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RALLYING AROUND THE NEW URBANISM

Daniel Solomon

“Urban Design: Reshaping our Cities” and the First Congress of the New Urbanism took place within a week of each other. I attended only one day of “Reshaping Our Cities” and I was one of the organizers of the Congress so I am hardly an informed or objective reporter. I have only impressions: “Reshaping Our Cities” was polite and uptight, like a faculty meeting, while the Congress was high spirited and intense; “Reshaping Our Cities” was pluralistic to the point of confusion while the Congress was focused to the point of evangelism.

For me, the “Reshaping Our Cities” gathering demonstrated precisely why the Congress on the New Urbanism is necessary: It is important for a group that is not too small or too big to come together to articulate principles based upon common experience and common purpose.

The Congress was like a meeting of the company commanders at Guadalcanal, the ones who have seen the blood close up and have an idea how to win the next battle. Speakers reminded us of what the American city is up against — smart roads, clean cars, an information superhighway, a crumbling economic foundation fueling ever more dispersal, privatization, polarization and fear. Project after project was presented, showing that there are more than a few skilled and savvy makers of urban places whose works have common technique and convictions.

Some of the argument at the Congress came from predictable quarters, other from surprising ones. Vincent Scully opened with a passionate address about the fragile legacy of American urbanism and the destructiveness of the 1960s and 1970s. He canonized Robert Venturi as the person who unlocked the forbidden treasures of history for our use and pleasure. James Kuntsler, author of *Geography of Nowhere*, debunked Venturi’s role (causing Scully to stomp out briefly) but he reminded us vividly, bitterly, hilariously why we had convened — to help one another fight the beast of urban collapse.

Elizabeth Moule, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Peter Calthorpe made statements about design principles extending from the scale of individual buildings to blocks, streets, districts, towns and regions. While these statements may have seemed like truisms, it is probably the first time since CIAM at Otterloo in 1959 that several hundred top practitioners and academics have seemed willing to stand behind such a large, specific and embracing statement.

One evening, five remarkable traffic and transportation engineers indicted their own profession for its myopia and social irresponsibility in contributing to the collapse of American towns. They showed in detail how traffic design can accommodate pedestrian

townscapes, urban space and connectivity. They reaffirmed the usefulness of the classic American grid as a basis of town structure and they established a clear, statistically documented correlation between the configuration of towns and automobile usage.

The next evening there was a very odd and controversial event. Marketing consultants who have been involved with the few “New Urbanism” projects that have built — The Kentlands (in Gaithersburg, Md.), Harbortown, Seaside, FL, and Laguna West (south of Sacramento) presented the principles of “New Urbanism” in their own language, like a rug commercial on the late show. Some (Calthorpe, Andres Duany) thought of these hard-sell spiels as necessary and useful propaganda. Others (Ken Greenberg, Stefanos Polyzoides) argued that if “New Urbanism” stands for anything, it is a better physical structure for American society, not the selling of a new brand of suburban real estate. Significantly, this debate was about tactics, politics and packaging — not about the shape of the world.

One left the Congress with the feeling that the road ahead is very treacherous, full of danger and possible catastrophe. But none of us need venture alone, and the travelling company is amusing, good spirited and very smart.