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A Matter of Priorities: New Urbanism and Community Life

Emily Talen

Recent scholarship in *Place* (Michael Brili, “Problems with Mistrusting Community Life for Public Life,” vol. 14, no. 2, 2003; Clare Cooper Marcus, “Shared Outdoor Space and Community Life,” vol. 15, no. 2, 2003) has raised some important concerns about the ability of designers to foster quality urbanism. This does not always have to be the case — as Cooper Marcus shows, but it often is. No doubt, New Urbanists have also at times applied their criteria too rigorously. But, in my opinion, they are justified in their attempt to focus on the promotion of urbanism as a first priority.

The focus on urbanism means that New Urbanists are more concerned with the provision of a quality public realm than with the creation of private or semi-private communal space. Furthermore, there may be some justification for assuming that over-attention to private space may undermine this objective. Indeed, some advocates of communal space seem to write off public places as if they could not possibly serve the goals of social interaction — and, eventually, community building. This would seem indicative of a ready abandonment of public space (as if it were eternally doomed to being unsafe and poorly designed for community life).

While less-than-public spaces for local community groups can be wonderful, this does not preclude the possibility that truly public spaces can be equally so. But, given the state of public space in America, it is difficult not to be at least somewhat concerned that a focus on communal space would lessen the focus on the public realm. What would be the effect on public space if every residential development demanded its own private communal outdoor room? Perhaps we can debate which type of space is in a greater state of neglect, and deserving of more attention.

Much Research Has Been Done

There is another irony about designing for community: the tendency for some designers to seemingly ignore existing literature on the relationship between the physical
environment and social life, while at the same time calling for more research on the topic. As a professor of urban and regional planning, I strongly support a vigorous research agenda — but only when the research that exists has been absorbed.

To be fair, I don’t really know if important studies by Kasarda and Janowitz, Michelon, Abhbrando, McMills and Chavis, and Chavis and Wandesman, among many others, on the relationship between physical environments and community or social life have been taken into account by those who call for more research. Perhaps they have been. But it would certainly be helpful if calls for new research could tie into these existing studies. In the end, however, I think it is safe to say that designers could do a better job of assimilating research that comes mainly out of sociology.

One important outcome of this existing literature is that it indicates how ambiguous the relationship between design and community may be. For example, it points to the need to distinguish between designing for community life that is already there, and designing in order to nurture a sense of community that is currently not there. In other words, design is an independent, explanatory variable that can engender community in some form? Or is it a dependent variable that responds to extant community life, like that seen among cohousers?

In the latter context, design may clearly be a matter of responding to self-selection. Groups of residents in cohousing situations — or even those who choose to live in a place like Celebration, Florida — are likely those who are most predisposed to the idea of community life, and therefore most likely to actively seek it out. Because of their attentiveness, they gravitate toward settings they believe are nurturing of a particular type of communal environment.

Examples of this tendency are pervasive. Thus, Klaus compared the communal tendencies of residents of Forest Hills Gardens, planned in 1909, with the same ideals found in the residents of Celebration. Both groups saw themselves, at least initially, as pioneers looking for a way to nurture the communitarian spirit. They were, in other words, predisposed. The fact that communities with shared spaces exist — or are being built to satisfy this need — is therefore very important. Advocates of the need for more communal space are likely responding to a perceived mismatch between the demand for such spaces and the existing supply.

However, the assertion that design is an explanatory variable that creates a sense of community in residents who are not self-selected or predisposed is very different — and much more difficult to support.

As a start, it is necessary to account for a variety of social realities that seem to work against the idea. Examples include the following: the complex meaning of the term "community" itself; the fact that some aspects of community life are coercive and socially undesirable; the strong sense of community that is known to exist in seemingly placeless domains; the documentation that localized interaction is not a requirement for building a sense of community; the knowledge that neighborhood units do not coincide with geographies of social interaction; and the evidence that people have been known to resist designing for social interaction.

These complexities are not anecdotal, but have been established based on a great deal of research conducted over many decades. At the very least, designers intent on designing for community need to take these "downsides" into account.

The Power of Quality Design

All of this could seem hopelessly negative if it weren’t for the fact that quality urban design and planning rests on something other than the elusory notion of community. I can not speak for other New Urbanists on this point, but in my view the principles of New Urbanism are based on something much less ambiguous — the need to support communities that are diverse, interconnected, walkable, and service-oriented.

Rather than the need to foster community as an end goal, the highest priority in my view is the need to promote urbanism through the provision of services, facilities, public spaces, public transit, and all the other functions of daily life that the human habitat needs — in relatively close proximity — in order to sustain itself. This is a socially responsive approach, but it does not necessarily require the nurturing of specific kinds of social relationships (like community). It requires design skill and knowledge of human behavior, but not necessarily a focus on social life.

In this regard, I would like to draw a connection here to what Gerda Wecikel wrote more than twenty years ago in "From Refuge to Service Center: Neighborhoods that Support Women." She argued that the social life of neighborhoods was being overemphasized in lieu of the more basic, service-oriented needs of residents. This is still a relevant critique.

Perhaps there could be some common ground, or some stimulation of common commitment, if we look for ways in which the two conceptions overlap — where, for those bent on using community as a basis of good design or for those more focused on quality urbanism as a first priority.

Taken / New Urbanism and Community Life


Places 15.3
Clare Cooper Marcus responds:

Emily Talen raises some important points. I will attempt to comment on some of them.

In my article, I was not trying to suggest that the New Urbanists are ignorant of their forebears (Clawson, etc.), but that they have laid too much attention on public as opposed to community space. There is reasonable evidence to suggest that residential interaction — an important component of a sense of community — is facilitated by a site plan which creates a venue for chance encounters. One such venue is the type of shared outdoor space defined and described in my paper.

Social interaction in such spaces especially serves the needs of our most environmentally vulnerable citizens (children, especially of young children, the elderly, and low-income families), for whom a walk to a public park or plaza may not be desirable, or even possible. By focusing almost exclusively on the public realm, the New Urbanists are ignoring the recreational and social needs of important sectors of society.

I am not suggesting that every existing development provide “its own private communal outdoor room,” but that we consider a reasonable mix of private and communal space and note the important difference between them. As to which kind of space is “in a greater state of neglect,” I would suggest we look at which kind of life is in a greater state of neglect, and take heed of the late Mike Brill’s plea that it is community rather than public life which is deserving of our attention. The argument that territorially based communities are no longer relevant does not apply to children, the elderly, and the poor.

I concur with Talen that people moving into cohousing or developments such as Village Homes are probably predisposed to community life. Such people exist, and we should aim to meet their needs, as well as those who prefer to spend time in fully public space. Ideally, planning goals should aim at maximizing choice, providing opportunities for those seeking community life as well as those seeking public life — and everyone in between.