

NU: The Same Old Anti-Urbanism

By Tom Angotti
(Rome, Italy)

From this side of the Atlantic, the new urbanism looks like a chic version of the anti-urban American Dream—the same old anti-urbanism. In theory and practice, it follows the long tradition of elite city planning everywhere—neat, rational, organized new communities for the privileged and forget about the rest of the

So much of the mythology about Europe seems to be based on this superficial visual analysis and a strictly formalistic approach to the city. Perhaps new urbanists got inspired by what they saw on their vacations to such places as historic Amsterdam and Florence, and returned home to find historic values in the picture books of America's nineteenth century small towns.

While looking at the static picture of the physical city they missed the real economic and political dynamic at the center of urban life, the *dense social relations among people*—not just the relations between people and space. These are the heart of *urbanism*. They may be facilitated by historic preservation, densification, public spaces and mass transit, but they don't depend on these physical elements. And, as exemplified in the case of Italy, you can have all these physical elements without having real *urbanism*.

Anti-urbanism in Italy

Architects and planners from the US are rightfully awed when they see the public plazas, pedestrian spaces and mass transit in the historic centers of Italy's great cities. But what they often don't see is that the majority of urban residents in Italy now live in dense suburbs that are increasingly auto-dependent, where public places are privatized. The historic centers, on the other hand, are becoming walkable, tourist fairylands. They've lost much of their industrial and artisan activities and their resident population. They increasingly survive on tourism.

Venice, the car-free paradise, is the most extreme example. Its population today is one-third what it was after World War II. There are no jobs outside the tourist sector. Only young professionals can afford the rents and tolerate the lack of an integrated social life. The city has become a giant museum and entertainment

center, an antique Disney World. All around Venice is an unsustainable auto-dependent metropolitan region where mass transit is in decline. New factories and housing are sprawled throughout the region, which is shaped by an American-style anti-urban model. This model is based on the creation of small, idyllic, single-use enclaves, not a comprehensive, planned and sustainable metropolitan region. New urbanist experiments would fit right in.

In the suburbs, autos rule the streets and in many places the sidewalks. As more and more people become dependent on the auto, they are using public spaces less and less, and public spaces are being privatized. In central cities, more cafes and vendors encroach on public squares as they increasingly serve tourist functions. Housing is converted to seasonal use and second homes. Car-free areas are surrounded by parking lots and garages so that the flood of visitors can arrive by car. Just like the new urbanist communities in the US—walkable within, auto-accessible without.

But these are the results and not the causes of Italy's anti-urbanism. The real problem is the decline in the traditional dense social relations—which made Italy one of the most urban of nations—and the rise of consumerism and individualism in their place. Behind this are the trends of deindustrialization, flexible production, dispersal of the labor force and the decline in union membership, neoliberalism, the breakup of the welfare state, the growing power of the private sector and, as part of all this, deregulation in land use.

The New Urbanist Regionalism

The new Italian suburbs are everything the new urbanists strive for in regional planning policy. They are dense, mixed-use and linked by mass transit to the central cities. Many follow strict design standards, even ecological standards. But they are essentially anti-urban. All too many are high-rise bedroom communities with private garages, gated residential ghettos surrounded by shopping malls or strip highway development. Even those that are comprehensively planned with a complete range of public and private services are

designed as separate enclaves. Mixed-use is limited to residential and retail uses, and the new suburbs are as isolated from the main centers of work and production as they are in the US.

And here we arrive at the basic class bias of all elite planning, including new urbanism—a blindness to the needs of labor. To build housing without providing a range of stable job opportunities at all levels destroys urbanism and produces anti-urban enclaves.

Elitist Planning

Italy is no doubt one of the most extreme examples of a wider anti-urban trend in



Speculative suburban development in Rome

world. This may come as a shock to CNU Europhiles who glorify Europe's traditions of urban conservation, compact city development, public space and mass transit, but the truth is that the same kind of elite anti-urban practice endorsed by new urbanists is what's threatening Europe's urbanism.

Physical Determinism

It all starts with a superficial view of cities. New urbanists see them as mainly physical entities. *Urbanism* is then defined as a product of the physical city. Economic, social and cultural elements follow the logic of the urban form. In the architecture and planning trade this is known as physical determinism—our occupational hazard.



Erice, Italy. A touristic historic center.

Europe. The planning profession in Italy is dominated by architects and engineers whose physical planning bias has left them relatively powerless in confronting the market-driven restoration of historic centers and suburban development. The more politically conscious asked the fundamental question about social equity: how can we shift the policy focus to the needs of the rapidly growing working-class suburbs? There were many notable efforts to preserve affordable housing in central cities and develop integrated suburbs, but they were not enough. In the meantime, speculative development everywhere took its toll.

In many Italian cities, new suburbs were built illegally and in violation of planning and building codes. The elite official planners basically threw up their hands and defended their

In most of the world, planning is for the upper classes and if the rest of the world lives in poor communities without proper infrastructure and services, then the elite planners can always say the reason is because those communities weren't planned! The planners look down their noses from their pristine, neatly laid out paradises and tell everyone to follow in their path. It's not *their* fault if the money isn't there to build more (new urbanist, Garden City, rationally planned, etc.) communities! Poverty and inequality are problems, but not *their* problems. From the comfort of their design studios, they proclaim the ideal physical world and call for changes in building facades and setbacks, and limits to growth, while most people want secure jobs, decent housing and basic services.

The US: Anti-urbanism and Racism

If the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) could get out of its elitist and formalistic shell, it could help contribute to a genuine transformation from an anti-urban America to an urban one. It could use its substantial resources to confront the real obstacles to urbanism. In the US the main obstacle to real urbanism is racism. From its inception, elite planning in the US has distinguished itself for its insensitivity to the problems and needs of people of color and the poor. Planning and zoning were used to protect the property values of white communities and exclude people of color. The disastrous urban renewal programs of the 1960s—creatures of elite planners working hand-in-hand with government and developers—displaced communities of color.

The goal of integrated metropolitan development today will remain elusive as long as racial and anti-immigrant prejudices continue to divide the urban territory. Growth control will be used to protect exclusive enclaves. Strict planning regulations will protect exclusive enclaves. New urbanist communities will be exclusive enclaves. It may be out of fashion to talk about this in elite professional circles, but racism is still with us. If planners continue to deal with racism only by making vague declarations in favor of diversity and ignore the environmental, economic and other problems

of the most distressed communities, they will help reproduce anti-urbanism.

Seventy five percent of the US population lives in metropolitan regions, yet the United States remains one of the most anti-urban of nations. Strong municipal governments and federalism guarantee the maintenance of exclusive enclaves via separate tax and school districts defined by racial exclusion. Real integrated urban development won't be achieved by physical means alone. It will take economic and political changes. In slavery, blacks and whites lived in very close proximity, but this was hardly a model of integrated development. It took an economic and political revolution to abolish the exclusions of slavery, and the subsequent exclusions of Jim Crow.

End Auto-dependency

It is hard to imagine a qualitative leap towards urbanism without eliminating auto-dependency and urban sprawl. Those low-density NU

Hurley [Cont. from page 16] low-income and elderly homeowners from property tax increases through a ten-year phased tax assessment policy; and invoking the Executive Order on Environmental Justice to ensure context-sensitive road and bridge design. The attention to concerns about affordable housing during the stakeholder meetings led the designers to create building typologies suitable for that need, and the designers' outrage at the poor road and bridge design led the policy specialists to suggest invoking the Executive Order. Although none of these policy recommendations were unique, they would not have come out of the process without a charrette team that included both designers and policy experts.

Of course the charrette described here is only one step in a larger process of revitalization. Will participation continue? Is there local capacity to implement some of the ideas, such as the community land trust? These are difficult questions associated with any participatory process, and ones with which new urbanism needs to engage more actively.

After studying new urbanism in more depth,

communities around the country—walkable within but fully integrated into the auto-dependent regions—only make the problem worse. Higher density, mixed-use, better planned and designed communities won't necessarily help either (witness the Italian experience). Changing US policies at all levels that subsidize and favor auto use will make a difference.

With cheap gasoline (and in the future, cheap alternative fuels), Ford, GM, Exxon, Walmart and their international partners are guaranteed a perpetual seat at the head of US industry. To end auto-dependency, it will take more than giving people in exclusive suburbs a chance to walk to the store or develop stronger bonds with their (white) neighbors.

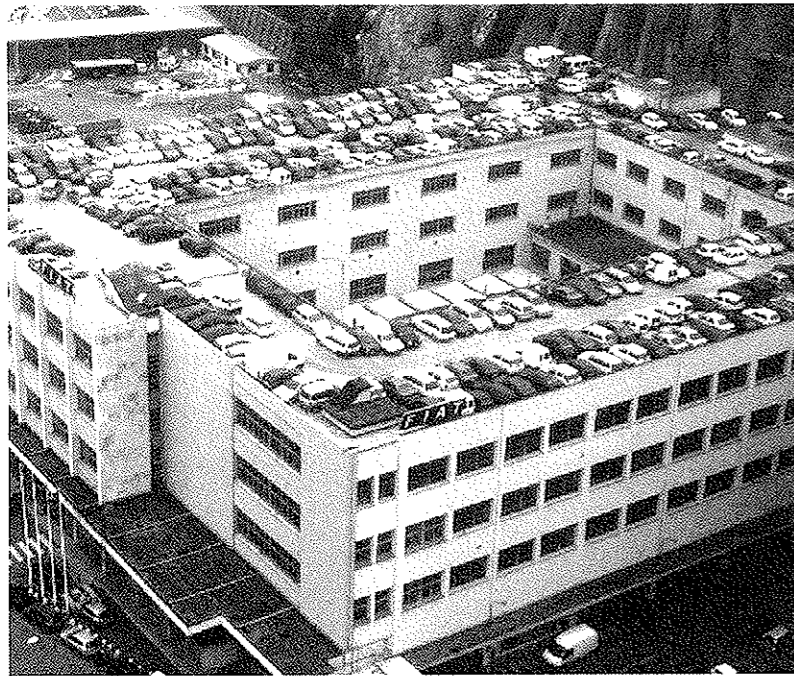
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meeting many new urbanist practitioners and discussing community building over the last year with the other fellows, I am even more convinced that new urbanism provides some of the answers to problems in our towns and cities. New urbanist design principles help create infill development that is sensitive to the local context and adds to the walkability and diversity of the physical form of the neighborhood. Where new urbanism is weak is in execution rather than ideal. New urbanist practice needs to include more attention to ensuring broad and diverse public involvement, and to addressing policy issues that arise from redevelopment. I believe that the solution is for a broader group of practitioners and advocates to become involved in shaping new urbanism and new urbanist developments.

(For more information about the Knight Program in Community Building, see <http://www.charrettecenter.com/knight/>. For more information about the Beall's Hill charrette, see <http://www.beallshill.net>)

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Photo by Tom Angotti



In Genoa, Italy's passion for the automobile.

impractical master plans, powerless to stop this market-driven and politically popular growth. In political circles a higher priority was placed on planning for the historic centers, where property values were highest, and a low priority on planning for the new industrial and working-class neighborhoods. In Rome, almost half of new suburban housing in the post-War period was built illegally.

In the earliest Mesopotamian cities, official planning produced the *citadelle*, a segregated elite enclave. Since then, official planning has mostly served elite populations. The neighborhoods that are created and maintained by workers, peasants and independent builders are always considered to be "unplanned." But even today the majority of the world's population lives in these areas—*barrios*, *favelas* and *shantytowns*. And the urban renewal programs, chic new enclaves, and museum-like historic centers advocated by mainstream planners serve only a small proportion of the population, those most able to pay the planners. Like the Italian Renaissance artists hired by the nobility to beautify the cities (which usually meant tearing up neighborhoods), aesthetics rules in these circles.