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The Polycentric City

Greg Tung with Ellen Greenberg

The thirteenth Congress for the New Urbanism was convened June 9-12 in Pasadena's 1931 Beaux-Arts jewel of a Civic Auditorium and within a flanking pair of bunker-like 1970s-era Conference Center annex buildings. With the latter's windowless concrete facades raked sharply away from adjacent streets and plazas, as if to divert the force of a truck-bomb, the complex offered a strikingly grim, if unintended, metaphor for urbanism in an age of terrorism. But nearby, downtown Pasadena offered much positive evidence of a resurgence of urban culture.

Across the street, the once-enclosed Plaza Pasadena Mall has been transformed into the mixed-use, open-air Paseo Colorado (2001). Nearby Oldtown has been successfully revitalized, and its impact is spreading beyond its Colorado Boulevard spine. LA County's Metro Rail Gold Line (2003) now courses through and underneath the city. And a decade's assemblage of downtown and transit-oriented housing has now added resident vitality.

Pasadena and its setting within the Los Angeles region also served to illustrate this year's overall theme of "The Polycentric City." It also illustrated a larger point and contention of the CNU: that populous urban regions are dynamic urban laboratories for shaping the "block, the street, the building; the neighborhood, the district, the corridor; and the metropolis, city and town."

Major Issues

The 2004 Congress extended and updated major areas of focus from the two preceding Congresses—in Chicago (2004) and Washington, D.C. (2003). It also showed that New Urbanist principles and obsessions are engaging (or at least attempting to

engage) a range of important issues at scales from regional growth patterns to mini-malls. All in all, however, the theme of polycentrism was perhaps as much about the CNU itself as it was about its urban object of invention and inspiration.

Form-based coding. New Urbanism's early form-based code efforts won attention, but their derivation from controlled platting of greenfield projects led to skepticism over their applicability to the irregular and dynamic lot patterns of existing cities. Municipalities that opted instead to graft elements of form-based coding onto conventional density and land use controls found that long, unwieldy documents and a more complicated permitting process would often result.

The latest form-based coding projects (Columbia Pike in Arlington, Virginia, and Downtown Ventura, California, for example) have specifically engaged the complexities of existing city fabric with an emphasis on compact and usable regulatory tools. The most ambitious of these have focused the organizational basis for the code on building types rather than land uses; several sessions addressed recent case studies and methods.

Green Urbanism. In previous years, most "green" discussions at CNU could only address buildings—and to a limited extent, landscape and site development. This year, a number of sessions took on the potentials of green urbanism and the refinement of what might constitute a LEED-neighborhood standard. This work still appears to be in the early stages, but it still drove detailed seminars and discussions.

Transportation and Transit-Oriented Development (TOD). Transit sessions focused on the potentials of streetcars and bus rapid transit, while what

might be called "automobile-management" sessions looked at the false economies of free parking, the potentials of car-sharing, and the challenges and positive results of urban freeway removal. Overall, however, transit-oriented development was more of a thread woven through other urbanistic concerns than a freestanding "how-to" topic. Culturally, TOD also provided a kind of meeting ground for East and West Coast urbanists—as well as becoming an area of overlap for design-focused and region-focused urbanists to engage both the local and regional scale of places.

Public Space. Fascinating presentations were made on developments in shared public space from Europe—particularly the work of traffic engineer Hans Monderman in the Netherlands. His work has gotten rid of traffic-control signs, lane striping, and curbs on downtown streets to promote ambiguity, and force drivers to pay attention to their driving—in other words, this is not your mother's *woonerf*.

In terms of street design, an update was presented on CNU's collaboration with the ITE (Institute of Transportation Engineers) toward revision of national and local standards for the design of streets and roads. A lively and sometimes contentious discussion of allowable street widths, fire truck sizes, and turn radii also took place between fire marshals (bigger is better) and street designers (small is beautiful).

Domestic diplomacy. "Conservatives and Urbanism," "Religion and Civic Art," "Slow Food and the Fast Life," and "Ethnicity, Economy and Urban Form" were all sessions this year that involved social initiatives (some of which were deliberated and proposed at previous Congresses). In general, they attempted to broaden dialogues

with groups or movements not previously engaged with New Urbanism, and in some cases openly opposed to it.

What might be termed “other urbanisms”—the everyday urbanism of mini-malls, billboards, and parking lots; and Latino New Urbanism as a synthesis and adaptation between the old culture and the new accommodated settlement pattern, for example—were also given forums to question and critique New Urbanism, and vice versa.

International relations. This year’s Congress sessions, awards and exhibitions signaled the growth of connections with the CEU (Council for European Urbanism), and nascent Australian and Israeli Urbanist movements. The work of Australian and Swedish urbanists made a strong showing in the Charter Awards.

Perhaps because the CNU is essentially an Anglophone organization (so far) and was formed historically in opposition to conventional American suburban development, there has been little formal presence of practicing urbanists from Asia, South America, and Africa. Nevertheless, these continents are home to the world’s greatest megacities, and on the outskirts of these megacities one can find rapidly growing and sought-after subdivisions patterned after American suburbs.

Home-court advantage. The Congress shone a spotlight on the work of Pasadena-based Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists. MPA was one of the major host firms and a founding member of CNU. Particular emphasis was given to their courtyard housing projects, which derive from a specific Los Angeles history and sensibility.

At several of its sessions, MPA and others also presented a theoretical repudiation of the Reyner Banham’s

Los Angeles: The Architecture of the Four Ecologies. As an alternative, they proposed a morphogenic structure of five Los Angeles(es) through history—Pueblo, Town, City, Metropolis, and Polycentric Region. They and others also assembled an excellent and comprehensive survey of Southern California Urbanism for the Congress, entitled *Los Angeles: Building the Polycentric Region* (Alan Loomis and Gloria Ohland, editors), which was provided to all attendees.

Other Conference Proceedings

As in its previous meetings, the CNU’s political engagement was much in evidence in 2005. Los Angeles Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa delivered a keynote address, raising Los Angeles-themed issues of urban mobility and livability, and political and cultural inclusiveness. The UK’s Prince Charles also made a videotaped appeal to cement common cause between the Prince’s Trust and the CNU.

In a change from the pattern of recent years, the annual Charter Awards saw an increase in the number of awards presented to projects at the regional scale, and in those given to the work of large firms. Was this evolution in the practice of designing these projects, a change in the jury attitude, or a change of interest in the program by large firms? It’s an interesting evolution, in any case.

For the first time, “Civic Art” awards were also given out by the local host committee. A lifetime achievement award went to Phil Angelides (developer of Laguna West, former California Democratic Party chair, currently State Treasurer, and declared California gubernatorial candidate). A policy and implementation award went to Rick Cole (former Pasadena Mayor and Councilmember,

former City Manager of Azusa, and presently City Manager of Ventura). An environmental award went to the NRDC. But perhaps most controversially, a physical design award went to Gehry Partners for their Disney Concert Hall, a choice that was hotly contested in on-line forums immediately following the Congress.

In addition, regional chapters of the CNU, first chartered in the 2004 Congress, made their first organized appearance—signaling a new phase of decentralization and local focus.

The Congress concluded with Janus-faced presentations by Jan Gehl and James Howard Kunstler. first, Gehl puckishly described how shared street and public spaces have succeeded in revitalizing city life in parts of Europe. But this was followed by Kunstler’s dark predictions of “The Long Emergency,” his dystopian vision of the coming failure of the American suburban economy and lifestyle.

During the traditional ensuing “open mike” session, attendees’ comments included protests against the lack of democratic discourse within the organization and the high cost of dues and conference fees for students and nonprofessionals. Attendees expressed frustrations that New Urbanism has not being able to climb out from under its stereotypes (“the porch people”), and that its public image is defined by critics.

Finally, there were musings over the CNU’s future. While CNU founders are still very much in leadership roles, the rise of regional chapters, the increased activities of the “next generation” group, and other trends may be pointing toward transition and further evolution of the organization.