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CITYSPACE

The New Urbanism



RESTORATION CITY: A New Urbanist would appreciate the urban design along 17th and Green. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

A conference will address fresh starts for old Philadelphia.

by Sandy Sorlien

As Hurricane Ivan blew northward from the Florida Panhandle, more than wind and rain came along for the ride. One of the Panhandle towns hit hard was Seaside, the 20-year-old planned community that stands as the model and inspiration for the anti-sprawl movement known as the New Urbanism (NU). The compact town and its well-built vernacular houses survived the storm, and now, an intensive one-day conference called "Has Philly Learned New Urbanism 101 Yet?" makes landfall today on Broad Street.

I'll merely be an attendee at the conference, which is hosted by the Association for the New Urbanism in Pennsylvania (ANUPA) and principally sponsored by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia. However, as someone who cares deeply about place in America, I've been an unabashed NU evangelist—my friends steel themselves when we go by a subdivision of McMansions—ever since I learned of it six years ago in James Howard Kunstler's important book, *The Geography of Nowhere*.

NU is the only comprehensive planning philosophy with the potential to solve at least some of the systemic problems caused by postwar conventional suburban planning (or lack thereof) and the automobile-centered, anti-urban lifestyle that spawned it. New Urbanists both preserve open space and restore the art of making real towns and cities. These folks have it exactly right.

We all know what's happened to Philadelphia and its countryside during the past half-century. As the city's population continues its exodus and spreads across our rolling farmland (which is being developed at the rate of an acre an hour by some accounts), both places are increasingly impoverished on economic, social and aesthetic levels.

Philadelphia stands at a tipping point where positive trends abound, from Center City desirability to the "Real World" hipness factor. But if we do not seize the opportunities now available for intelligent urban design, we may regret it for generations to come. Already some of our traditional urban fabric, in the form of ordinary 19th-century rowhouses and shop fronts, has been destroyed as Center City changes and entire blocks in poor neighborhoods are leveled in the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative. Some changes are necessary, but what will we build in their place?

We can be guided by the shortsighted desire for suburban typologies like drive-in Rite Aids, "snout houses" with ugly garages up front, big-box stores, strip malls, windowless gaming halls and parking in front of everything. Or we can realize that the best model for development is right here all around us: the traditional urbanism of old Philadelphia neighborhoods from Strawberry Mansion to Bella Vista to Fitler Square.

These places are walkable, mixed-use, human-scaled and transit-connected. With their street life and connections to history, they make Philadelphia great but under conventional zoning in most jurisdictions in this country, these places would be illegal to build today.

The preeminent NU planning firm, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company of Miami, recently published a comprehensive SmartCode that, if implemented, would allow and encourage the creation of blocks, towns and cities modeled on traditional urbanism like ours. While DPZ and other NU firms have designed towns like Seaside, Kentlands, Celebration and Windsor from scratch, such greenfield projects represent the minority of NU and NU-influenced development today.

"The typical media image of the New Urbanism is incorrect," says Andrés Duany, the de facto leader of the movement. "The New Urbanism includes vast numbers of infill and urban revitalization projects. The New Urbanists have for years been effective in restoring our existing towns and cities." (In Philadelphia there are two mixed-use NU Hope VI-funded



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kill Falls. Both replaced recently imploded high-rise housing projects

alleged "pastiche" quality of Disney-owned Celebration and a slew of Code standards by a long shot. Proponents of modernism, including many architects, reject NU because they maintain it means all the architecture has to be "traditional." In fact, NU "transcends style" in the words of its founding charter, and the NU projects of Aqua in Florida and Prospect New Town in Colorado are largely comprised of modernist buildings.

What's "traditional" in each case is the urbanism, or as writer David Sucher says, the "city-ness" of a place. If you know Philadelphia neighborhoods, you know what that means. Today's ANUPA conference should help local planners, architects, citizen activists and policymakers grasp the language, principles and codes necessary to continue the tradition.

Sandy Sorlien is a Philadelphia-based photographer and writer. She is a member of the Congress for the New Urbanism, and the author of Fifty Houses: Images from the American Road (Johns Hopkins University Press). For information on the Association for the New Urbanism in Pennsylvania, visit www.anupa.org.



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