

## **inclusive design: moving beyond new urbanism**

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Urban planning, as with fashion, architecture and dieting, has its fads, fashions and styles. There is no doubt that we are now riding the wave of New Urbanism. Terms like “form-based zoning,” “walkability” and “transit-oriented development” are on the lips of experts in planning departments and redevelopment agencies across the nation.

We applaud this trend. When New Urbanism burst onto the scene in the late 1980s, it was a breakthrough in reintegrating the social and physical aspects of planning. It brought with it a sense of the European city, a touch of the classic American Main Street and an acceptance of the density and “messiness” that make cities vibrant and healthy places to live.

Over the past decade, however, many environments built under the rubric of New Urbanism have lost much of that original vitality. We are seeing more formulaic “instant” neighborhoods with no, or very little sense of place. Downtown redevelopments look like they’ve been stamped out of the same mold, drawn according to the same template. Why is it that a newly redeveloped area of Brea, California, looks so much like Louisville, Kentucky?

While they may look inviting, these instant neighborhoods are not meeting the needs of all residents of the city. Take a closer look beyond the facades and the traffic-calmed streets. You’ll notice that housing is expensive and the shops even more so. The people who live there don’t work there and the people who work there can’t afford to live there. Bay Street in Emeryville, California, has all the requisite features of New Urbanism, including nicely designed residential-over-retail buildings. The result does not work as a neighborhood, however. Instead of looking like a simulacrum of Main Street, it more closely resembles a large mall with the roof removed. Where are the kids, the parks, the neighborhood-serving stores? Chic boutiques on the corners don’t make a social community.

The problem, we feel, is that urban planners once again are becoming too reliant on the *physical* design approach to infill and urban redevelopment. This is understandable. Trends in planning, after all, do swing as dramatically as fads in fashion. New Urbanism was, in a very real sense, a reaction to the overemphasis cities had been placing on providing social services, health care and jobs. In the wake of urban riots in the ’60s and the grim specter of abandoned downtowns during the ’70s, social services were a crucial and necessary focus. But in the

process we almost completely neglected classical city and building design elements. New Urbanism aimed to reintegrate them.

Now, we feel the pendulum swinging back to overemphasis on physical design. It is time to stop the wild swing of planning styles we have all witnessed over the past half century and bring the pendulum back to a point where physical design *and* the needs of all residents in our cities are equally addressed.

How can do we get there? The solution, we believe, is a focus on inclusive planning and design based on economic, social, environmental and culturally sensitive policies that allow everyone to improve economically as the physical area improves. Cities need planning that recognizes that every individual has the right to full and equal participation in the built environment—and that through their direct involvement they can shape their own environment to meet their own needs.

To support a conversation about inclusive design for planners, elected officials and community members, we have proposed a broad, inclusive policy framework to help guide urban area decision-making.

**Economic Development:** Land use and public policy decisions that create opportunities for everyone to participate fully in the economy of the city, with access to a variety of quality jobs.

**Housing and Neighborhoods:** Codes, zoning and incentives that generate safe, healthy neighborhoods with a range of housing types and price levels to accommodate diverse socio-economic background and lifestyle choices.

**Education:** Full access to quality education choices for all residents, with shared use between schools, parks and community facilities.

**Access and Mobility:** Viable, multimodal and interconnected public transit systems with seamless spaces that are friendly and inclusive of *everyone*: those with disabilities, young children, seniors, and parents pushing baby carriages.

**Habitat Protection and a Safe Public Realm:** Connected, safe, healthy, functional and green connections with pedestrian- and bike-friendly streets that reactivate the public realm and lead to environmental stewardship.

**Community Facilities and Gathering Spaces:** Well-maintained and usable open spaces that can be built, landscaped, *and maintained* with funds from selling development rights.

**Cultural Meaning:** Spaces and places to create and display social and cultural rituals and symbols that have meaning for all residents, ensuring that projects—especially large-scale redevelopments—retain a distinctive sense of place and neighborhood.

These policy guidelines are far from theoretical. Over the past decade there have been many projects that exemplify this approach and fulfill many of the policy considerations.

The Fruitvale Transit Village in Oakland, California, was the result of the community coming together and insisting that a new development centered on transit also include affordable and senior housing, offices, neighborhood-serving retail, a child-care facility, library, senior center, health clinic and a public plaza.

In Seattle, Washington, downtown property owners have partnered with low-income housing providers. The City changed the development code to increase the housing height limit. Builders buy the extra height and that money goes toward affordable housing.

In Washington, D.C., where disenfranchised areas like the low-income Anacostia Waterfront have borne the brunt of political wrangling for years, an innovative new comprehensive plan is adding jobs, education, arts and cultural elements.

The University of California in San Francisco, addressing impacts of expanding its campus on an economically disadvantaged area south of the City, is offering economic mitigations, including reserving eight acres for usable public open space, and creating high school and college programs for local residents to train for well-paid staff positions.

In Pittsburgh, Market Square is a redesigned public space that's now appealing, inviting and safe for all users, with new, compatible surrounding land uses.

In Ocala, Florida, community members worked with the City on a Downtown Master Plan with development standards and guidelines that restored a dynamic, active environment in the heart of the City.

These inclusive projects share two important elements that we believe are crucial to creating successful projects. The first is an emphasis on robust public participation. We strongly believe that each project has to fulfill the community's vision. All too often public participation is done entirely pro forma, with no real input. The inclusive approach ensures that everyone who is eventually going to live in the area—or be affected by it—needs to be involved in a meaningful way.

And, community members have to *know* their ideas and comments will be incorporated into the design. That's the kind of involvement that builds the community and makes a project truly inclusive.

The second common element is equitable sharing: the local community that gets all the impacts needs to also get a proportionate share of the benefits. In far too many cases involving redevelopment, prices rise and the original inhabitants are forced out, destroying neighborhoods and historic communities whose roots can go back more than a century. We believe that in each case where redevelopment results in an uptick in property values, the increase in tax revenue generated thanks to the revitalization should go directly back to the area that generated them in terms of improvements that bring real benefits.

This approach is already being supported by community members in San Francisco through “Community Benefit Zoning.” The right to develop a certain square footage is given in return for explicitly measurable benefits in that same neighborhood. Those benefits are measured in terms of parks, community facilities, ongoing costs of maintenance and operations, sidewalks, schools, transit—all the things that communities need to be healthy.

We need more policies like this. Despite the advances we have made in our urban centers over the past two decades, people of color, those with low incomes, or who are disadvantaged in some way continue to live in the areas with the worst pollution and the heaviest traffic. Their parks, schools, hospitals and other community facilities are deteriorating.

It is time to take everything we've learned from New Urbanism about the physical design of cities, and, using a more inclusive approach, develop projects that go beyond just bricks and mortar. Our cities need to be public spaces where we're giving the best of what the city has to offer to everyone.

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