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## Places

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Strategies for Albuquerque

# Urbanism

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New Urbanism has strongly been associated with suburban-scale development, especially on “greenfield” sites. From the earliest days, however, practitioners in the movement have been interested in and working in urban settings as well.

Current downtown plans for Albuquerque and Milwaukee — presented as New Urbanist exemplars at CNU’s congress last summer — illustrate different but generally complementary approaches to rebuilding downtown urbanism. They also raise a



Top left: Illustrative drawing, “podium housing” along Second Street, downtown Albuquerque

Top right: Illustrative drawing, town houses along Silver Avenue, downtown Albuquerque

Bottom: Illustrative drawing, “hybrid building” along Central Avenue, downtown Albuquerque

Albuquerque graphics courtesy Moule & Polyzoides, Architects and Urbanists



and Milwaukee

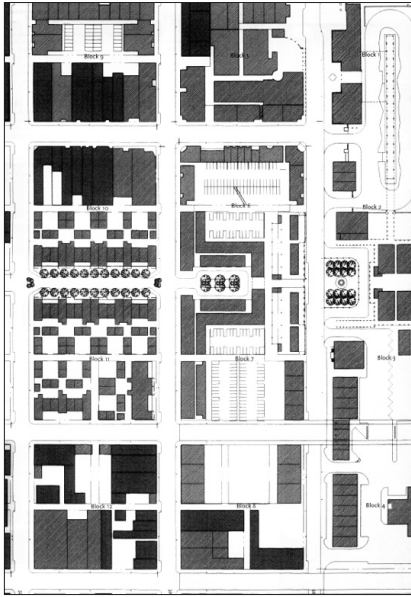


# Downtown



Highly rated images from Milwaukee visual preference survey. Clockwise, from top right: City Hall, parking garage with ground-floor retail, residences with marina access in Third Ward, a wide residential sidewalk, a facade with well-defined structure, River Splash festival along Milwaukee's River Walk.

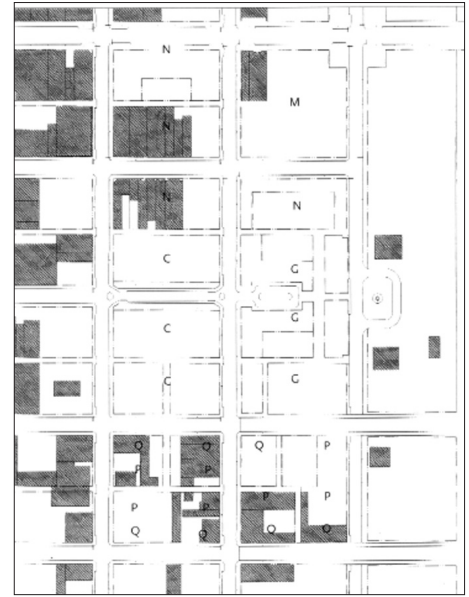
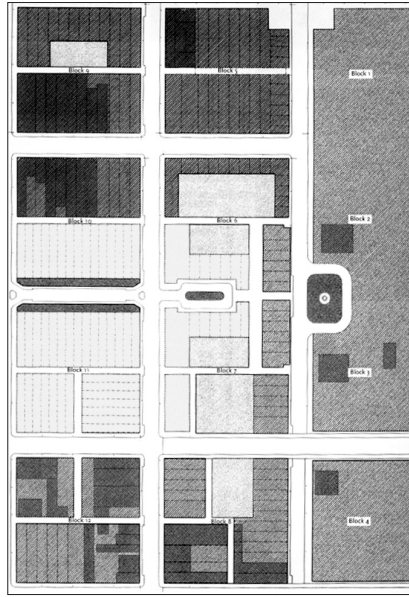
Milwaukee photos and graphics courtesy Nelessen Associates



The regulating plan sets out what building types are desired in what blocks

Center: The development code describes standards for the six building types proposed in the regulating plan

Right: The illustrative plan describes a possible build-out of the individually developed projects



range of ideological issues and practical questions about the role that downtown rebuilding can play in regional growth.

### Albuquerque's Alvarado Transportation Center Master Plan

Albuquerque, commonly thought of as a post-war boomtown, actually dates to 1706, and has been marked by bursts of growth in the late 1800s as well as the first half of the twentieth century.

The Alvarado Transportation Center is about a half mile from Albuquerque's original settlement, in a grid-d addition that was located next to a train station in 1880 in the expectation that it would emerge as the new city center.

Alvarado, designated an urban renewal area some 30 years ago, has lain fallow since then. The current plan for the area was commissioned by the Historic District Improvement Company (a spin-off of the Arcadia Land Company), which had been designated master developer for the site, and was prepared by Moule & Polyzoides, Architects and Urbanists.

The plan recalls a "golden era" in Albuquerque, from the 1910s to 1950, when the "urban structure and architectural riches accumulated ... downtown were second to none in the country" and "the fabric of commercial buildings was as dense as imaginable." It responds to the familiar decanting of urban centers by overzoning, highway construction and urban renewal.

The master plan covers more than twenty square blocks straddling Central Avenue, downtown's main street. It

envisioned entertainment, retail, civic and convention activities, as well as residences woven throughout, primarily in townhouses and live-work spaces.

The plan was developed over three months in 1998. The first stage included twelve community input meetings with neighborhood groups, business owners and city officials; during this time the design team also met with building developers to refine the plan. Then HDIC organized a four-day public charrette, which attracted more than 1,000 people, and at which the plan was finalized.

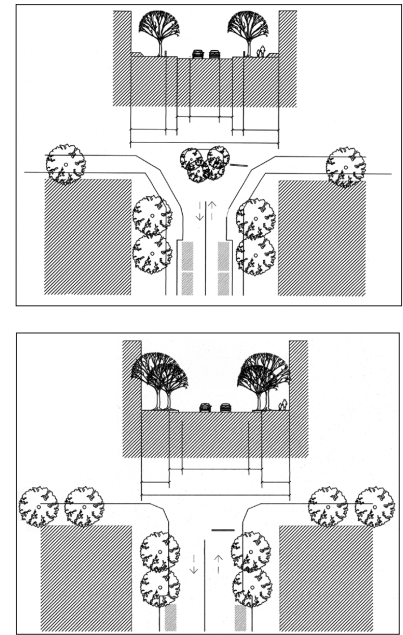
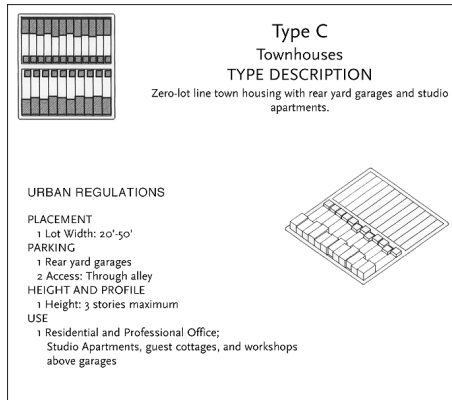
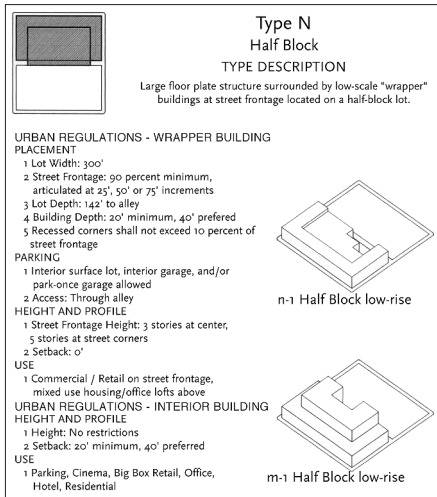
The approach of the plan is typological, and it is conceived with a flexibility that would allow various developers.

- The plan conceives of several types of civic infrastructure: pedestrian realm, parking, and streetscape. Each element was mapped for each project area and for the district as a whole. They were dealt with in terms of streets and squares, street sections and parking.
- Various development projects are assigned an architectural type, a size and predominant use. The projects were mapped into a single regulating plan, and each was adjusted based on the emerging requirements of the building developer.
- The plan also includes a development code that could be extended to the whole of downtown.

The document that controls the design of projects is called a regulating plan. The plan consists of five building types, along with the civic infrastructure improvements. Each type can accommodate a mix of







Left: Half-block building type  
Center: Town house building type  
Right top: Silver Avenue street section  
Right bottom: Central Avenue street section

uses, what differentiates them is the intensity of each use. All the types are configured to define public realm of shared space; the concentration of similar types and intensities in plan helps to create recognizable district character.

Finally, the plan offers an illustrated build-out and phasing plan, including a preferred sequence that would start with the construction of a transportation center, then a theatre block. Next would come a hybrid building and podium housing and mixed-use infill. The last phase would consist of more infill, auxiliary buildings to the transportation center, another garage, and a market hall and learning center.

### Milwaukee's Downtown Plan

The Milwaukee plan starts from a stronger foundation: In the mid-1990s, several large cultural, commercial and civic projects were completed — including the celebrated “Riverwalk” and a convention center — and city leaders wondered how downtown’s continued redevelopment could be assured. In 1997, the city (along with the state transportation office and the local convention bureau) commissioned Nelesen Associates to prepare a plan.

The team began with interviews and field analyses. It then elicited citizen participation through the Nelesen’s trademarked “Visual Preference Survey” approach, a questionnaire about marketing and policy options, and public workshops.

In the Visual Preference Survey, planners showed some 230 images, mostly from downtown Milwaukee, to about 1,600 people; the questionnaire was answered by another 1,000 people. The responses helped suggest the program for and character of redevelopment downtown.

In the public “vision translation” workshops, small groups were prompted with results from the survey and questionnaire and asked to record their ideas and suggestions onto maps. The process was broken into tasks, such as identifying and distinguishing daily, weekly and seasonal activity generators; suggesting locations for infill housing; or proposing bus, trolley and bike routes.

Finally, the planning team synthesized the research findings and workshop results into proposals, which were refined through presentations to various various city staff, citizens and interested groups.

The plan’s comprehensive recommendations include:

- Allowing a broader mix of uses at the block and building scales, and structuring activities to create 17 compact “urban neighborhoods” — each of which has a mix of retail, residential and office space yet maintains its own urban character and planning objectives.
- Combining underutilized surface parking into garages, freeing up space for development, while



ensuring parking is distributed in a fine-grained pattern and supports a “park-once” environment downtown.

- Creating a range of mobility options, from regional buses and light rail to bike routes and water shuttles, and relating transit routes to neighborhood centers.
- Establishing a hierarchy of streets that combine auto, pedestrian, parking, bikes, landscaping and property access in various configurations

The plan does not make explicit recommendations for urban form; rather, it says, the most strongly liked images in the Visual Preference Survey “indicate principles, proportion, scale and character of desired appearance,” particularly in terms of impacting the form and experience of the public realm.

By suggesting proposed uses by properties or blocks, the plan says, it “affords the greatest flexibility for market response while ensuring the physical predictability that will encourage investment.”

The plan concludes by suggesting thirteen catalytic projects, such as the revitalization of Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee’s most active street.

#### New Urbanism, New Ground?

The Albuquerque and Milwaukee plans operate at different scales and intervene at different moments of opportunity. Thus it is worth considering what makes them good examples of “New Urbanism,” or new examples of good urbanism, and what they portend for the revival of American downtowns.

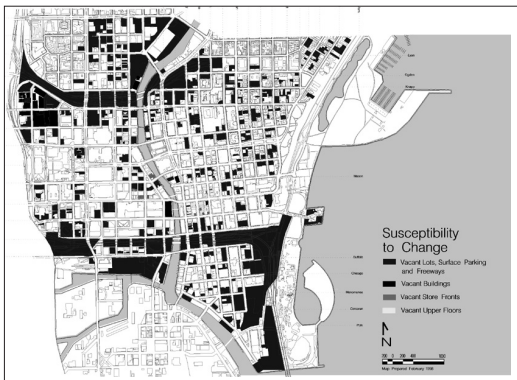
Both plans express a primary concern about the interface between the public realm and private develop-

ment. Both imagine a framework of civic elements, the most pervasive of which are streets and blocks. Both suggest how that civic framework should be designed, and how the design of buildings and spaces should relate to it.

Both, as well, are multi-purpose plans, balancing a range of issues, such as land use, circulation, public infrastructure and private development standards. Both speak of districts, blocks and buildings that can accommodate complimentary uses; both speak of streets that balance private vehicles, transit, parking, pedestrian space and landscaping.

These are hardly urban design concerns that are particular to New Urbanism. In fact, Milwaukee’s plan, in method and tone, follows a long tradition of areawide physical planning that reaches back to the City Beautiful era (if anything, it pulls back from conventional concerns about building massing or density). The Albuquerque plan, on the other hand, is very much a New Urbanist document in its tone and strategy. It offers a more polemic recitation of the city’s history, a more aggressive stance toward collaborating with developers in working out urban patterns, and a stronger focus on the massing and architectural design of buildings. Its process of crafting typological models acceptable to communities and developers alike is a promising urban infill strategy.

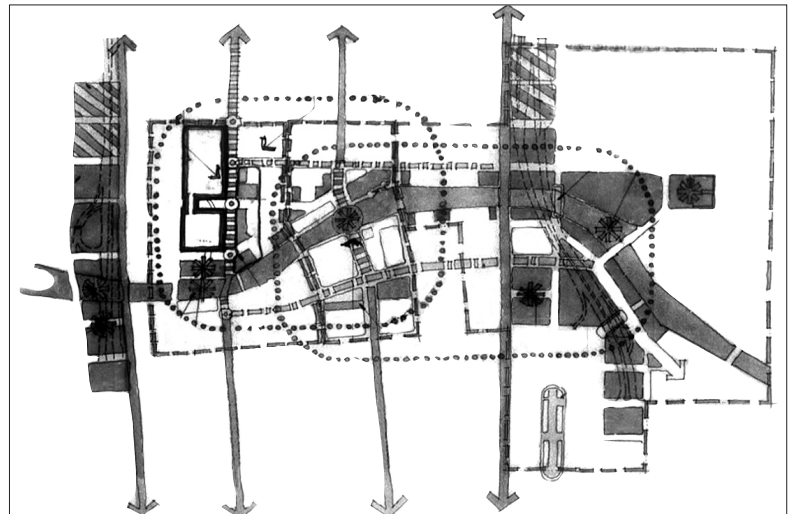
Like many recent urban design plans, New Urbanist or not, these plans elide a number of analytical frameworks or concerns. Neither conveys a strong sense of the visual or perceptual structure of the areas they are considering, such as the visibility and character of important landmarks or the sense of progression along movement corridors. Rather, both rely on carefully calibrated



Background: Downtown Milwaukee, aerial view

Left: Map of sites susceptible to change

Center and right: Summary of recommendations made by planning teams in public workshops





architectural imagery — suggestive in character but generic in representation — to convey a sense of place.

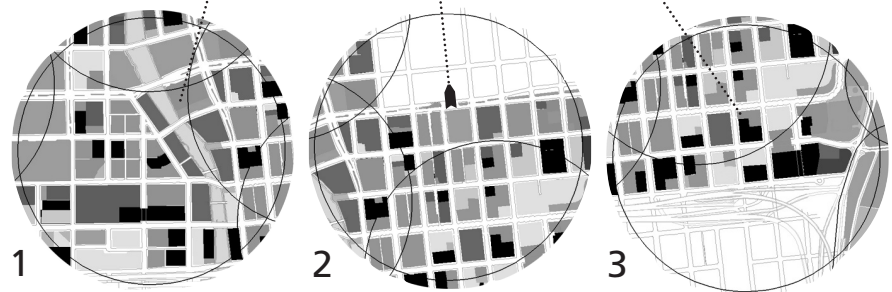
Nor are the plans communicative about landscape character; they are mute on matters of topography and terrain, light and color, even plant materials. Though Milwaukee’s plan clearly regards the Milwaukee River and Lake Michigan as primary elements of the civic framework, it fails to consider the possibilities embedded in the grade changes between water level and the city.

Like any plans that seek support through public process, these plans only challenge aspects of conventional planning that are safely within the revisionist canon. Thus, while they suggest mixed uses, tamed streets and “park-once” environments, and while they accede to the public a role in setting visions, they don’t question who controls the levers of development, or how capital should be used.

Milwaukee’s plan proudly leaves private development decisions to the market, without explaining convincingly how the outcome may be different from that which the market has already produced. The Albuquerque planners collaborated with regional and national development firms, without suggesting a role for locally-initiated, capitalized or managed development. The implication seems to be that it is solely the envelopes into which capital is shoehorned, not the patterns or increments of investment or the repositories of development expertise themselves, that are the problem.

Both plans open intriguing questions about the role of centers in urban regions. Both suggest that even large areas, like downtowns, could be thought of as neighborhoods or villages for perceptual and functional reasons — using New Urbanist theory to reinterpret the structure of existing areas. Yet Milwaukee’s approach, depicted by a matrix of same-sized circles laid over city maps, seems abstract and removed from the texture of the city. Why are the circles the same size? Why are the centers located where they are? More generally, are there necessarily thresholds of scale or intensity that are required for these areas to function properly or comfortably?

The plans also raise questions about the capacity of infill in central places to shoulder the burdens of regional growth. What proportion of the region’s growth will the 27,000 new residents of downtown Milwaukee comprise? More importantly, do these plans offer lessons about how infill might occur in less



intense settings? The urban neighborhood concept elaborated in Milwaukee’s plan prepares the city conceptually for retaking the middle ground, the area between downtown and the newer suburbs; Albuquerque’s typological approach may offer a strategy for configuring such growth in an acceptable pattern.

**Top:** Downtown planning areas  
**Above:** Detailed plans for sample planning areas  
**Below left:** Landscaping plan  
**Below right:** Projected pedestrian activity

