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# New Urbanism and the Environment

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The Charter of the New Urbanism begins with the following statement:

*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.*<sup>1</sup>

Calling attention to the direct link between exurban development and disinvestment in inner cities is the most important contribution of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), from an environmental perspective. The insight itself is not new; others, such as Patrick Geddes, Brian Berry and myself have highlighted this connection.<sup>2</sup>

CNU members have persuaded developers that there is a profit to be made in infill development. They have demonstrated that if designers and planners aspire to be more than mere tools of prevailing market forces and public policies, they must redesign the processes that regulate the conception, construction and maintenance of the built environment.

But have they achieved the environmental goals spelled out in the charter? Sometimes, but often not. And do these goals go far enough? No.

Despite seemingly good intentions, the charter reveals a fundamental lack of understanding of how natural processes shape cities, towns and regions. This can lead to actions that contradict or undermine the stated goals, and result in missed opportunities.

While the language of the charter naturalizes the processes of growth and development as inevitable, it tends to render natural processes mainly as static artifacts. For example, almost all references to the natural environment are nouns (“climate,” “ecology,” “topog-

raphy,” “coastlines”). This leads to nonsense like the following statement: “Metropolitan regions are finite places with geographic boundaries derived from topography, watersheds, coastlines, farmlands, regional parks and river basins.”<sup>3</sup>

A watershed is a territory shaped by water flowing. A watershed may be as small as a single neighborhood, or it may encompass a chunk of a continent and multiple metropolitan regions, such as that of the Chesapeake Bay, Mississippi River or Columbia River. Geographic boundaries are shaped by processes—social, economic, cultural, political and natural.

Focusing on natural features rather than the processes that shape and structure them has consequences: the failure to accommodate dynamic change in the natural environment, the failure to make connections among seemingly unrelated elements and issues, the failure to recognize that not all traditional settlement patterns should be repeated and the failure to realize opportunities.

Take the example of water flowing and, in the process, shaping and structuring rivers, floodplains, watersheds and their topographies. Seen from this perspective, the drainage system of a neighborhood, city or region consists of not only the channels officially designated for storm water flow, but also all the other surfaces and water reservoirs within a watershed: roofs, roads and parking lots; gardens, parks and forests; soil, plants and valley bottoms.

Water flow is changing, not constant, and floodplains are zones of dynamic change, places where water rises and falls, pools and seeps. Burying a stream in a sewer and filling in the floodplain does not eliminate many of the floodplain's characteristic qualities. Understanding floodplain processes is as germane to