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To build is to pursue a promise.

The promise may be simply one of economic gain, a speculation; it may be a promise of civic glory, of sacred space, of corporate identity; or it may be a personal vision of splendor. For the builder the promise must always include economic value; for the support of society, the promise must be more.

A house built for an individual seeks to secure particular domestic pleasures, the stuff of individualized dreams. Homes built on speculation promise their purchasers inclusion in a lifestyle, the semblance of community.

“Once upon a time” our towns were built house by house, institution by institution, assembling a complex sense of community as they were built. That founding image remains engraved in the back of our minds. But for the most part now places are no longer built that way. Houses, indeed, whole tracts, are commodified, built as objects to be acquired, to be stepped into and appropriated as one’s own. This is not unlike living within existing towns, where we reside in compartments of a larger built fabric consisting of structures that we have had no part in building, and a spatial pattern of roads and public spaces that are owned by, but seldom designed by, the community. Such places have, however, usually developed over time, they have been adjusted and varied in ways that offer real diversity and choice.

Alas, our extended world is filled with many buildings that promise little and achieve less. Vast areas of land have been consumed in the pursuit of individualized, trivialized ambition, absent of the mix of activities and institutions that create community. Great housing tracts, built all at once, have advertised ambitions for the good life, ambitions often

proved to be based on hollow imagery. They offer false promises and usually fail to deliver what they project or, worse, they simply project too little.

The Congress for the New Urbanism is a remarkable organization dedicated to promoting and achieving a promise — the promise of communities that are considered whole; communities that are sensibly located, socially diverse, comfortably secure, include many activities and are architecturally rewarding. Most fundamentally, they promise places, not simply rows of home-builder products; assemblies of streets that you can enjoy being in, configured open spaces and monuments that lend variety to the structure and experience of the place and localized opportunities for shopping, gathering and (often) work.

New Urbanists postulate that these qualities can be approached through careful, critical examination of traditional communities throughout the United States and that attention paid to lessons embedded in the past will provide guideposts to sensible development of the present, even as the modes of production, finance and marketing have changed. At their most profound they ask us to examine the conditions under which we build and to seek out those practices that support human dignity in its many guises, giving them priority over those that are abstractly formulated, by government and industry, to serve the values of production and dispersal.

As purveyors of promise the New Urbanists have attracted great attention, both favorable and skeptical, often unnecessarily hostile. This issue of *Places* examines New Urbanism and some of the promises it makes, as well as some evidence of how these promises play out on the ground — how architects, planners and builders have structured the life within places that incorporate principles labeled New Urbanist. Our purpose is to further debate and exploration, to help sort out the valuable, achievable promises that architects, builders and communities can pursue, and to listen carefully to cautions regarding the hazards of false vows or misleading assurances.

— *Donlyn Lyndon*