the West Edmonton Mall, in Edmonton, Alberta (WEM). Claiming to contain the entire world beneath its glass atria the WEM boasts, amongst other features, a simulated French boulevard equipped with the typical Parisian mansard roof, a version of New Orleans' Bourbon Street equipped with mannequins offering 'evening services', an indoor wave pool, a skating rink, the worlds largest indoor amusement area, a full-size replica of the *Santa Maria*, and four fully-operational submarines.

This thesis has previously illustrated that the retail mall was a contributing factor in the decline of the urban core and as such, has assumed the role of urban town centre. Yet, in an effort to compete for retail sales, the mall has resorted to employing an urban-based theme and consistently advertises itself as a *place* to go. Ironically, the mall is actually imitating the very element it helped to eradicate: the city. In a similar effort, by selling itself as *the place to live*, the New Urbanism imitates the very thing it is helping to eliminate: the town.

Clearly though, the WEM is no more a city than Kentlands or Celebration are real towns. Nevertheless, what both of these offer is a sanitized version of their respective realities where only the positive elements of the experience are included. One can easily experience the seedy element of New Orleans' Bourbon Street at night without fear of harassment under the light of a simulated twilight-moon. Similarly, residents of Celebration are offered a perpetually happy-town in which to live, where crime is non-existent, the porches are always full and the paint never peels. Apparently then, the widespread popularity of the themed environment indicates that what is important is a fantasy experience and not reality.

In this clever adaptation of theming, the WEM has wrapped the world of entertainment around the world of consumption. In its suspension of time and place, the WEM temporarily inverts reality such that

...confusion proliferates at every level; past and future collapse meaninglessly into the present; barriers between real and fake, near and far, dissolve as history [and] nature are indifferently processed by the mall's fantasy machine.<sup>155</sup>

In adopting the urban theme as a feature of consumption, the WEM utilizes Main Street, U.S.A. and the theme park as a model. Yet the WEM goes much farther than simply incorporating Disney-esque themed elements as it now competes with the park itself. Margaret Crawford writes that

...the themes of the [mall] owe much to Disneyland [as] theme park attractions are now commonplace in shopping malls, indeed, the two forms converge; malls routinely entertain, while theme parks function as disguised marketplaces. Both offering controlled and carefully packaged public spaces and pedestrian experiences.<sup>156</sup>

In fact, as the two cross-over in function, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between them. The WEM's theme park offerings include a dolphin pool, an amusement arcade with several rides as well as a full-scale roller coaster. If this were not enough to satisfy, the WEM continues by offering a hotel --with themed rooms of course-- and as such, promotes itself as an all-inclusive, family vacation destination.

Again, we can draw a parallel between the WEM and the New Urbanism. Clearly, both promote a Disney-esque imagery while offering a diversion, or alternative to everyday realities. The WEM uses theming and entertainment to distract us from the mundane act of shopping. Kentlands on the other hand, offers porches, tree-lined avenues and the promise of a community as an alternative to the drudgery of suburban life.

What this inevitably leads to is that an association is being made between consumerism and entertainment. The WEM clearly supports this parallel and relies heavily on a variety of themes

to increase its retail competitiveness. Disney also makes this association and wraps the process of consumption with its own entertainment-based imagery. Ultimately what is occurring is that consumption is being likened with entertainment thus removing the negative aspects of spending money. Similarly, as Kentlands is linked to the Disney entertainment experience, the process of buying a home—a substantially major purchase—is potentially likened with visiting a theme park. Ultimately, this process is less intimidating when linked directly with a positive entertainment experience.

It must be made clear that this thesis makes no attempt to imply that the WEM, Disneyland and Kentlands are in effect, the same thing. Clearly, one is a retail centre, one is a theme park and the other is a residential development. They do however, share commonalities in the fact that they offer a distraction from the activities of daily life and they rely heavily on theme park techniques. These similarities converge even further as both ultimately utilize the urban theme to foster consumerism. Interestingly this thesis asks the question: will the WEM eventually provide its own simulated version of the small town to sell nostalgic products? Given the propensity for the themed environment and the level of nostalgic sentimentality within the postmodernist context, the answer is most likely yes.

### **The City That is the Show**

Las Vegas is without a doubt the apogee of the themed environment. Its name is synonymous with larger than life casinos and pure entertainment. Since its emergence in the 1950's as a neon-clad gambling hot-spot, the strip has evolved into an all-encompassing tourist attraction. Recently though, as competition for gambling dollars increases, Las Vegas has replaced the neon sign with a more monumentally scaled, spectacle-based, themed entertainment venue. Residing simultaneously in the world of reality and illusion, Las Vegas exists as a collage of theme park imagery, simulation and multi-media extravaganza.

The magic and the medium of the hotel / casino themed attractions that are the economic lifeblood of Las Vegas are not architecture. Las Vegas is not a set of architectural sites, it is entertainment, it is show business.<sup>157</sup>

The function of the themed building is straightforward: to seduce the consumer. Multi-media spectacles such as the Luxor offer a stylized version of the Sphinx, while Casino New York, New York provides an amalgam of familiar New York City structures and theme park rides. While the mandate to visually seduce remains, the recent scale of theming has transformed Las Vegas from a collection of individual events to that of a vacation destination existing as a simultaneous urban / entertainment experience.

Essential to the imagery of pleasure-zone architecture are lightness, the quality of being an oasis in a hostile context, heightened symbolism, and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role: a vacation from everyday reality.<sup>158</sup>

Clearly then, a parallel between the theme park and Las Vegas can be drawn. Frances Anderton posits that "there is no other American environment you can enter without buying a ticket that is so much like Disneyland."<sup>159</sup> In much the same way as the various Disney attractions unify the park, each casino offers a different themed event and ultimately unites the entire city as one, inter-connected entertainment venue. In providing a framework designed to distract and entertain, the plethora of visually stimulating themed events offers itself as its own reward.

As such, the New Urbanism maintains a dangerously close parallel with its theme park / casino counterparts as it too offers itself as a reward. Furthermore, Anderton suggests that "one of the requirements of hotel / casinos built on the strip...would be attractions that stop pedestrians in their tracks, so that they engage with the public spectacle."<sup>160</sup> This curiously sounds like an excerpt from the New Urbanist design guidelines in promoting the front porch. After all, is this not the aim of the New Urbanism: to provide residents with a framework so that pedestrians will stop in their tracks to engage their neighbours?

Las Vegas has often been described as a being like no other place on earth. On the surface, it seems to be an isolated enigma; an urban anomaly. Yet nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, Las Vegas is increasingly viewed not as itself, but as a simulation of everywhere else. The recent addition of a sanitized, scaled-down version of New York in the form of a hotel / casino supports this idea. As expressed by Umberto Eco in *Travels in Hyperreality*, Las Vegas, representing the pinnacle of the absolute fake, is in effect "a city that imitates a city."<sup>161</sup> Thus, to experience Las Vegas is not to experience Las Vegas, Nevada, but rather to experience several mediated versions of somewhere else.

If Las Vegas exists primarily as an assemblage of representations of somewhere else, where then is the real Las Vegas? It could be argued that Las Vegas as itself no longer exists, except as a controlled collection of borrowed experiences. Borrowed of course, from everywhere else except Las Vegas. When one visits Casino New York, New York, or the Luxor, where exactly is it that you are visiting? Clearly it is not New York or the Nile Valley, but can it be said that it was Las Vegas?

One can also make the same assertions for the New Urbanism, as exactly where you are living is a nebulous point. Kentlands exists not as an authentic town, but rather a representation and amalgamation of all small towns real or imaginary. Nevertheless, while the simulated experience is so contrived, it is also so distracting and entertaining that determining where you are becomes irrelevant. What is important is the overall experience and not where that experience takes place. This is evidenced by the duplication of the Disney theme-park model in several different countries. Perhaps then, in order to experience the original Las Vegas of the 1950's, a copy will have to be constructed somewhere else. Ironically, this is not an unrealistic assumption when witnessed by our copying a town in order to experience it.

As illustrated previously, Robert Venturi (1972), observed that the architecture of Las Vegas represented a departure from the tenets of Modernism and characterized an increasing emphasis on the building as a postmodern system of *symbols and signs*. According to Venturi, by applying a decorative plywood Sphinx to the facade of a casino, the structure itself is reduced to nothing more than a *decorated shed*. As the original meaning of the referent is subdued, the structure is thus relevant only in that it supports this system of themed signs.

Las Vegas is an entire metropolitan area that is quite literally themed....The Las Vegas casino environment is a multidimensional system of signs. Both the built forms and the messages they intend to convey are highly developed and articulated as intentional symbols.<sup>162</sup>

While the casinos of Las Vegas exist as primarily representational, a similar relationship can be drawn from the New Urbanism. Clearly the small town model and its accompanying aesthetic act as a sign symbolizing community, neighbourhood and a value standard. Unfortunately, like the plywood Sphinx, the imagery is borrowed from several different eras and locales and does not reflect the current use. In keeping with the postmodernist paradigm, the aesthetic of Kentlands only signifies a certain lifestyle, it does not embody it. In both cases the original referent is abandoned while forms are reduced and recombined such that the symbol is more important than the actual building. In other words, what the houses of Kentlands symbolize is far more important than the actual structures themselves.

Clearly, similarities exist between Las Vegas and the New Urbanism as proprietors of the postmodernist experience. The concern however lies in that the simulation often improves upon the original. Ultimately, as the participants begin to believe in the validity of the simulation, the fake becomes increasingly associated with the real. While neither the theme park nor Las Vegas are admired for their realism, Kentlands promotes itself as reality and is applauded as an authentic community. This should cause concern as residents believe that the model is indeed a fully functioning community. Unfortunately, the sham is never unveiled as there is no letter

inside the front door informing you that you have been fooled, and that the idea of a community is really nothing but a marketing tool. If there was, it would most likely be in a nostalgic font on parchment paper. Unfortunately, the New Urbanism must hide behind the promise of community as it is unable to unmask itself for fear of degenerating its perceived authenticity.

Peter Calthorpe maintains that the difference between the real and the sham lies in the craftsmanship and skillful execution.<sup>163</sup> This thesis suggests that the difference lies not in the quality of the final product but in the *expectations* of its users. Casino users expect to gamble and be entertained, whereas Kentlands residents do not expect to be entertained, they expect a community. While residents do not truly believe that they have stepped back in time to Mayberry, they do expect some form of community and neighbourhood interaction; at the very least they expect a wave. 

Ultimately however, it is highly unlikely that the New Urbanism will be able to deliver on its claims. In much the same way as the Hard Rock Cafe uses a musical theme to entice you into the act of eating, the New Urbanists are hoping that the nostalgic aesthetic will entice you into the act of *community*. While Kentlands relies heavily on traditional styling and nostalgic nomenclature to sell the expectation of community, this thesis suggests that neither architecture nor imagery alone can foster community development. The developers of Kentlands are simply hoping that a community will evolve within their framework. Yet even in Las Vegas, where the odds are king, nothing is left to hope or chance. Imagine what would happen if the owners of the Luxor left only the tables in the hopes of a card game spontaneously breaking out?



## Conclusion

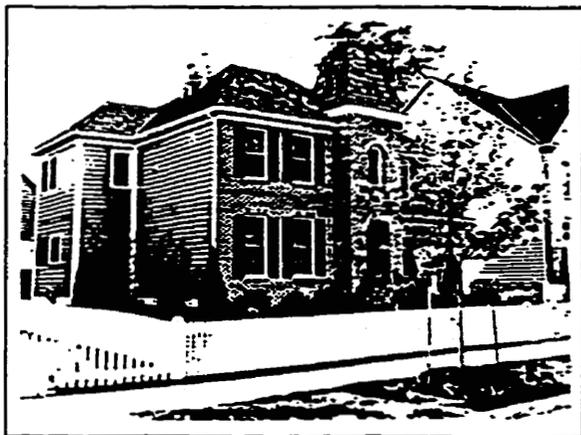
'You may fool all the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you can't fool all of the people all the time.' Lincoln's popular maxim relies on the fundamental assumption that people will ultimately prefer reality over sham. However, in the postmodern context, it seems that people do not mind being fooled all of the time.<sup>164</sup> North American culture continually accepts the notion that *image is everything*. As the edges between reality and illusion become blurred, the simulated experience for the sake of entertainment is rapidly becoming the preferred reality. According to Daniel Boorstin, "[North Americans] run the risk of being the first people...to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so realistic, that they can live in them."<sup>165</sup> This is precisely what the New Urbanists have done: created an illusion rooted in entertainment that is so complete, so comprehensive that it is both believable and inhabitable, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.



*Casino New York New York, Las Vegas, Source: Huxtable, A., (1997)*



*Cornell Sales Offices, Markham, Source: Author, (1998)*



*Typical Kentlands Home, Source: Author, (1997)*

## Concluding Observations

### Urban Mis-Fits

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*In a time when the world around us seems to grow more complex with each passing year, we seek out the simpler things in life. The green vistas of a stroll in the park. The tranquil waters of a pond and the gentle currents of Miller's Creek. The warm breeze that caresses your face on the front porch. Everything you could ask for is only a stroll away. This is the kind of neighbourhood you've always dreamed of; where comfort blends easily with convenience; where you walk through the door and say 'It's good be home'.*

The intention of this thesis is to critically review the New Urbanism in the North American suburban realm. This is achieved through a review of the current suburban context in which the New Urbanism resides, an examination of the movement itself, and ultimately reviewing the physical results.

The New Urbanists propose within their mandate, alternatives to the current sprawling suburban condition. The vehicle through which this is achieved is patterned after the traditional American small-town model. Included within the movement's objectives is an architecture of community relying on traditional planning techniques and an historically based aesthetic. As the physical results of these objectives are becoming firmly established and are now measurable, this thesis attempted to pit reality against theory.

## The Spectacular Towne

On the surface, the New Urbanism presents itself as a direct response to the current suburban condition in North America. Suburbia has not lived up to its promise of clean, family living in the country and has in fact created a landscape of placeless sprawl marked by parking lots and strip-plazas. Designed entirely to support the automobile and promoting only uniform sprawl, the suburban experiment has mercilessly torn massive holes the urban fabric. Wholly unsustainable, the cost of maintaining this current pattern of development is staggering. In a landscape of mediocre uniformity, sense of place has been destroyed, architectural specificity greatly reduced, and the urban core slowly dissolved.

Responding to a sub-urban system that satisfies neither the automobile nor the pedestrian, the New Urbanism, through the "restoration of existing urban centres and towns, [and]...the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighbourhoods"<sup>166</sup> advocates, *the return of place* to the suburban condition. Centering themselves around the notion of the close-knit neighbourhood, the movement makes clear statements regarding its ultimate intentions. As outlined in the Charter of the New Urbanism, the movement advocates the following:

- ▶ Restore the *traditional neighbourhood* form;
- ▶ Reduce the need for *automobile dependancy*;
- ▶ Increase *pedestrian accessibility* and use;
- ▶ Develop a more *sustainable model* of development.<sup>167</sup>

Ultimately, the mandate of the New Urbanism is to *revive traditional planning techniques and an historical aesthetic in an effort to restore community* to a placeless suburban context.

In order to achieve this, the New Urbanism has adopted a specific set of key implementation strategies and techniques. At the core of the movement is the restoration of the traditional small town. For the New Urbanism, the typical small town is the physical and social representation of all that is absent in the current suburban context. Physically it symbolizes a sustainable method of planning characterized by a limited size, increased density, pedestrian access, and a distinct sense of place. Socially, the small town is an embodiment of the human graces that suburbia has squelched; those being social interaction at a variety of locations and levels within the town framework.

To successfully construct this model, zoning policies and planning techniques must be re-evaluated. Segregated-use zoning combined with current street patterns must be altered and redesigned to better suit the needs of the pedestrian and the community. Typical suburban streets favor the automobile whereas New Urbanist streets are narrower and rely on a grid system thus eliminating the need for the cul-de-sac. The use of back alleys and rear garages further returns the street to the pedestrian. Mixed-use residential and commercial development is also promoted within the town. In addition to the physical framework, a visual aesthetic is also employed. This is achieved through an architectural styling based on nationally historic imagery and details as guided by a specific set of design guidelines. The primary devices include a return to pre-World War II architectural techniques and styles incorporating traditional color schemes, picket fencing and functional front porches.

Supporting this resurgence of traditional planning techniques and architectural aesthetics is a powerful national nostalgia. Raised to the status of national myth, the small town has become synonymous with The American Dream; a keystone American tradition. Fueling this nostalgia, apart from being a common characteristic of the postmodern, is the search for Paradise, lost in a time of uncertainty.<sup>168</sup> As previously summarized, the desire for a secure and familiar place to reside is high in a time of accelerated lifestyles. In addition, the postmodern architectural aesthetic itself fuels this nostalgia; when compared to the current suburban styling, the New

Urbanism clearly offers a more traditional and visually pleasing alternative. Without a doubt though, the major factor behind the wave of nostalgic sentimentality is entertainment imagery. Having an entire movie genre dedicated to the small town, and generations lulled to sleep by images of Norman Rockwell, it is no surprise that residents flock to the bucolic small town as seen in the movies.

Further enhancing the popularity of the New Urbanism is the wide sweeping presence of the themed experience and the increasing desire to be perpetually entertained. Exemplified by Disneyland and Las Vegas, the propensity for the themed environment has spread to influence virtually every facet of the postmodern landscape. Tied directly to commercialist intentions, the themed experience has come to include restaurants, retail centres, civic buildings and even entire cities and towns. In North America, we love the simulation, and given that ours is a nation where *what you see is what you get*, unfortunately in the postmodern context, *what we get often isn't real*. Yet, this remains perfectly acceptable as the real is increasingly being replaced by the fake and we willingly promote its existence. As described by Ada Louise Huxtable

...interpretations rush in to fill the vacuum where knowledge fails. For those without memory, nostalgia fills the void. For those without reference points, novelties are enough. For those without the standards supplied by familiarity, knock-offs will do....For all of the above, the outrageous is essential.<sup>169</sup>

Without a doubt, the New Urbanism exists as an extension of the themed environment and maintains close parallels with the entertainment meccas of Las Vegas and Disneyland. To borrow a common slang, the New Urbanism is clearly a *Mickey-Mouse* operation. The direct connection between the Disney-esque imagery and the level of verisimilitude as seen in Las Vegas clearly illustrates the position of the New Urbanism in the postmodern themed environment. In addition, similar to its theme park relatives --or the entire themed environment for that matter-- the New Urbanism offers a sterilized and improved version of a genuine

experience; even better than the real thing. Ultimately then, what connects the New Urbanism with these examples is the common perception that it offers an alternative or a distraction from the realities of daily life.

### **Hype or Reality**

The New Urbanists maintain that people, if given the choice, would prefer to live in a traditional small town as opposed to either the city or the suburbs. A recent Gallup poll supports this notion. In 1989, Americans, when asked where they would like to live, 34 percent chose a small town, as compared with 24 percent who chose a suburb, 22 percent a farm and 19 percent a city.<sup>170</sup> Heidi Landecker writes that "[Americans] like the iconography of porches and picket fences because it signals...a return to an era when everything was certain and the same."<sup>171</sup>

Now as the New Urbanist small town model is firmly in place, a pragmatic review of that model revealed inconsistencies. Conclusions reached indicate that New Urbanist communities are in fact *not authentic towns* by definition and maintain an ageographic existence as neither physical location, social nor economic factors are developmental considerations; that the New Urbanist small town *model does not support the claims* made by its proponents; and that while it remains an inauthentic town, *a direct link can be made between the New Urbanism and themed environment* in which it resides.

While the New Urbanism actively promotes its communities as fully operational, authentic towns, the research indicates that this is not entirely the case. At issue is the legitimacy of the town itself. Neither Kentlands, Celebration, nor any other New Urbanist community operates in the same manner or created for the same purposes as their original. Further, in generically reconstructing a new old-town entirely from scratch, the New Urbanism either fails to address,

or has conveniently chosen to ignore many of the basic historic and physical principles involved in the development and growth of a traditional town.

Traditionally the small town developed as a locus of commercial activities around shared values or social connections, geographic location, employment or skills. The New Urbanism, on the other hand, indiscriminately dispenses with many of these essential qualities and fails to sustain any direct relationship with its surrounding context. Rather than evolving slowly and incrementally, the New Urbanist town rises to fully functioning status in a matter of a year or two. As a result, they *fail to sustain any legitimate historical roots*. A residential sales brochure proudly boasts that at Cornell, "they are making history....It's surprising how long it has been since anyone thought of creating an old-fashioned town."<sup>172</sup> As a result, the town's existence is owed largely to the whims of developers who sell nothing more than the idea of a town. Further, what is clearly absent in the New Urbanist community is the fundamental keystone for economic success: the ability of the town to sustain a workforce within its borders. As a result, these towns fail to maintain any *bona-fide* sense of legitimate urban purpose.

The New Urbanism believes that a fully functioning community can be created simply by providing the physical framework. Yet a community can not be wished into existence. To plan and design communities around a specific predetermined framework undermines the true nature of communities. According to Oscar Newman, The New Urbanists are "creationists, who, with one grand gesture that fashions perfect beautiful places, believe they are God."<sup>173</sup> Advocating social engineering through built form, the community which the New Urbanism promotes is in fact largely prefabricated and sold. Yet, either directly through promotional material, or indirectly through architectural references, the New Urbanism claims that joining the community is as easy as moving in.

Proponents of the New Urbanism claim that the small town model addresses many of the ills caused by current suburban patterns. As previously described, these include the restoration of the traditional town, notions of walkability, reduced auto reliance and sustainability. This thesis has already illustrated that the New Urbanist community is not a real town. The research further indicates that these towns do not live up to the claims made by its supporters.

Of critical importance to the success of the small town model is the ability to walk to critical amenities and social activities. The presence and location of the town centre within a five minute walking distance from most points within the neighbourhood is a fundamental tenet within the New Urbanist mandate. Peter Calthorpe maintains that "the centre is a necessity, ...the locus of the neighbourhood's public buildings [and that]...the optimal size of a neighbourhood is a quarter mile from centre to edge."<sup>174</sup>

From this, the New Urbanists believe that the inclusion of a functioning town centre will change patterns of daily behavior. However, to believe that a re-created town centre within walking distance will alter mobility patterns is a wide sweeping assumption. John Schleimer writes that within New Urbanist developments there is a "lack of a discernable impact on resident's behavior patterns"<sup>175</sup> as there exists little external incentive to change. If you should choose to walk to the centre, there is however, little to be found. While these spaces may yield some life within the square, as a destination point, little else is offered.

At McKenzie Towne, the potential for external life is limited, as the entire square is framed not by cafes but by Georgian townhomes with only one token corner store. The success of the square is thus jeopardized as

...mute edges only serve to frame the space, and not enliven it. Without lively edges, the space must be artificially programmed in order to have the appearance of life....Reams of jugglers, bands, [and] food fests are the only means available to bring, and keep, people into the space. Without such programming, the spaces simply become places to pass through, and not to inhabit.<sup>176</sup>

Clearly, the notion of a walkable town with a definable centre is a welcome alternative. Yet, in order for it to work successfully, it must be a functioning urban element. Unfortunately, as in many New Urbanist communities, the centre is in fact nothing more than a token programmed space which only imitates the real thing.

The New Urbanists hold fast to the notion that their model can reduce automobile dependency and increase transit usage. The theory holds that the reason people drive so much is that cities and towns are poorly designed. The solution is to redesign cities so that there is no need to drive. Unfortunately, this philosophy is severely flawed. The assumption that people would rather walk than drive is simply unrealistic. It is absurd in the current social and physical context to expect people to abandon their cars in favor of walking or public transit. There will always be places people will travel to by car regardless of how well the town is planned as the car is ingrained too deeply in our daily patterns.

Modern traffic engineers worry that the pedestrian-oriented street system will inevitably handle as many cars as walkers. The logic is that if you build more streets, more people will drive on them thus increasing traffic. The danger is that shorter travel distances ultimately reduces the cost per trip; reduced costs means more trips; and ultimately an increase in vehicle-miles traveled.<sup>177</sup> The irony of this situation would be if residents did indeed drive more. Yet, this is precisely what is happening. As supported by John Schleimer, the statistics regarding work-related driving patterns are interesting.

- ▶ 95% occasionally or always commute;
- ▶ 5% work at home;
- ▶ 91% commute by private auto;
- ▶ Significantly lower transit use than non New Urbanist towns.<sup>178</sup>

As these statistics indicate, the notion that, if given the opportunity, people would prefer to walk rather than drive is simply not true. With such a small percentage working at home, combined with the economic failure of the town-centre, the daily commute to work and to the store remains a reality for most residents. It appears then, that 'walkability' is nothing more than a developers marketing ploy.

The problem is that, while these developments mimic the old 19th. century streetcar neighbourhoods, they keep the same transportation system that produces conventional suburbs. In other words, current New Urbanist developments follow the standard pattern for suburban development. They sit right off a main highway. They often have but a single entrance. They have winding roads that are just slightly less confusing than cul-de-sacs. They are, in effect, subdivisions masquerading as small towns....So what you get, at best, is a neighbourhood that looks like a Georgetown, but functions like any other subdivision off the Beltway.<sup>179</sup>

A further claim made by the New Urbanism is that the small town model is more cost efficient and sustainable than current suburban patterns. Increasing its status as a sustainable community are the claims that these towns require less energy to maintain, that infrastructure costs<sup>180</sup> are significantly lower and that traffic congestion is reduced.

A 1995 survey conducted by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, directly addresses this issue. The aim of the study was to "assess and compare the cost-effectiveness of two patterns of community development: (i) a conventional suburban development pattern, and (ii) a mixed use, more compact development, planned according to the principles of New

Urbanism."<sup>181</sup> In simple terms, the study determined which development option is more cost-effective and why. The most significant results are summarized below.

The infrastructure in the alternative plan...is more cost-effective for both the public and private sectors....The per unit cost savings associated with the alternative plan is attributed to the increase in residential density, which spreads the cost of the infrastructure over more units, and to the increase in land use mix, which reduces the residential sector's share of capital, operating and maintenance costs.<sup>182</sup>

The majority of the savings are generated from infrastructure emplacement costs as maintained over a 75 year life-cycle. In a moderately sized residential community, the actual savings are substantial: "\$11,000 per unit generates approximately \$77 million when spread over a community of 7,000 dwellings. Over a 75 year period, this translates to annual savings of over \$1 million dollars for the alternative plan."<sup>183</sup>

The findings of this study certainly make the New Urbanism a very attractive alternative to both developers and residents. Ideally this would be passed on to the consumer. Aside from the obvious nostalgic appeal—a characteristic sales feature many housing developers have latched on to—developers are clearly benefitting from, and willing to discuss, the potential cost savings and increase in profit margin. Henry Turley, developer of Harbor Town in Memphis, Tennessee, supports the rectilinear narrow street pattern since "it always bothered [him] that you had to pay for asphalt and lay it on the ground that you could otherwise sell."<sup>184</sup>

It is important at this time to ask who is really benefitting from this model of development? The concern is that developers are simply using residential nostalgia as a selling feature. Almost all new residential developments have applied derivatives of the New Urbanist aesthetic. This however, is dangerous as it potentially blurs consumer preference and likely undermines the validity of the movement. Stephanos Polyzoides, a co-founder of the New Urbanism, writes,

"[builders] put up a couple of Victorian clocks or a town square or a nice lake and then rape the landscape...by sprawling all around it."<sup>185</sup>

This distinction between the supporters of the New Urbanism and the developers is crucial. Proponents of the movement genuinely believe in the benefits of the small town model. Peter Calthorpe writes "finely integrated and walkable communities with strong identities...are both possible and economical today. The forms will vary in time and place, but certain traditional town-design principles will emerge as timeless and contemporary."<sup>186</sup>

At issue, is that this deep seated idealism within the movement is perhaps not shared by the developers. In addition, the New Urbanism is viewed by many, not as their long-lost childhood home, but simply as an investment opportunity.<sup>187</sup> For the developers, the nostalgia craze is being utilized primarily as a marketing tool and has translated into voluminous sales and hefty returns. Unfortunately, if the potential savings are not passed on to the consumer, it is ultimately the developer who profits. It is highly unlikely that this is what the New Urbanists had in mind.

When theory is compared to reality, the New Urbanist town fails to live up to the claims made by its proponents. In fact, they are nothing more than copies of a town, based largely on a myth with tradition and history being manufactured. Essentially, they exist largely as turn-key operations, fully equipped with clock towers, happy streets, and a friendly architecture. One wonders when a creative-minded developer will realize that they could probably sell the franchise rights for the town to the town.

*The fact that people will be out strolling on the street is wonderful. And since we drive all day, it's great to know you don't have to drive to the store when you get home!*<sup>188</sup>

This quote clearly illustrates the inherent contradictions with the New Urbanism. Proponents of the movement claim that their development model is more cost-efficient, will reduce auto dependance, increase neighbourhood interaction and revive a sense of community. While people are indeed buying the small town concept, in reality their patterns remain unchanged. Unless the larger patterns of daily existence are altered, the New Urbanist town will forever remain a skillfully wrapped, glorified post-war suburb.



The results of the New Urbanism, while hard to dislike, are a contradiction in terms. 'Neotraditionalism' is itself an oxymoron. While the model may indeed present a more positive aesthetic, the final product remains an inauthentic creation. It maintains little faithfulness to the original materials or processes which created the traditional town in the first place; ignores notions of geographical context as a determinant for location; and has the perpetual commodity based mentality looming over its head. It is a place created entirely from scratch and relies on a postmodern pastiche of superficial imagery which wraps an imposed tradition and an ersatz history. Simply a monument to sham, these towns are icons of unreality utilizing clever nomenclature and a happy aesthetic.

Yet buyers seem to miss the point that these places are not authentic towns, and are in fact a pre-fabricated, scripted experience which, for the most part, exists as an extension of the entertainment-based theme park. The fact that Kentlands offers its own *joy-ride* should immediately make this point clear. Prospective buyers are treated to a free driving tour through a town. Narrated by a future *neighbour*, key locations are pointed out so that you too can experience the town's rich history and tradition in the making. Participating at your leisure, entirely from the comfort of your automobile, the town's rich flavor is experienced first hand at 40 kph. Ironically at no time in the tour are you ever asked to walk. Remember this is a town

designed to be experienced on foot. Just like the history of the town, you ingest what you want, when you want, pausing the experience when required. This is the pinnacle of the personalized theme-park ride and there could not be a more appropriate situation to illustrate the position of the New Urbanism as pure entertainment. The question is however, will the tour / ride stop when the last house is sold?

Perhaps this is exactly the context in which the New Urbanism can thrive. While it may not be an authentic town by the pragmatic definition, it is very much in keeping with the postmodern environment in which it resides. Perceived as the tangible realization of familiar forms already made popular through the entertainment media and the theme park experience, the New Urbanism resides quite comfortably within its surrounding context. Successfully entertaining us through superficial details and entertainment imagery, we like what the New Urbanism shows us, and in the world of the simulated and the themed, if what we see is entertaining then that is usually authentic enough.

Rarely questioning what we are shown, we believe in the validity of our copies --as does the New Urbanism. Peeling back the facades to determine the authenticity of our creations is no longer necessary, as authenticity is largely measured only by what is shown to us. Not only do we believe it to be authentic, but we willingly participate in the very sham we have created. If the advertising promises a *community* where the *past is perfected* while *history is being made*, it must be true. Ignoring legitimate developmental processes, we strive for the quick fix. Satisfied with something like an authentic town, we readily accept a plastic version of the real thing.

From Baudrillard, we know that a characteristic of the postmodern is that the simulated has replaced the real such that it is now considered genuine or authentic.<sup>189</sup> Because of this, the notion of authenticity itself is now in question as the 'real' and the 'fake' are becoming

increasingly difficult to distinguish. In fact, the difference between the two is largely becoming irrelevant as the copy has, in many instances, surpassed the original and is now the preferred choice. Michel Pastoureau, in *Vrai ou Faux*, takes this notion one step further and writes that "le faux n'existe plus,"<sup>190</sup> --literally translated into 'the fake no longer exists'.

...fakes don't matter; that we cannot, or can no longer, distinguish between genuine and false and that to attempt to do so is to show ourselves trapped in outmoded patterns of thought, to delude ourselves that we are making valid distinctions where in reality none exist.<sup>191</sup>

Hillel Schwartz writes that the authenticity of the original is no longer distinct from that of the authenticity of its simulation as the "culture of the copy muddies the waters of authenticity."<sup>192</sup> As a result, while meaning and referent become diluted with each successive copy of a copy of a town, the notion of whether or not it is an authentic town is rarely at issue. In the postmodern era, if it looks like a shoe and it smells like a shoe, it therefore must be a shoe. Similarly, when Kentlands is considered in this context, if it looks like a town, it must be a town.

In addition, there is "a growing awareness that images have now displaced the original realities they were traditionally meant to reflect."<sup>193</sup> This is witnessed in the New Urbanism as these towns exist as picture-perfect replicas of only the best elements of the traditional small town. Kentlands is nothing more than Mayberry minus Otis the town drunk, for his presence will only shatter the picket-porch imagery that the New Urbanism depends on so heavily for its authenticity.

The New Urbanists have discovered that the imitation of types is more important than a continual process of innovation.<sup>194</sup> The results however, are a superficial hodge-podge of physical elements, traditions and images lacking both meaning and substance. Yet, this seems to be perfectly acceptable as evidenced by the popularity of both the New Urbanism and the

themed environment in which it resides. In a world where the simulated has become reality, and where 'authentic reproductions' continually make the absurd acceptable, authenticity essentially becomes moot.

Miles Orvell writes "we have a hunger for something like authenticity, but we are easily satisfied by an ersatz facsimile."<sup>195</sup> Whether or not it is a real town, and whether or not the images they are based on are genuine is no longer a critical issue so long as the final product pleases, entertains and comforts. Again, regardless of how many inauthentic copies of a copy exist, when compared to the surrounding suburban sprawl, the New Urbanism is clearly the most comforting, entertaining and authentic alternative.

Richard Kearney writes of postmodernism that its predominant features include "...mirror-play, the crisis of interpretation, the logic of the simulacrum, the cult of the pastiche and the parody of times past as tokens of a depthless, ahistorical present."<sup>196</sup> Charles Jencks writes that the postmodern world is less a complete break from the modernist tendencies as it is a mixture or a collage of modern and non modern images including commercial, vernacular, and traditional.<sup>197</sup> Clearly then, the New Urbanism, while it fails to produce an authentic town, has found its place in the world of the postmodern. Less function and more fiction, it exists as a pastiche of historical eras, architectural styles, and materials. In both the postmodern context and especially the New Urbanism, history is irrelevant only insofar as it can be used to generate positive imagery; where tradition is non-existent, it is pre-fabricated; when community is required, it is suggested; and where authenticity is sought, facsimiles are widely accepted.

Authentic reproductions symbolize the postmodern age. In the world of the simulated, monuments to fiction, whose only desire is to recreate the mood of an imagined past, become reality. Further, as our incessant desire to be perpetually entertained increases, it would come as no surprise if someday there existed an *Edge City Theme Park*.<sup>198</sup> a scaled-down version of

sprawling suburbia fully equipped with cul-de-sacs, an 'authentic re-creation' of Kentlands and simulated automobiles to take you on the ride of your life because, in Edge City Theme Park, this time the pedestrian is *not* welcome.

### *How Far Are You Willing To Go?*

Unfortunately, inherent within this situation is the possibility that the framework will have the power to alter our behavior. This is precisely what the New Urbanists have in mind as it is hoped that the model will change our normal patterns. For the model to be successful and maintain its (perceived) authenticity, we must walk, or sit on the porch and wave as other neighbours walk by.

When buying into a New Urbanist development you are buying into the concept of small-town life, but also potentially subscribing to the social myth as well. While this review does not offer answers, it is cognizant of the fact that these issues warrant further research but nevertheless, poses the following critical questions.

- ▶ If you choose not to participate in the small town social ideology, will you be considered a social outcast?
- ▶ If you do choose to play along simply because it is fun to participate in the act of waving, are you then just playing the role of the happy community member?
- ▶ If no one waves, is the model itself a failure?

To simulate is not necessarily to pretend. Yet, if we adhere to the behavior patterns implied by the New Urbanism, are we not really pretending to be something we are not? In much the same way as a trip to the mall activates our *consumer* selves<sup>199</sup> it is hoped that Kentlands will activate our *community* selves. Yet social engineering through built form can not be achieved solely through land planning alone. Again, absent are the key factors which will assist in the

development of community interaction. Those being historically developed social connections, familial roots and shared experiences.

Nevertheless, will we self-actualize<sup>200</sup> ourselves simply because the mechanism is present, or will we do it because it is fun to play along? This thesis posits that it is in fact a combination of both. Acting in the roles of our lives, we once again allow ourselves to be told how, by what means, and under what circumstances we will live. This pattern is reminiscent of the 1950's and 1960's, when masses of people fled the cities in search of that elusive cabin in the woods. Remember, suburbia was initially, and is still, advertised as an alternative for the decaying urban context.

The New Urbanism promotes and sells a controlled environment that dictates a mediated experience, and as such it has the potential to alter our daily patterns. While it is absurd to blindly assume that a front porch will dramatically alter a person's behavior, the question remains: how far are residents willing to go to entertain either the notion or themselves? When one considers the popularity of the New Urbanism and the nature of the postmodern themed environment, it seems we are willing to go the distance.



Clearly then, when reality is pitted against theory, the New Urbanism does not live up to its stated intents. It is neither a revival nor is it the authentic town that it is actively promoted as. Simply put, porches and back alleys do not a community make. While it may look like a real town, looks can be deceiving. There is a big difference between looking like a town and acting like a town. While Kentlands skillfully plays the part, the only difference between it and a typical suburban development is the level of verisimilitude. It is no more a real-town than it is

real. We have become so numbed by our simulations that we are unable to distinguish what is real and what is fake. While the New Urbanism may indeed offer a better alternative to the current suburban situation, it is in fact, nothing more than a canned community; a turn-key operation supported by entertainment imagery, theme-park machinery and an overarched nostalgic sentimentality.

It is however, a lot of fun. In an ever increasing desire to be entertained and amused, we have become so obsessed with the themed environment that we have created a realm in which the fake is preferred over the real, and as such have allowed ourselves to be fooled by our own creations. Given these conditions it is no surprise that the New Urbanism has evolved, for in the postmodern context, if you prepare people enough to believe a big lie, they eventually will. Clearly, we have not only prepared, but willingly allowed ourselves to be entertained into a false sense of community and perhaps even existence.



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[cnu@lsu.uky.edu](mailto:cnu@lsu.uky.edu)

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**Appendix - A**

**Kentlands: A Personal Narrative**

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## **Kentlands: A Personal Narrative**

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Due to the nature of the thesis, it was deemed beneficial to visit a completed New Urbanist development. Complemented by a three week tour of the United States' Eastern coast, the chosen site was to be Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland. This site was selected because of its size, relative state of completion and the fact that it is commonly regarded as the flagship of the New Urbanism. The intention of this visit was not to physically document, but rather to personally experience the New Urbanism first hand. As such, this review is presented as a narrative in the first person and will hopefully convey the nature of the author's experience.



### **Do I Have to Wave in Smalltowne?**

September 24, 1997.

Kentlands was scheduled to be the last stop on a three-week driving tour which would include much of the Eastern seaboard of the U.S. from Maine to Virginia and inland to Washington D.C. The weather was perfect as the warmth of late summer blended into early fall. There could not have existed a more ideal climate in which to experience this part of the country. In fact, as the leaves began to change color in the small-towns of Maine and Vermont, it was truly, just like out of a movie.

Day one, St. Johannesburg, Vermont, proved to be just what I had expected from a typical American small town. Everything was exactly as I had envisioned: an actual 'Main Street', quaint homes with real porches and a big oak tree in the front yard. Even the County Courthouse and the Town-Hall were in the Colonial Revival style painted a crisp white and complemented

by the obligatory Stars and Stripes. While this was neither my home nor my country, I could not help but feel *at home*. Embarrassingly, I felt somewhat jealous as I knew nothing like this existed in Canada. I could not help but think to myself “this place is fantastic, why don’t we have one of these towns?”

With only one shot, I had fallen victim to the charm of the small town and was seduced by the powerful lure of its aesthetic. As we traveled down the coast, the consistent imagery reinforced the idea that this truly was what small-town America was all about. It really was white columnar buildings, flag waving, and tree lined streets. Although I was surprised that it actually existed outside of the movies, this was exactly how I envisioned small-town America, and small-town America did not disappoint.

After seeing this, for a brief moment, the New Urbanism surprisingly made sense. The towns of the New Urbanism maintained a wonderful architectural and cultural aesthetic and practically oozed patriotism from every orifice. As well, the New Urbanist towns expressed everything which I considered ‘American small town’. Although I knew better, I saw nothing wrong with attempting to regenerate that in suburbia. However, I was still supporting an educated bias against the movement and decided it best to suspend my opinion until we arrived at Kentlands.

Sadly, the arrival at Kentlands was not what I had expected. By this point I had toured ‘several’ small towns, and unfortunately, the novelty soon wore off as each town began to look like every other before it, until they too became somewhat repetitive. In addition, my expectations were enhanced by idealistic visions of a quaint little town set against a natural setting with hills, trees and a babbling brook. I had seen the advertisements and done the research; I knew that it was located on *356 rolling acres of the Kent family farm*, and that *the original farmhouse was incorporated into the design*. The name sounded so traditional too, so romantic: Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland; how could it not be this way?

Unfortunately, our arrival was met with neither a romantic winding road on a hilly landscape nor a tree-lined babbling brook. There was however, a four-lane major arterial through some of the most boring suburban crud in memory; so monotonous that we drove right past the entrance. Actually, it was quite easy to miss as the backs of the 'Kentlands traditional homes' looked exactly like their suburban counterparts directly across the street. I was at a loss; where was the town I had seen in the advertisements; where were the porches, and the flags? I guess I forgot that in a country where 'image is everything' the nostalgic decoration applies only to the front of the house.

Nevertheless, we turned around in a strip-mall and ventured in. Un-jaded by the mishaps of our arrival, I had come a long way to see this and as such, held firm to my expectations for the flagship development. Once inside, Kentlands was able to deliver on the physical aesthetic. There was, without question, a plethora of porches, tree-lined streets and a handsome display of flag-waving patriotism. Even though I knew it wasn't real, I was absolutely determined to experience what the town had to offer.

Our first stop was the sales office, and much in keeping with the tradition of the New Urbanism, we were treated to a wholesome video presentation and a plethora of nostalgic pamphlets. Great lengths were indeed taken to make sure that the experience --particularly in this area of town-- was complete; cobble stone paving lined the main square, while garbage receptacles and street signs were embellished with the town logo. Much to our delight, the town even has its own weekly newspaper --*The Kentlands Town Crier*-- offering the latest town happenings. When you combine this with the changing leaves, this aesthetic certainly had a powerful allure. Admittedly, the fact that this was neither my history nor my tradition was irrelevant as I too considered relocating here.

Initially, Kentlands was exactly as I had envisioned it. There were porches, tree-lined avenues and also as expected, an extremely high level of verisimilitude. What I had not expected

however was that the developers had created of all things, a *narrated driving tour*. As we cruised through the streets listening to tales of the town's rich history in the making, the irony of this situation struck me. What an odd way to experience the town. Remember, this is supposed to be a town designed for the pedestrian and here we were experiencing it from behind the wheel. This should have immediately offended me but the novelty of the whole situation was still high. Interestingly, at no time throughout the tour were we ever asked to leave the car and experience the town on foot; except of course when we left the car to enter the sales office. Ironically, it was not until much later that it occurred to me that the driving tour was really nothing more than a personalized joy-ride in a live-in theme park.

In any case, as we drove through the town and lapped up the nostalgic cuteness --as it was aptly described-- we noticed the absence of a critical element in the scheme: *people*. Where were all the people and why weren't they sitting on the porch or in the parks flying kites with their children? This missing link made the experience almost eerie as the town seemed deserted. Granted, this was a weekday. Perhaps on the weekend we would have been over run by pedestrians on their way to the store or the park.

But then it happened, the moment we had all been anticipating, the moment that would redeem Kentlands: out of nowhere came a lone pedestrian.

*Hey look, it's a pedestrian, should we wave?*

In one simple encounter, this question summed up an inherent characteristic of the New Urbanism. It was precisely at that moment that my awareness of social determinism came into focus. Were we obligated to wave at a passerby simply because the framework is designed to foster that specific action? In an instant, I was forced to make a decision that I believed would either secure my place in the town's social circle or permanently ostracize me as a 'non-waver.' Questions raced through my head; should I wave; will she wave; what if she waves and I refuse?

Of course my travel partner waved because, as she put it, 'it was fun to play along.' In the end, I too collapsed under the pressure and waved. While the encounter was positive, as the pedestrian returned the wave, I was not happy with myself as I had clearly succumbed to the pressures of the aesthetic.

This encounter prompted me to consider several possible implications involved in the simple act of waving. If I wave and they do not wave back, what is wrong with them; what if I do not feel like waving today but I waved yesterday, will she remember me and, what if nobody waves, has the entire framework failed? This question was then expanded to other elements such as waving from the porch or even driving my car to the store when I could be walking. What this prompted in me was the reinforcement that I was not in a naturally developed setting and that we were potentially being manipulated.

While I present no data to support this claim, I would maintain that the residents of Kentlands neither care that this place is a simulation nor that they are perhaps being manipulated. After all, we had a biased opinion and we waved. The question is: did we wave out of social politeness or simply because it was fun to play along? In the end, we were divided as to why we waved. Nevertheless, in a country where image is everything, Kentlands provides a cute, novel and visually entertaining image. Ultimately it is only an image that is being sold here, and unfortunately that is all that is required to satisfy the residents: the image of a town and a sense of community.

The Kentlands experience was successful though, in what I consider to be one critical area. In touring real, small towns and then experiencing the copied version, I now understand the fundamental roots of the movement's aesthetic. The imagery and traditions are clearly representative of the American cultural experience. It also became clear that the New Urbanism is not commensurate with the Canadian context. For me, the New Urbanism *is* the United States, it certainly is *not* Canada. Canada is obviously based on its own ideologies, and as such, the

New Urbanism seems more at home south of the border. I suspect that its popularity here in Canada lies more in its ability to entertain through nostalgic imagery and simulation rather than for its ability to provide a decent quality of life for its residents. Although Canadians willingly get caught in the nostalgia trap, it seems that the New Urbanism is much more comfortable in the United States.

As we left with Kentlands in our rear view mirror and headed for home, I was neither impressed nor fooled, I was however, more experienced. Kentlands is not a real town and would never be one, for the idea of pretending to be a real town is simply not enough. Supported by a collection of plastic architecture and an inflated aesthetic, it was a totally superficial experience of nostalgic overkill wrapped in happy imagery. After spending three weeks experiencing legitimate, traditional small towns, Kentlands remained wholly inferior to the real thing.

While the writings of Umberto Eco penetrate my thoughts, I can not agree with him in this situation. It is indeed a fact that the level of verisimilitude in Kentlands is high, but it is precisely this which inspires, not reduces my desire for the original. I have experienced the real thing and clearly prefer the original over its imitation. Embarrassingly however, I must admit, if forced to make the choice between Smalltowne and a typical suburban location, I too would move into Smalltowne. Why? Because it looked like a lot of fun!



**Appendix - B**

**Charter of the New Urbanism**

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# CHARTER OF THE NEW URBANISM

THE CONGRESS FOR THE NEW URBANISM views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge.

WE STAND for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy.

WE RECOGNIZE that physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.

WE ADVOCATE the restructuring of public policy and development practices to support the following principles: neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice.

WE REPRESENT a broad-based citizenry, composed of public and private sector leaders, community activists, and multidisciplinary professionals. We are committed to reestablishing the relationship between the art of building and the making of community, through citizen-based participatory planning and design.

WE DEDICATE ourselves to reclaiming our homes, blocks, streets, parks, neighborhoods, districts, towns, cities, regions, and environment.

We assert the following principles to guide public policy, development practice, urban planning, and design:

#### *The region: Metropolis, city, and town*

1. Metropolitan regions are finite places with geographic boundaries derived from topography, watersheds, coastlines, farmlands, regional parks, and river basins. The metropolis is made of multiple centers that are cities, towns, and villages, each with its own identifiable center and edges.
2. The metropolitan region is a fundamental economic unit of the contemporary world. Governmental cooperation, public policy, physical planning, and economic strategies must reflect this new reality.
3. The metropolis has a necessary and fragile relationship to its agrarian hinterland and natural landscapes. The relationship is environmental, economic, and cultural. Farmland and nature are as important to the metropolis as the garden is to the house.
4. Development patterns should not blur or eradicate the edges of the metropolis. Infill development within existing urban areas conserves environmental resources, economic investment, and social fabric, while reclaiming marginal and abandoned areas. Metropolitan regions should develop strategies to encourage such infill development over peripheral expansion.
5. Where appropriate, new development contiguous to urban boundaries should be organized as neighborhoods and districts, and be integrated with the existing urban pattern. Noncontiguous development should be organized as towns and villages with their own urban edges, and planned for a job/housing balance, not as bedroom suburbs.
6. The development and redevelopment of towns and cities should respect historical patterns, precedents, and boundaries.
7. Cities and towns should bring into proximity a broad spectrum of public and private uses to support a regional economy that benefits people of all incomes. Affordable housing should be distributed throughout the region to match job opportunities and to avoid concentrations of poverty.
8. The physical organization of the region should be supported by a framework of transportation alternatives. Transit, pedestrian, and bicycle systems should maximize access and mobility throughout the region while reducing dependence upon the automobile.
9. Revenues and resources can be shared more cooperatively among the municipalities and centers within regions to avoid destructive competition for tax base and to promote rational coordination of transportation, recreation, public services, housing, and community institutions.

#### *The neighborhood, the district, and the corridor*

1. The neighborhood, the district, and the corridor are the essential elements of development and redevelopment in the metropolis. They form identifiable areas that encourage citizens to take responsibility for their maintenance and evolution.
2. Neighborhoods should be compact, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed-use. Districts generally emphasize a special single use, and should follow the principles of neighborhood design when possible. Corridors are regional connectors of neighborhoods and districts: they range from boulevards and rail lines to rivers and parkways.
3. Many activities of daily living should occur within walking distance, allowing independence to those who do not drive, especially the elderly

and the young. Interconnected networks of streets should be designed to encourage walking, reduce the number and length of automobile trips, and conserve energy.

4. Within neighborhoods, a broad range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.
5. Transit corridors, when properly planned and coordinated, can help organize metropolitan structure and revitalize urban centers. In contrast, highway corridors should not displace investment from existing centers.
6. Appropriate building densities and land uses should be within walking distance of transit stops, permitting public transit to become a viable alternative to the automobile.
7. Concentrations of civic, institutional, and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes. Schools should be sized and located to enable children to walk or bicycle to them.
8. The economic health and harmonious evolution of neighborhoods, districts, and corridors can be improved through graphic urban design codes that serve as predictable guides for change.
9. A range of parks, from lot-lots and village greens to ballfields and community gardens, should be distributed within neighborhoods. Conservation areas and open lands should be used to define and connect different neighborhoods and districts.

#### *The block, the street, and the building*

1. A primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use.
2. Individual architectural projects should be seamlessly linked to their surroundings. This issue transcends style.
3. The revitalization of urban places depends on safety and security. The design of streets and buildings should reinforce safe environments, but not at the expense of accessibility and openness.
4. In the contemporary metropolis, development must adequately accommodate automobiles. It should do so in ways that respect the pedestrian and the form of public space.
5. Streets and squares should be safe, comfortable, and interesting to the pedestrian. Properly configured, they encourage walking and enable neighbors to know each other and protect their communities.
6. Architecture and landscape design should grow from local climate, topography, history, and building practice.
7. Civic buildings and public gathering places require important sites to reinforce community identity and the culture of democracy. They deserve distinctive form, because their role is different from that of other buildings and places that constitute the fabric of the city.
8. All buildings should provide their inhabitants with a clear sense of location, weather and time. Natural methods of heating and cooling can be more resource-efficient than mechanical systems.
9. Preservation and renewal of historic buildings, districts, and landscapes affirm the continuity and evolution of urban society.

*For more information:* Congress for the New Urbanism  
706 Sacramento Street, Box 148, San Francisco, CA 94108  
Phone: 415 291-9804 Fax: 415 291-8116