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PROMISES AND PROSPECTS: New urbanism in practice[1]

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Abstract

With hundreds of new urbanism projects built or proposed, practice has begun to reveal which principles prove easiest to implement. By reviewing the literature and evaluating experience in North America and Europe, this paper considers the impact of new urbanism on planning practice and examines the progress of new urbanism in meeting some of its promises of social and environmental responsibility. While many new urban projects meet the aesthetic goals of the movement, attaining defined social and environmental objectives proves more challenging. That new urbanism has become the favoured contemporary planning paradigm in the face of evidence that many of its aims remain elusive should give pause for reflection.

New urbanism is among most influential planning and development paradigms of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. After two decades of practice, its proponents increasingly describe it as an international movement that parallels and even rivals the garden city and modernism that preceded it. Although originally an American-based approach, by the early twenty-first century commentators could suggest that new urbanism had become influential in Europe as well (Campbell 2004, Steuteville 2003, Thompson-Fawcett and Bond 2003).

The term "new urbanism" (without initial capitals)[2] constitutes the most general label applied to contemporary approaches to urban form that include traditional neighbourhood (neo-traditional) design, transit-oriented design, urban villages, urban renaissance, urban revitalization, smart growth, and sustainable development[3]. While these variants have unique features and techniques, they share key principles. New urbanism approaches celebrate the city: they advocate reclaiming and revitalizing the urban environment through traditional design principles: mixed use, pedestrian-friendly streets, compact form, high quality design, regional planning, and transportation alternatives. Thus new urbanism represents a diverse yet reasonably coherent movement for redefining planning practice to avoid the spacious suburbs and high-rise boxes of the twentieth-century city.

New urbanism remains open enough that it provides something for almost everyone: who would oppose mixed use centres or pedestrian-friendly streets? These are time-honoured planning principles. Hence new urbanism appeals to wide constituencies and provides a useful framework for practitioners seeking guidance. The critics of new urbanism, however, find its generality and its potential to lapse into deterministic language troubling (Audirac and Shermyen 1994). They challenge its proponents' faith in good design to transform society and correct long-standing urban problems (Marcuse 2000, Milgrom 2002). They argue that new urbanists ignore the issues and questions raised by planning theorists, and proffer simple solutions to complex problems (Falconer Al-Hindi and Staddon 1997, Harvey 1997).

As new urbanism has increased in popularity it has come under growing scrutiny. Some of the critiques are philosophical, often based in concerns about social justice (eg, Fainstein 2000, Harvey 1997) or in market conservatism (eg, Gordon and Richardson 1997, Houstoun 2004 , Kraemer 2002). Critical geographers have

paid special attention to new urbanism, challenging its premises and analyzing its promises (eg, Falconer Al-Hindi 2001, McCann 1995, Till 1993). Planning academics have questioned whether new urbanism practice can deliver on its aims (eg, Grant 2006). Critiques of new urbanism have spawned vigorous defences of the paradigm and its principles (eg, Ewing 1997, Talen and Ellis 2002), and encouraged efforts to develop the theory and philosophy of the movement (eg, Duany and Talen 2002a, Talen 1999).

Each year more empirical studies test the claims. Some compare new urbanist and conventional suburbs (eg, Brown and Cropper 2001, Lund 2002, Talen 2001). Some report survey results to estimate the potential appeal of new urbanism to buyers (eg, Audirac 1999). Evaluating the promises of new urbanism to change transportation patterns has generated a virtual cottage industry (eg, Crane 1996, Handy 1996). Recent interest in linking the principles proposed by new urbanism with measures of community health has also spawned research initiatives (eg, Frumkin *et al* 2004). Does new urbanism deliver on its promises? At best, the evidence presented to date remains contentious.

Much of the discussion about new urbanism remains essentially in national silos, with few efforts at international comparisons. Many authors have evaluated American new urbanism (eg, Audirac and Shermyen 1994, Rees 2003). Urban villages have been extensively critiqued in the UK (eg, Biddulph *et al* 2003, Thompson-Fawcett 2000). The compact city has come under the magnifying glass (eg, Breheny 1992, Jenks *et al* 1996, Williams 2000). Grant (2003) described the Canadian experience. To date though, we find relatively few efforts to synthesize the literature on new urbanism to take a cross-Atlantic perspective on the movement and its progress. Hall (2000) suggested some similarities (focus on design) and differences (approach to regional scale) between new urbanism in the US and the urban renaissance in Britain, but did not take his argument far. Thompson-Fawcett and Bond (2003) described case studies of new urbanism in Canada, the UK, and New Zealand, exploring the degree to which the projects meet the paradigm's design objectives. Examining the practice of new urbanism in diverse settings helps to elucidate its progress on its aims.

This paper reviews material on new urbanism projects in North America and Europe. Insights derive from a literature review and findings from my own field research in Canada, the US, England, and Belgium[4]. I begin by considering how we might evaluate new urbanism before proceeding to discuss the progress that practice has made on certain goals related to social and environmental responsibility. I examine briefly the influence that new urbanism theory has had on planning and development practice, and consider its prospects for maintaining its place as the planning paradigm of choice.

EVALUATING NEW URBANISM

In examining new urbanism practice, we are limited to fairly short-term evaluation, as most projects have not been built long. Some studies have considered whether project implementation addresses the principles articulated by proponents of the movement (Thompson-Fawcett and Bond 2003). Given that new urbanism principles are continuing to develop and that they take different emphases in local contexts, establishing universal criteria for evaluation proves a challenge. We can see, though, that many social and environmental objectives have become reasonably clear: they provide a framework of principles for comparing theory and practice.

New urbanism shares many premises of earlier planning paradigms. A similar commitment to compact form and affordability impelled conceptualizations of the garden city, and moved the modernists to innovative urban technologies (Fishman 1977). Concerns about open space conservation and energy reduction were boosted by the environmental movement of the 1970s; heritage conservation hit the agenda in the same

period. Much of the appeal of new urbanism lies in its ability to embrace the traditional values of town planning while offering new tools and techniques for implementation. Its attack on sprawl and traffic congestion especially resonates with public concerns.

Since the 1990s, governments at many levels adopted principles associated with new urbanism. In Canada, municipal plans often reveal new urbanism principles (Grant 2003, Gordon and Tamminga 2002). Several American states advocate smart growth (Smart Growth Network 2004), and new urbanism principles guided public housing redevelopment in the Clinton administration (Steuteville 2004b). Following the Brundtland report (WCED 1987), governments in Canada and Europe increasingly promoted sustainability (eg, Canada 1990, Urban Task Force 1999). The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in England made urban villages official government policy (ODPM 2004a).

By 2005, many development projects reflected new urbanism principles. Hundreds of new urban communities are built or proposed in the US (Steuteville 2004a). Some 20 to 30 appear in Canada and an undocumented number in Europe. New urbanism developments are finding a place in the market. Developers see them as an attractive product, especially in rapidly-growing metropolitan areas (Schmitz 2003).

What does practice tell us about how new urban developments are able to achieve their aims? Visitors to the projects can attest that they are beautiful places, often built to high standards of craftsmanship. In many markets they sell well, and have proven economically successful for developers. In the next sections I consider how well they meet some of the social and environmental objectives of the movement.

DOES NEW URBANISM BUILD MORE SOCIALLY-RESPONSIBLE COMMUNITIES?

New urbanism offers the hope of building better communities. New urbanism attends to the public realm, trying to create public spaces and streets that provide vibrant, civil, and affordable social environments for a range of residents and visitors (Duany *et al* 2000, Urban Task Force 1999). For neo-traditionalists especially, authenticity constitutes a key issue: new developments should represent *real* urban environments. The proponents of new urbanism believe that good design enhances sense of community (Duany *et al* 2000, Prince of Wales 1989, Talen 1999), sense of place (Duany *et al* 2000, Talen and Ellis 2002), and social equity (Talen 2002). New urbanism should build more socially-responsible and responsive communities.

New urban approaches seek to produce attractive, coherent, human scale, pedestrian-friendly, livable, and imageable places. Critics accuse new urbanism of holding that design can achieve social objectives (Audirac and Shermyen 1994, Harvey 1997). An element of physical determinism runs through new urbanism, suggesting that beautiful and well-designed forms create good spaces for developing meaningful communities: Van der Ryn and Calthorpe (1986: x) argue, for instance, that “shared spaces reestablish community”. But some new urbanism proponents say that good design merely affords opportunities for social engagement (Talen 1999, 2000a, Talen and Ellis 2002). Duany *et al* (2000: 83) write,

> “It bears repeating: we shape our cities and then our cities shape us. The choice is ours whether we build subdivisions that debase the human spirit or neighborhoods that nurture sociability and bring out the best in our nature.”

Although new urban thinking is not completely deterministic, even cautious authors sometimes suggest that proper spatial patterns create more socially-responsible environments.

In this section I examine two key values – civility and authenticity – associated in new urbanist writings with socially-responsible communities.

Civility

New urbanists hope to plan harmonious, balanced, safe, and healthy communities: "to find a way out of the chaos of our cities" (Krier 1998: 19). Proponents often espouse the traditional positive features of pre-modern cities, urban quarters, and small towns (eg, Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1992, Krier 1978, 1984). Krieger (1991: 15) says that for new urbanists like Duany and Plater-Zyberk "the modern suburb [is] a rudimentary form of habitation, something ... in need of civilizing." With their bad form, suburbs generate inappropriate behaviour, including youth violence, suicide, road rage, and social dysfunction (Duany *et al* 2000, Kunstler 1999, Lennard and Riley 2004). New urbanists appear to postulate a correlation between the built environment of traditional forms and sociability and good behaviour (Harvey 1997). In building meeting places, local parks, and village squares, new urbanists try to (re)create the urban infrastructure for a civil / civilized society.

Experience shows that many new urban communities have strong social bonds. Residents in these communities feel safe, welcomed, and engaged. Kim and Kaplan (2004) found a strong sense of community at Kentlands (in Gaithersburg, Maryland). Frantz and Collins (1999) and Ross (1999) describe Celebration, Florida, as a tightly-bonded community after its first few years. In part, however, the solidarity in these communities reflects their social and economic homogeneity (Morris 1996, Talen 2000b). Residents in many of the projects, especially in North America, participate in programmed social activities, such as community picnics or parades, or Christmas decoration competitions. The sense of community they develop may reflect such social activities rather than the effects of community design.

Contemporary planning practice incorporates new urbanism's focus on "eyes on the street" (Canin 1998, Jacobs 1961), using visibility and surveillance as civilizing strategies (Foucault 1977, Lianos 2003). British new urban approaches employ additional crime-prevention techniques, like community watch and video surveillance (Garland 1996, ODPM 2004b). Do these techniques reduce bad behaviour or simply move crime to other areas with fewer safeguards?[5] Evidence remains limited. Understanding why new urban communities provide positive social environments for their residents requires further investigation to separate socio-economic factors from the spatial elements: do ubiquitous front porches, semi-private amenities, or social homogeneity make the difference?

Site visits show that new urbanism communities are well-kept. Residents often report that neighbours get along well, and the communities are strong. Yet visitors will also note signs of concern about civility such as security alarms on houses and neighbourhood watch programs in most developments. New urban communities may be microcosms of civility within a society that increasingly lacks restraint, but they are not immune to "bad" behaviour.

To date few studies have offered concrete evidence on the impact of new urbanism on civility, although the journalistic accounts of Celebration probably give the clearest picture (Frantz and Collins 1999). How would we operationalise the concept of civility to test whether new urbanism contributes to it? Until scholars find ways to determine whether eyes on the street reduce crime or good design alters human behaviour in positive ways, the ability of new urbanism to deliver civility remains unproven.

Authenticity

More than any other planning paradigm in recent memory, new urbanism has made authenticity a critical factor for planning attention. Duany *et al* (2000: 148, 182), for instance, talk about "encouraging the construction of true neighborhoods" and giving people "the opportunity to experience authentic urbanity on a regular basis". The neo-traditionalists find authenticity rooted in tradition. Classical lines and proportions and vernacular materials and practices define real communities. Urban village proponents advocate some different design principles, but they share the search for authenticity: "An urban village is a concept of a settlement which is small enough to create a community in the truest sense of the word" (Huxford 1998:1).

New urbanism often builds on the cultural interest in heritage conservation to offer effective strategies for continuing and encouraging local architectural traditions. The best projects, such as Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk's Kentlands and Leon Krier's Poundbury, provide excellent examples of contemporary workmanship that could stand the test of time. Critics of new urban projects, however, suggest that many developments have a kind of manufactured urbanity (Leung 1995, Marcuse 2000). Many look surprisingly similar, although they occur in areas with distinct vernacular traditions: for instance, Figure 1 shows homes some 500 miles and nations apart. Several projects involving Duany Plater-Zyberk feature remarkably-similar house types: developments at Kentlands, McKenzie Towne in Alberta, and Cornell in Ontario all include red brick row houses with light coloured materials accenting windows. Krier's buildings in Poundbury (UK) and Alessandria (Italy) share Etruscan-inspired columns and arches (see Steil with Salingaros 2004). False windows on third stories, as at Celebration (Frantz and Collins 1999), and fake antique bricks in Poundbury (Beckett 2000) reflect compromises necessary to manage costs. Poorly fitting false dormers and broken plastic shutters at King Farm, Maryland, undermine the impact of a project with a strong record on transportation options and density. Tiny front porches on replica nineteenth century farm houses dispel the illusion of authenticity in some of the new urbanist suburbs in Markham, Ontario. As developers borrow new urbanism ideas to help to sell their projects, they cut corners (Grant 2002).

[Figure 1 - Although the houses are constructed in different materials, the turrets and wrap-around porches are common touches on high-end new urbanist projects in North America. Panel a (left) is Cornell, in Markham, Ontario. Panel b (right) is Lakelands, in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

Many new urban projects look like old-fashioned neighbourhoods, and call themselves towns or villages. Critics say they are neither truly urban (Marshall 2004, Milgrom 2002, Robbins 2004) nor real villages (Biddulph 2003, Biddulph *et al* 2003). Most are suburbs. For instance, a cluster of projects like Kentlands and King Farm lie on the edge of Washington DC. Orenco Station is a long commute from Portland, Oregon.

Cornell, Angus Glen, and several others inhabit the Toronto fringe in Markham. Poundbury borders the town of Dorchester. The most famous and beautiful developments are greenfield sites or remote resorts. Krieger (1991: 38) suggests in earnest that Windsor, a golf resort for 320 wealthy families (Strupat 2001), is "designed to function as a real community". By contrast, Duany defines the modernist public housing projects that accommodate the poorest families as dysfunctional places – not real communities – that warrant demolition (Duany *et al* 2000, Marshall 1995). As Marcuse (2000) suggests, new urbanists sometimes see the messy landscapes of the inner city and the suburbs as artificial or dysfunctional while constructing myths about the authenticity of their privileged enclaves. Developers build private management spaces and club rooms that they call "town halls" or "community centres". Renovated malls like Santana Row in San Jose are described as "town squares": private spaces pose as the public realm (see Figure 2). Where traditional towns were public places accessible to all, most new urbanist developments constitute private communities whose amenities are semi-private "club goods" restricted to members (Marshall 2000, McKenzie 1994, Webster 2002).

[Figure 2 In Rockville, Maryland, a mall parking lot calls itself the village centre.

Are infill new urban projects more authentic? Many of them are well-integrated within the urban fabric. Some carry forward local vernaculars quite effectively. The Garrison Woods project in Calgary, Alberta, involved the redevelopment of military base housing in a location well-served by public transportation and neighbourhood commercial uses. Greenwich Millennium Village in London (UK) takes advantage of excellent public transportation services to convert brownfield lands to new uses. One of the earliest new urban projects – long pre-dating the coining of the phrase new urbanism – in the St Lawrence area of Toronto has become a vibrant and desirable mixed-income neighbourhood (see Figure 3).

[Figure 3 A mix of housing types and land uses in the St Lawrence neighbourhood in Toronto created an early example of new urban infill development.

With the evidence available it is hard to determine the proportion of new urbanism projects that occur as urban infill rather than on greenfield sites. The UK government reached its target of 60% of new growth in already urbanized areas in 2000 (ODPM 2002), but builders have argued that Britain has insufficient urban land to continue to meet its targets while accommodating continued growth (Aldrick 2004). Urban redevelopment and intensification has become policy for many cities in Canada (Isin and Tomalty 1993), and is encouraged in smart growth policies in the US. At the same time, though, cities continue to expand at their edges. American new urbanism proponents often suggest that most new growth will still occur on the fringe. If new urbanism fulfils its promise of generating authentic urban environments, then we should expect the proportion of growth occurring on greenfield land to decline.

DOES NEW URBANISM PRODUCE MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY-RESPONSIBLE PRACTICES?

Compact urban form with a mix of uses features prominently in all the new urbanism approaches and is often linked to the search for more environmentally-responsible practices. This section considers whether new urbanism achieves its promises of higher density and enhanced sustainability.

Density

The compact city is a central aim of new urbanism. Higher densities should provide walkable, vibrant, sociable, and engaged urban environments (Duany *et al* 2000, Jacobs 1961, Jenks *et al* 1996). Compact form reduces sprawl and correlated problems by using land efficiently (Katz 1994, Urban Task Force 1999). With an excellent system of open spaces and community centres within walking distance, people should not need large lots.

Intensification strategies, which pre-date new urbanism but have been incorporated within new urban approaches, have increased densities in many inner cities in Canada (Beasley 2004, Isin and Tomalty 1993),

the US (Bohl 2002, Fader 2000), and the UK (House Builders Federation 2005). Urban village projects in the UK and Europe have fairly high densities, and typically include medium-rise apartment buildings (see Figure 4). High densities are common in Europe where cost forces many households to accept apartment living. Densities seem linked to housing affordability: where housing costs are highest (as in London, Brussels, Washington DC, and Vancouver BC): then high density multi-family projects prove common and successful. Urban growth boundaries, designed to limit urban expansion and increase urban densities, have encouraged revitalization in areas like the Pearl District in Portland, Oregon (Berton 2004), but their impact on urban densities is less clear (Gordon and Richardson 1997, Richardson and Gordon 2004).

[Figure 4 - New urban approaches can achieve high density through medium-rise multi-family units, as in Rue de Laeken in Brussels.

Small lots, apartments, and a significant proportion of multi-family housing units are appearing in new urbanist projects (Brown and Cropper 2001, Grant 2003, House Builders Federation 2005). Even without high rise structures, a mix of housing types can increase dwelling unit densities (Carter 2004): for instance, Munro (2004) notes that a project in Abbotsford, British Columbia, had 55% greater density than a conventional plan would have delivered. Gordon and Tamminga (2002) indicate that the parts of Markham built according to new urbanism principles have higher densities than areas designed conventionally.

But not all new urbanism projects result in higher densities. Projects with a high proportion of open space, such as Prairie Crossing, Illinois, may leave net densities similar to those in conventional developments (Heid 2004, Zimmerman 2001). Marshall (2004) notes that the net density in Kentlands is four units per acre, lower than conventional suburban densities in much of Canada (Bourne 2001).

Increasing the number of dwelling units per area may not augment population density or reduce the amount of land developed. Applying new urbanist principles sometimes reduced urban densities in HOPE VI projects as low-rise housing replaced high-rise apartments (Goetz 2003, Popkin *et al* 2004). In 2004 neo-traditional McKenzie Towne (Calgary, Alberta) had a smaller average lot size, at 3865 square feet, than the neighbouring conventional project of McKenzie Lake, at 5179 sq ft (Calgary 2004a, 2004b). However, because the average household size in 2000 in McKenzie Towne was 2.16 while McKenzie Lake's was 3.18 (Calgary 2000), the average resident of the new urbanist project consumed 160 sq ft *more land* than the occupant of the conventional development. Detailed analyses of new urbanist projects have yet to demonstrate general success with density objectives.

Audirac (1999) tested new urbanist claims that higher density and mixed use would entice suburban residents to accept smaller lot sizes. She found that proximity to shopping seemed an acceptable trade-off only for single-person householders. Data did not support new urbanist predictions that women or the elderly would accept the trade-off of proximity for less private space. Audirac sees greater preference for the small lot clustering and open land conservation promoted by Arendt (1996) than for new urbanism.

The call for higher densities arguably creates the most significant negative public response to the new urbanism option: suburbanites often resist the suggestion that they may have to give up space (Marshall 2000, Williams 2000). While compact form promises many benefits, it also reduces private space, may limit access to open space, and may increase the risk of crime and pollution (Breheny 1992, Burton 2000). Kyle, Texas, reconsidered its minimum lot size requirements after complaints about crowding in the new urbanist Plum Creek project (*New Urban News* 2004). A conversation I had with a neighbour of an urban village project in Northampton in the UK revealed the resident's fear that the developer would "cram little boxes" onto the site. Those buying in new urban projects might be expected to appreciate high density living, yet even they sometimes express concerns about density. For instance, Poundbury residents opposed a high density development on its periphery (Langdon 2004, Redwood 2004) A resident of Greenwich Millennium Village posted an online protest about "unsustainable" high densities in a phase of that project (Garcia-Merino 2005).

Finding strategies to convince people that higher density living offers benefits worth the trade-offs remains a key challenge for the proponents of new urbanism (Morrow-Jones *et al* 2004, Talen 2001). Yet increasing densities is arguably the most important potential planning contribution of the movement. It is also an outcome that planning can achieve with the tools at hand. Increasing densities and minimizing sprawl has been a goal of the profession for decades. New urban approaches offer attractive ways to package compact form. They offer a concept of place that embraces density: hence the appeal of new urbanism to planners. Unfortunately the available evidence indicates that to date new urbanism has had little effect on densities except in areas where an expensive housing market forces people to select compact housing. Where people have choice, large lots on the urban fringe remain best sellers.

Sustainability

New urban approaches promise greater sustainability by minimizing land conversion and reducing car use (Calthorpe 1993, Calthorpe and Fulton 2001), and by protecting environmentally sensitive areas (Gordon and Tamminga 2002). In Europe and Canada, the adjective "sustainable" appears with great frequency as a modifier for new urbanism solutions (Brindley 2003, Calgary 1995, Urban Task Force 1999). In the United States, the word "smart" is used in a similar fashion (eg, Duany and Talen 2002b).

Are new urbanist projects more sustainable? Gordon and Tamminga (2002) report that Cornell in Markham preserved most of the ecologically significant features identified on the site. The Greenwich Millennium Village project restored contaminated industrial lands and constructed a 50-acre wildlife haven (ODPM 2005): its ecology park provides illustrates the potential of new urban approaches (see Figure 5). Communities like Kentlands and Celebration have a high percentage of dedicated open space. Yet Frantz and Collins (1999) criticized the Disney developers for removing treasured old trees and draining wetlands to build Celebration. What new urbanists see as vibrant waterfront development (Steuteville 2004c) ecologists lament as habitat destruction. Some authors suggest that the high densities and intense land use associated with new urbanism strategies have significant potential to disrupt landscape function or endanger urban wetlands (Audirac *et al* 1990, Grant *et al* 1996). While some projects have a good record of environmental conservation, many suburban developments consume valuable farm land, resource areas, or wildlife habitat on the urban fringe (Leung 1995, Zimmerman 2001).

[Figure 5 The brownfield redevelopment of Greenwich Millennium Village in London includes a restored wetland.

Ultimately, new urbanism provides tools to accommodate what proponents see as inevitable growth, but critics call the interests of capital (Harvey 1997, Knox 1992, McCann 1995). New urbanism represents a useful marketing tool for developers to improve land values and to manage growth (Ewing 1996, *New Urban News* 2001, Schmitz 2003). Some would argue that smart growth is an oxymoron: that continued expansion in consumption, even in new urbanist forms, can never prove sustainable (Wackernagel and Rees

1995).

SHAPING PLANNING PRACTICE

New urban approaches are shaping the way that planners operate in many regions, with many jurisdictions adopting policies to promote compact, pedestrian-friendly, mixed use cities. Communities planned by new urbanism principles are beautiful and photogenic, as even their critics acknowledge. Magazines like *Urban Land* and *Planning* feature elegant images of new urban projects in almost every issue. Visits to conventional suburban developments indicate that new urban approaches often set the standard for contemporary design. When front porches and peaked roofs appear on garage-front houses, even the critics must acknowledge that new urbanism has helped to redefine suburban expectations.

At present new urbanism captures a small segment of the market. The growth is generally in other suburban forms. For instance, consumers and developers are showing great interest in gated communities: these are more common than new urbanism developments in England, Canada, and the US (Atkinson *et al* 2004, Grant *et al* 2004, Sanchez *et al* 2005). Conventional developments still appeal to households starting families. With government policy support for compact form, new urbanism may have greater potential to make a long-term impact in the UK than in North America.

Planning academics have argued for better evidence and research to test the bold and sometimes unsubstantiated claims of new urbanism (Fainstein 2000, Thompson-Fawcett and Bond 2003). Useful studies are now appearing in the literature. Some offer intriguing insights, but may be challenged on methodological grounds: for instance, those using older "traditional" neighbourhoods as a proxy for new urbanist forms (eg, Ford 2001, Lund 2002, Talen 2000c) may not adequately address the possibility that other factors (such as length of residence) contribute to the positive features of older communities. Studies that compare new urbanism developments with conventional developments of a similar age and socio-economic composition (eg, Kim and Kaplan 2004) may become more common now that new urbanist projects are built out, and should provide a clearer picture of the potential of new urbanism to achieve its aims.

Garden city and modernist ideas permeated twentieth-century planning despite accumulating indications of the model's failure to obliterate urban problems. Now new urbanism principles are coming to dominate planning in many jurisdictions. This brief review of some of the claims finds little evidence that new urbanism can deliver density and authenticity. The potential of new urbanism to contribute to sustainability and civility remains uncertain. While planners may have the tools to promote density and sustainability, a century of planning has certainly shown that social problems cannot be solved by physical planning.

Some may suggest that it is unfair to judge a movement on the basis of practice by countless developers, designers, and planners in widely divergent circumstances. Clearly, though, planning progress depends on monitoring and evaluation. Planners need to know what works and what does not. Planners have to test what we achieve against our goals to recognize what the principles we preach can and cannot accomplish. Two decades of practice reveals challenges in achieving certain new urbanism aims. Experience to date reminds us that the lack of solid evidence for the social and environmental claims of new urbanism does little to diminish planners' enthusiasm for it. Uncritical acceptance of the paradigm without empirical evidence of its merits is highly problematic for a profession committed to making a difference. The long term success of planning depends on assessing our progress and adjusting our mission and methods to ensure that our efforts remain relevant.

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Notes:

[1] I would like to thank the many research assistants who have helped on this project through the years, and the organizations that supported my work (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Dalhousie University).

[2] In the United States, the words are often capitalized. The "New Urbanism" represents the synthesis and formal articulation of neo-traditional and transit-oriented approaches through the organization the Congress for the New Urbanism. Since I am taking a more general interpretation of new urbanism, I do not capitalize the words.

[3] A term perceived as American has not always been well-received abroad. Rogers (2004) expresses his resistance to using "new urbanism" to describe British interest in an urban renaissance and urban villages. Thompson-Fawcett (2000) believes that "urban villages" caught on as a label in the UK because it was not American.

[4] Prior to 2006 I visited 9 new urbanism communities in Canada, 5 in the US, 3 in the UK, and 1 in Belgium. My research assistants and associates visited another 2 in Canada, 1 in the US, 1 in the UK, and 1 in Germany. We photographed and documented the communities, and where possible interviewed planners and developers. We often enjoyed informal discussions with residents.

[5] Studies of gated communities suggest that crime may simply be relocated from one neighbourhood to other districts (Atlas and LeBlanc 1994, Helsley and Strange 1999).