

Design and Feminism

*Re-Visioning Spaces, Places,
and Everyday Things*

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In the mid-1970s, when manifestations of male domination in American society were under attack as part of a large and diverse social movement against all forms of social injustice, feminist scholars and policymakers turned their attention to the limitations of women in traditional urban settings. One reason for this focus was that women's increased access to education and their large numbers in the work force altered the separation of male and female roles, challenging the segregation of public and private worlds exemplified by low-density suburban communities. Pioneering studies showed the relationship of housing and community design to economic opportunity and sociability for women.¹ Researchers found that the spatial organization of the suburbs benefited men and encumbered women, who were left isolated not only from the urban activities enjoyed by their commuting husbands but even from one another. But while cities offered greater opportunities for everybody—including shorter travel to work and increased family use of public and cultural facilities—the growth of the suburbs seemed an irreversible trend.² Scholars, architects, and community activists therefore promoted the idea that American suburbs should become more like cities, that is, denser and more urbanized, providing better access to public transportation and placing services and amenities within walking distance of homes.³

Changes in zoning were seen as a priority in this effort because zoning was (and is) being used to exclude innovative uses of space to respond to the needs of working women. Examples include the sharing of homes by single parents of different families, working for pay in the home, and the presence in the neighborhood of convenience stores and child care centers. Advocates of the poor urged women to join the challenges to restrictive zoning, which had the effect of limiting cooperative housing, battered women shelters, and other facilities to marginal neighborhoods, where there were higher crime, poorer schools, less public transportation, and fewer amenities.⁴

In the decades since, designers have introduced a multitude of initiatives to transform the suburb, including mixed-use zoning to create neighborhoods with decentralized public services and many new housing types. No initiative has been more visible or

Expanding the Urban Design

Agenda:

A Critique of the New Urbanism

Susana Torre

influential than the New Urbanism, whose annual congress seeks to become the broadest possible umbrella to effect urban change in America.

Although the terms "New Urbanism," "neo-traditional planning," and "Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND)" may refer to works in a variety of urban settings—from infill structures to the replanning of obsolete shopping malls—the most influential of New Urbanist projects have been new residential communities built beyond the edge of metropolitan areas and initiated by commercial developers.

The guiding ideas of the movement were laid out in the so-called Ahwanee Principles, which envision an urban pattern that is decentralized and where residential developments are small and dense enough so "that housing, jobs, daily needs and other activities are within easy walking distance of each other." The community should also have a "center focus that combines commercial, civic, cultural and recreational uses." Streets should be designed to slow down cars; bicycle paths and convenient public transportation stops would increase pedestrian movement. Each community or cluster of communities should be protected from development in perpetuity by "well defined edges such as agricultural greenbelts or wildlife corridors." As for the communities' social composition, "a diversity of housing types [would] enable citizens from a wide range of income levels and age groups to live within its boundaries."⁵

The population of built TNDs was estimated in 1996 at two thousand people.⁶ But New Urbanist planning principles are becoming very influential, through both their adoption by national and local planning organizations and their diffusion through distorted applications by developers anxious to profit from a new trend.

Celebration versus HOMES: Contrasting Partial Visions

Although Seaside, Florida, was the first example of a new paradigm for urban and suburban design, what will likely be remembered as the most accomplished example of a TND is Celebration Village, a neighborhood within the Disney-owned development of Celebration, Florida.⁷

Celebration Village comprises many key features of the New Urbanist planning credo: school, recreation, and convenience shopping (in an upscale supermarket catering to exotic tastes) are within a short walk of homes. The single-family houses have considerable variety, in terms of both visual appearance and price range.⁸ Lots, regardless of house size, are small, resulting in higher densities and more shared open space than is typical in the suburbs. The Disney

to most of Celebration's current inhabitants but can hardly be taken as a model for the long term or on a wide scale in a nation founded on the right to cranky individualism.

To understand what concerns regarding the options for working women and their families remain unaddressed by TNDs, we turn to Dolores Hayden's blueprint for a feminist-influenced neighborhood design, presented in 1980, just before the public emergence of New Urbanism. Hayden's plan assumed as radical a remodeling of the suburb as the New Urbanists propose, but on very different premises. She envisioned an "experiment in meeting employed women's needs" that would "maximize their personal choices about child rearing and sociability."¹² The experiment, requiring proximity to an urban area, would be initiated by homemakers' organizations, formed by men and women; hence the project's acronym, HOMES (Homemakers Organization for a More Egalitarian Society). Hayden's blueprint encompassed a program and a proposal for physical design. She described a hypothetical HOMES group made up of forty households representing the actual composition of American households in 1980: 15 percent single parents and their children, 40 percent two-worker couples and their children, 35 percent one-worker couples and their children, and 10 percent single residents. The total population would consist of sixty-nine adults and sixty-four children.

A HOMES community would combine collective installations with private dwellings and outdoor spaces. The shared activities and spaces would include a day care center; a laundromat; a kitchen supplying take-out meals, meals for the elderly, and lunches for the day care center; a food cooperative with grocery; a garage with two vans for distribution of meals and transportation; garden allotments for the growing of food; and a home help office. All services would be run like businesses available to customers in addition to the members of the community. Most important in her scheme was her calculation that the collective activities would generate at least thirty-seven jobs for the residents.

Hayden considered the remodeling of the existing suburb to be a higher priority than the construction of new residential developments. To effect this transformation, she proposed the replacement of single homes' front lawns without sidewalks with building additions to obtain multiple units. Ancillary structures such as porches, garages, and tool sheds would be converted to community facilities, and the center of the block would be turned into a shared parklike open space.¹³ By "turning the block inside out" and pooling land, the duplication of amenities and equipment characteristic of suburban communities could be avoided: there would be no need to have six inflatable swimming pools, ten garden sheds, and thirteen

lawn mowers belonging to individual houses on a block when one of each of the appropriate size and type should suffice.

Race and Class: Two Repressed Issues

Disparate as they are, these two communities—one actual, the other imagined—share some important strengths and weaknesses. The ideas informing both plans emerged from academic environments rather than marketing studies or social surveys and thus reflect more the ideology and value systems of their creators than the expressed desires of the potential end-users—which are more likely to be more complicated and contradictory. Both plans were conceived as complete entities and proffered as alternatives to suburban sprawl. And both proposals ignore the political complexity that is embedded in real urban communities, especially the intractable difficulty of integrating uneducated, poor, and mostly African American or Hispanic households within or in close proximity to predominantly white middle-class neighborhoods. Exclusive residential single-family zoning is eschewed in favor of neighborhoods that integrate basic services and shopping within walking distance of homes. In both cases, a shared, public environment is made an integral part of the community, although in very different ways.

And here the similarities cease. Celebration Village—like other TNDs—is a private, for-profit development based on single-family homes standing on private lots as its predominant residential type. Home ownership in Celebration Village requires well above the median annual household income.¹⁴ Since its diminutive “downtown” district is not directly connected to a major commercial thoroughfare, the economic feasibility of shops can only be assured by a sizable development. The exceedingly high degree of control that Celebration residents must accept in their physical environment is seen as a self-selecting condition. The HOMES neighborhood, instead, was conceived as a cooperative undertaking initiated by a nonprofit developer such as a tenant cooperative organization, a union, or a church. It assumed cooperative ownership and use of the land in conjunction with private ownership of the homes and private yards. It required the involvement of residents as managers of the collective services; it included employment within the residential cluster; and the projected level of services could be implemented with forty households, 12 percent of the number in Celebration Village. Although not explicitly stated, the look of such a neighborhood would be influenced by negotiation among residents. And unlike TNDs, HOMES was envisioned as a remodeling of existing suburban and urban housing stock, requiring change in zoning.

Celebration Village represents the high end of a consumer-based model for the production of domestic life, available for purchase in the form of cleaning services, domestic servants, nannies and au pairs, and ready-to-eat well-balanced foods. The HOMES neighborhood represents a model based on cooperative management of services accessible to families of modest resources and on the creation of jobs in close proximity to homes.

Challenge of a New Feminist Urbanism

The comparison of Celebration Village and the HOMES neighborhood highlights an ongoing dilemma for women: their continued responsibility for the production and maintenance of domestic life.¹⁵ Much has been made of the increased participation of men in the production of the domestic environment, but women continue to be the primary, if not exclusive, caretakers of the home. Food preparation and child care, two traditionally female concerns, have been increasingly taken over by large-scale industries as women become integrated into the labor force and do not have the time to be personally involved in them. Outside of large cities, working families have limited choices, and when convenience at a low price is a major issue, they become captive consumers to the national food chains and their inferior food products, resulting in unbalanced diets and obesity.

Traditional Neighborhood Developments are available to a tiny minority. The majority of working women and their families are still left to devise their own, usually inadequate, solutions to the production of their domestic environments, including child and elder care, cleaning and food preparation, the integration of personal life with work, and time spent driving. This dilemma is particularly difficult for women isolated in poor neighborhoods without adequate public transportation to reach desirable jobs.

During the past twenty years, the most visible efforts toward economic and racial integration in residential communities across the country have been infill development of affordable housing in middle-class neighborhoods and the rebuilding of decayed parts of cities by inserting a suburban residential pattern. Nonprofit housing providers made great advances in breaking down the resistance of middle-class residential districts to having subsidized housing in their midst. The small scale of developments, and designs for multifamily housing that emulated the look, scale, and materials of large single-family residences, have been credited with increased acceptance. This approach to incremental integration has proven more effective than large-scale projects. In some states that require the provision of affordable housing as a percentage of a market resi-

dential development, developers have been allowed to avoid the integration presumed in this requirement by transferring the affordable homes to other communities.

The introduction of suburban patterns to rebuild decayed urban fabric has received mixed reviews, and there is no conclusive evidence that suburbanites have chosen to move to these neighborhoods; in Detroit, for example, where this pattern has been tried, the extreme racial and class segregation between the black city and its white suburbs is, in effect, reproduced on a smaller scale within the city boundaries. It is not surprising, then, that these developments are separated from surrounding neighborhoods by a high fence and a gate. These neighborhoods appear to attract safety-minded people already living in the city. Although their scale is similar to that proposed for the HOMES neighborhood, the gated suburban pattern used does little to provide the kinds of choices and proximity to services envisioned in that model.

In 1980, Dolores Hayden's thought experiment raised issues that the New Urbanists have so far managed to avoid. If the New Urbanism is to become truly urban, larger problems and more diverse populations will need to be addressed. Other replicable urban patterns must be created to counterbalance the vision of encapsulated communities that epitomize New Urbanist designs. These patterns should provide solutions to the problem of how to design good edges and points of contact, so that adjacencies between different kinds of communities can happen without walls, gates, or greenbelts.¹⁶

Where radical thinking of urban design is most urgently needed is throughout our cities, seen in their specific regional contexts. The necessary allies of a truly new urbanism will be community organizations and coalitions, nonprofit developers, politicians, and agencies rather than commercial developers.

Notes

1. See Gerda Wekerle, "Women in the Urban Environment," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5:3 Supplement (Spring 1980): S188-214.

2. Robert Fishman has argued that the suburbs' growth has resulted in a new kind of city, which he calls "technoburb," where "both work and residence [are contained] within a single decentralized environment" and the single-family house is "a convenient base from which both spouses can rapidly reach their jobs." See Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

3. See Wekerle, "Women in the Urban Environment," for relevant bibliography on this subject.

4. See Karen Hapgood and Judith Getzels, eds., *Women, Planning, and Change* (Chicago: American Society of Planning Officials, 1974).

5. For analysis of New Urbanist planning principles, see Heidi Landecker, "Is New Urbanism Good for America?" *Architecture* (April 1996) and William Fulton, *The New Urbanism: Hope or Hype for American Communities?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1996).

6. See Fulton, *New Urbanism*, p. 3.

7. The town of Celebration, Florida, consists of several neighborhoods. Celebration Village is the only one where different lot types are combined. Adjoining and satellite neighborhoods are based on older suburban layouts, including neighborhoods segregated by lot type and, in North Village, an enclave of stately homes on lanes ending in cul-de-sacs.

8. Home buyers can select from a range of nineteenth-century-inspired architectural styles, such as Colonial or Victorian, that are approved by Disney for the different lot types.

9. I have based my calculations on the area encompassed in Celebration Realty's "Site Plan. Celebration Village, West Village, Lake Evalyn," 1995 (Walt Disney Company). Fulton, *New Urbanism*, states that the entire town of Celebration will comprise 4,900 acres and eight thousand residential units.

10. The lot type not included, called "Garden," is for small cottages of the type found in early American suburbs. This suggests, ironically, that the neighborhood of Garden Cottages is a kind of suburb of Celebration Village.

11. Regarding a controversy focused on Celebration's public school, see Michael Pollan, "Disney Discovers Real Life," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 14, 1997.

12. Dolores Hayden, "What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like?" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5:3 Supplement (Spring 1980): S170-87.

13. Hayden acknowledges her debt to Henry Wright and Clarence Stein's plan for Radburn, New Jersey. Regarding services, Wekerle, "Women in the Urban Environment," describes a proposal by Nona Glazer, Linda Majka, Joan Acker, and Christine Bose for federally funded neighborhood service houses; Wekerle found it significant that the community was held responsible for supporting people in their daily functioning, not just emergencies.

14. According to the March 1996 "Current Population Survey" of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the 1995 median income of all households in the United States was \$34,076; for all white, non-Hispanic households, \$37,178; for black households, \$22,393.

15. For a current perspective, see Elizabeth McGuire, "Still Seeking a Perfect Balance," *New York Times*, op-ed, August 11, 1998.

16. For a challenge to New Urbanism regarding regional scale and context, see Armando Carbonell, Harry Dodson, and Robert Yaro,

"Expanding the Ahwancee Principles for the New Regionalism," a 1995 self-published statement. Harvey Gantt, an architect and former mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina, also issued a challenge in his plenary speech to the 1998 Congress for New Urbanism: to address the survival of neighborhoods in the city, where poorer, nonwhite populations are concentrated.