

**Resource Architecture – XXI World Congress of Architecture
22 to 26 July 2002 in Berlin**

Workshop 03 Living and New Urban Planning

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**New Urbanism in the USA and Urban Design Reform in Europe:
Common Ground, Differences and Contradictions**

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The large post-industrial towns and cities in the wealthy countries of Western and Central Europe are not in top shape. Most of the inhabitants – or at least those who earn enough money to have the choice – have moved away from the compact, dense cities. Suburbanisation has long since become established, and housing in the surroundings of the large towns and cities have been followed by shopping centres and later by jobs in the tertiary sector and leisure centres, all on very separate sites.

For many, this development is regarded as a form of individual liberation. As a liberation from the lack of space and the dangers of the city, from the difficult mix of social groups and from pollution and crime. However, this development also poses a threat from two points of view: in spatial terms it encourages overdevelopment of the landscape, and in social terms it promotes the isolation and the drifting apart of different social groups. Large-scale social segregation and isolated living are placing a burden on the big cities. The term "city" itself has been hollowed out: it conjures up idealistic images that no longer have very much to do with reality. Cities are disintegrating into functional islands, and urban design is turning into isolated development. We are no longer dealing with cities, but instead with city regions, which are not yet associated with any fixed images.

In the European debate, this process is often referred to as the "Americanisation" of the city. This is because, from the European point of view, U.S. cities have broken down and disintegrated into suburbia, are divided up by motorways and are marked by ethnic and social collapse and by architectural chaos. U.S. cities have become a negative role model for European ones. European cities, people say, have to be protected from becoming like American ones.

However, over the past few years, Europeans have become a little confused about what they see on the other side of the Atlantic, because an autonomous form of criticism of urban development in U.S. cities has arisen, primarily criticism of suburban sprawl. This criticism is based on numerous networks under various labels: *Smart Growth*, *Livability*, *New Urbanism*.

Of these networks, New Urbanism is particularly successful, but also particularly controversial. For the Europeans, New Urbanism is a provocation. The first reaction to the movement here was to say "how awful, how terrible, typically American!" The main point of criticism is that New Urbanism often uses a traditionalist architectural language, which is seen as being backward-looking and a falsification

of history. This negative codification creates an almost impenetrable shell that prevents an objective view of New Urbanism.

During the unprecedented building boom of the 1990s, things started to happen again in U.S. cities. The conditions in many inner-city areas improved, but the main development was that the cities continued to encroach on their surroundings, and suburbs went into mass production. The new aspect here, however, is that this latest episode of suburbanisation is no longer simply celebrated as progress, as the realisation of the American dream. A fundamental change has begun to take place in public opinion in this context. You often hear people say that the development of suburban sprawl has reached a stage that is harming U.S. society. We only need to recall the film *American Beauty* or the countless studies conducted in the social sciences showing that the "ideal world" of suburbia is an illusion.

In this context, the call for alternatives to the traditional suburbs makes sense. There are two major alternatives in practical urban design: firstly, gated communities, closed areas of housing with surveillance that are no longer open to the public, and secondly, the distinctive products of New Urbanism. In contrast to gated communities, New Urbanism appears to many to be the urbanistically correct response to the misdevelopment of U.S. cities. New Urbanism is not an architectural movement, but an urban design movement. Its programmatic aim is to achieve mixed-use communities with a social mix, greater density of development and architectural variety within a regulatory framework of urban design. New Urbanism calls for the creation of walkable neighbourhoods and promotes local public transport and the reduction of car traffic. It calls for open cities with maximum links to their surroundings, the opposite of gated communities. The basic assumption is that a form of urban design guided by the principles of historical cities will promote social integration.

However, a number of compromises are made when these principles are put into practice. Most New Urbanism projects are built in suburban areas by private developers, and projects such as these often differ from conventional suburbs only in degree. This is true even of what is perhaps the most important development principle of New Urbanism: the rejection of self-chosen ghettos and the advocacy of maximum links between a new estate and its surroundings. Even the goal of a social mix is usually only achieved to a rudimentary degree. However, it should be emphasised that this problem is being discussed within the New Urbanism movement, and this debate is becoming increasingly intense, as shown by the congress in Portland in the year 2000, for example. The search for strategies to counter social division in cities was a central topic at the congress.

The most ambitious goal of New Urbanism is found on a different spatial plane, however: at the regional level. At least part of the New Urbanism movement believes that it is only at the regional level that social and spatial goals can be achieved on a sustainable basis. The aim is to establish interlinked, socially well balanced regional cities with flexible limits to expansion. One of the advocates of this view is Peter Calthorpe, who, together with William Fulton, published a manifesto on this topic in 2001 in their book entitled "*The Regional City. Planning for the End of Sprawl*". As can be seen here, New Urbanism deliberately avoids polarising the debate by not making a sharp distinction between compact cities and suburbia. The question of where the focus should lie is obviously the subject of

debate within the movement, but the issue is always about the focus, not a question of either/or. New Urbanism has set itself the task of upgrading the entire urban region – downtown *and* suburbia, not downtown *or* suburbia.

New Urbanism is primarily a U.S. movement. Only few foreigners attended the most recent congresses in Portland and New York, and most of these came from Canada or from as far away as Australia, while hardly any came from Europe. The exclusive reference to the USA demonstrates the self-confidence of New Urbanism, but it is also a potential weakness in strategic terms. Debate across the Atlantic is hampered by two factors: by the introverted nature of the U.S. debate and by the sceptical attitude in Europe.

While New Urbanism is essentially a response to suburban sprawl, the European debate on urban design reform focuses on reorganising compact cities, particularly on reorganising the city centres and converting urban wasteland, on new uses for industrial estates, military land, and land belonging to railways, ports or airports. From the European point of view, the main issue is to stabilise historical compact cities against the competition from suburbia, and the public sector plays an important role in steering this development. One of the advocates of this view is Richard Rogers, who published his manifesto on urban design, "*Cities for a small planet*", in 1998.

European cities are regarded as having structural features such as a relatively high density of development, an interlinked system of public spaces, a social, functional and architectural mix and a spatial hierarchy with the city centre at the top. The specific form that these structural features take differs from region to region, it is claimed, reflecting the cultural variety of European cities. In this sense, a specific European city is the material interpretation of its own particular history, which needs to be maintained or reproduced. In social terms, this usually means that the middle classes are reclaiming compact cities.

But what does this type of focus in urban design mean for suburbia? Here, a major deficit of the urban design debate in Europe needs to be pointed out. In Germany, in particular, knowledge about suburbia is still very limited. In contrast to the situation in the USA, there are still too few studies available in Germany, in particular, about the origin and discrepancies of suburban development. Attention has repeatedly been drawn to this deficit by one of the protagonists of the urban design debates in Germany, Thomas Sieverts, whose manifesto *Zwischenstadt zwischen Ort und Welt, Raum und Zeit, Stadt und Land* ("In-between City Between Place and World, Space and Time, City and Country") appeared in 1997.

We need to debate suburbia on two levels, and these should not always be confused or played off against one another: the overall urban level and the level of the particular suburban fragment. The individual fragments of suburbia can each be regarded as social and urban development islands in themselves. The only question is how they can be optimised, both internally and in comparison with other islands. However, they can and must also be looked at on a large scale at the level of the city region – as islands that potentially take away resources from the mainland and that play a major role in its structural change. Here, the politically awkward question arises as to the extent to which the price of suburban living can be made to reflect the actual costs, or whether, in a society otherwise geared towards public savings,

we should exempt suburbanisation – of all things – from these constraints. Christiane Thalgott has drawn attention to this aspect on several occasions. The principle of sustainability can ultimately only take effect at the overall urban level.

On the whole, the debate about urban design reform in Europe is currently marked by considerable programmatic fragmentation. In fact, it is not correct to speak of one debate, but of several debates. The protagonists of these debates are isolated prophets who make little reference to one another. There is no relatively uniform, organised movement to renew European cities. Thus the advocates of sustainable cities, social cities, traditionalist cities or in-between cities dissociate themselves very definitely from one another.

In summary, the U.S. debate and the European urban debates start out from different premises, because cities on either side of the Atlantic are in a very different state. In addition, the main topics of the two debates are projects in different areas: in suburban areas in the USA, and in compact cities in Europe. Even the preferred form of architectural and urban design is different. There are differences in the groups of actors: in the USA there is a tendency towards private urban development, whereas in Europe it is still largely controlled by the public sector. Finally, the programmatic regional targets are also different, namely protecting compact cities from suburbia in Europe, and upgrading both suburbia and compact cities in a "regional city" concept in the USA. The forms taken by the debates differ too: while New Urbanism is an organised reform movement with various schools comprising not only experts but also politicians, developers, and social and environmental activists, the European debate is poorly organised and fragmented, dominated by isolated experts and government institutions.

In contrast, the similarities between the principles of urban design advocated in the U.S. and European debates are striking: both are based on general, complex criticism of the development of cities. Criticism of gated communities, social exclusion, over-development, car-dependent development and modern urban design. Criticism of the social segregation that occurs in a suburbanised city region, the separation between living and the city, and the social disintegration of cities in general. Both debates are guided by the social reintegration of living in the city, by social and environmental sustainability, and both advocate new projects of urban design that should fulfil at least the minimum criteria for a city: social and functional mix, and walkable public spaces.

A joint message here might be the call for urban design instead of isolated housing construction. That means not only a functional mixture, but also a social one, a careful, situation-dependent mix in terms of income groups, ethnic groups, lifestyles and age groups. Or at least an attempt at achieving this kind of mix. It also means networking at the level of the city region in spatial terms and, most importantly, in socio-economic terms – as a balance of values based on solidarity within a city region. Just as the pre-industrial cities had to be adapted to the industrial cities in the nineteenth century, the compact cities of our modern industrial society have to be adapted to the conditions of the post-industrial city region. Now, as then, there needs to be a lively debate as to the best way of achieving this.

The projects that are going to be presented now are examples of a reorientation of urban design on both sides of the Atlantic. Harald Kegler from Dessau played a

major role in preparing this workshop. Since the Second World War, Munich has been a successful model of the preservation and renewal of historical cities. While for a long time Munich was a special case in Germany, Elblag in Poland is a current example of a Polish tradition, unique in Europe, of reconstructing historical centres destroyed that were during the war. The two projects in North America are not set in suburbia: the Aqua Project in Florida is a conversion project for Allison Island between Miami and Miami Beach, and finally, Vancouver, Canada, is an ambitious model for revitalising a city centre.

All these examples are primarily geared towards the middle classes, and they usually take place in prosperous city regions. This is true at least of Miami, Vancouver, Munich and Freiburg. And on a more modest scale of Elblag too. Does that mean that we are running away here and now from the "real problems"? Not at all in my opinion. The "real problems" are not only, and not primarily, other people's problems, problems in poor regions. We, the rich regions that determine the pace of globalisation, are creating the "real problems" ourselves. In the rich regions, solutions need to be sought for the socially and environmentally sustainable integration of living in a city region characterised by solidarity – in a debate involving all the actors, including private investors, who are unpopular in Europe, and the middle classes, who have choices about how they live. Unless the high-income sections of the population, in particular, are actively involved, an urban design reform project will be impossible.

Different starting points, different preferences regarding design, similar principles – this is actually a very good basis for cultural exchange. However, cultural exchange across the Atlantic only works to a very limited extent. There are few links between the two debates, and this exchange is hampered by prejudice and a lack of knowledge. However, both sides can benefit from the exchange of ideas, while they cannot benefit from setting up ideological gated communities of urban design. The first step towards the exchange of experience and ideas today should soon be followed by a second one: giving specific shape to a transatlantic urbanistic dialogue.