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Exorcising the Ghost of Emily Latella

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New Urbanists can be their own worst enemies. I get particularly annoyed with my New Urbanist friends when, in their conversations, public interviews and speeches, they loosely throw around the term "community." At first I chided them. At a conference in Seaside, Florida, held in January, 1999, on the topic "Is Design a Catalyst for Community?," I denounced the way that they seemed to be promoting a thoroughly unsubstantiated and politically dangerous proposition about the ability of design to promote a sense of community. I chastised them for failing to understand and appreciate the complexities and paradoxes of community life.

But, in learning more about what New Urbanists are really trying to achieve, I have come to feel a little like Emily Latella, the Saturday Night Live character portrayed by Gilda Radner who would rant about an issue that turned out to be non-existent. For example, she once scolded public schools for trying to discourage "sax and violins" before someone tapped her on the shoulder to tell her that the issue was actually about discouraging "sex and violence." "Oh..., never mind," she would say.

What I have come to realize is that most New Urbanists do not, in fact, adhere to some sort of Skinnerian view about the ability of design to create community. What happens is that the occasional New Urbanist will overstep the bounds and misspeak about what design can be expected to do, but it usually doesn't take much for the New Urbanist to eventually admit that all he or she is really trying to do is strengthen the public realm. Strengthening the public realm, in turn, is about providing opportunities for social interaction. In some cases, interaction leads to stronger bonds; in other cases, it has no effect. In either case, it simply is not possible to design

for "community," and New Urbanists, despite an occasional blurt of feel-good rhetoric, are not really proposing to do so.

In fact, New Urbanists state repeatedly (ad nauseum, even) that their goal is to create a variety of venues where social interaction can occur. Whether or not that interaction leads to higher order social bonds is, contrary to misconception, not an explicit part of their agenda. What is explicit is that they seek an urban form that does not actively thwart the ability for citizens to come together. Whether this interaction involves friends and neighbors or actors and spectators is not a distinction most New Urbanists make.

This is not just wishful thinking on my part. I recently analyzed the Charter of the New Urbanism to determine what it explicitly says about social goals in general, looking for clues about how notions like community, social equity and the common good are treated.[1] I found that the social goals of New Urbanism are most concerned with the common good, followed by social equity second and community last. In fact, I found no principles in the charter that were directly based on the social goal of "community." Instead, there are instances in which notions of community are used as descriptive material to support a given principle. True, there are various statements about the promotion of "social life," "civic bonds," "social identity" and the like, but community is not an explicit goal under any of the charter's twenty-seven principles. Most often, the idea of community is limited to short descriptive phrases that signify, perhaps, an underlying perception among New Urbanists that social bonds have somehow been damaged by sprawl. It is not inconsistent to question this assumption (as I do) and still

be a New Urbanist.

What critics most object to is the idea that New Urbanists may be trying to promote community to the exclusion of a more open public life. This interpretation is based on statements that seem to emphasize one form of public space over another. For example, statements made by Peter Calthorpe in his book, *The Next American Metropolis* refer to the need for places where "workers meet during lunch time," or that plazas should be able to act as "neighborhood meeting places."[2] But it is important to remember that although such places serve as meeting grounds for neighbors and co-workers, there is no exclusion of other types of activities. Statements about what people might typically do in a public place are merely descriptive. What is at issue is the design of public *place*, not public *life*, and it is not necessary to view quality design as an attempt to exclude particular behaviors.

Part of the confusion stems from the erroneous idea that New Urbanism is about implementing a prototype for the medieval village. If this were true, it might make sense to explore the distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* forms of association and postulate that New Urbanism is attempting to instill *gemeinschaft* fellowship and common identity as an alternative to the alienating angst created by the *gesellschaft* urbanism of detachment and impersonal relations. It would mean that New Urbanists are exclusively focused on the world of kinship while remaining essentially indifferent to the world of strangers. But there is no reason to suspect this, and there are no statements that I am aware of that indicate that this is the case.

The criticism is also made that New Urbanists are seeking a kind of conformity and consensus in

neighborhood social life. The problem with this assertion, however, is that it directly contradicts many of the New Urbanists' other explicitly stated goals. A careful reading of the charter suggests that the importance of social diversity is far more explicit and pervasive than anything said about "community." In particular, one of the main goals of New Urbanism is to reverse the segregationist trend found in U.S. cities by integrating multiple dwelling unit types and multiple types of uses in one locale. Unlike the goal of "community," these goals *do* have an explicit link to physical design. If it is true that New Urbanism seeks conformity and consensus among similar people (the *gemeinschaft* convergence of people with similar backgrounds and attitudes), then critics should be pointing out that New Urbanist contradict themselves by attempting to mix housing types.

If New Urbanists advocate community association to the exclusion of other types of public associations and behaviors, as some contend, then they must be actively discouraging more diverse, non-parochial forms of social relationship found in public life. They must be asserting that parochial realms are morally superior to free expressions of social non-conformism.

But this conclusion could be reached by any attempt to design, and therefore order, the public realm. For example, public spaces that are well integrated, dispersed, accessible and well-designed (adhering for example to the principle of space enclosure rather than space unbounded) could be interpreted as a quest for conformity and consensus, promoting rigid enforcement of certain codes of moral conduct. The reverse of this would be an ad-hoc, non-designed public realm–public spaces that are dispersed, unbounded, inaccessible except by the automobile and found in strip malls and parking lots. These alternative types of spaces could be interpreted as good venues for a public life where people are able to engage in all kinds of self-satisfying behaviors that are free from social control.

Either attempt falls into the trap of physical determinism. In fact, both community life and public life, if such a distinction can be made, elude a territorial basis. For this reason, the distinction between public life and community life does not make a great deal of sense in the context of city design. Thus, even if New Urbanists did have the goal of creating community through design (and simultaneously excluding public life), they would not be able to accomplish it. A review of the sociological literature quickly reveals that "community" is much too complex to be designed.[3] It involves multiple meanings and perceptions and the creation of it has to account for interaction effects (e.g., socio-economic status) as well as indirect effects (e.g., feelings of safety). Franck's 1984 article "Exorcising the Ghost of Physical Determinism" explains these points particularly well.[4]

The best that can be done is, first, to make sure that design doesn't actively get in the way of social interaction and, second, to provide venues that allow for a variety of types of civic engagement. It doesn't matter if one then meets strangers or neighbors in these places. Both types of interaction can happen, both are important, and it is neither necessary, desirable nor possible to focus on venues that exclude one or the other. It is possible to meet a friend under the Eiffel Tower just as it is possible to see a stranger in a neighborhood playground. The issue of community life versus public life is thus a straw man.

Rather than drawing distinctions between different desired social behaviors, New Urbanists posit that social behavior—individual conduct that happens in a social place, as well as social interaction—is affected by design. Naturally, this interaction can take on many different flavors and lead to a variety of outcomes, but New Urbanists are primarily focused on making sure that a variety of well-designed and well-located spaces exist. These spaces range from tot lots and alleys to grand plazas and boulevards, and nowhere is there a denial that a variety of public places set the stage for a variety of social behaviors. The social interaction that occurs can be limited to mere observation (of individual theatrics, either non-threatening or threatening), it can lead to striking up a conversation with a stranger, or it can be a deliberate meeting between friends or colleagues. That it may lead to the shaping of public concepts of governance or to deriving pleasure from creating a public spectacle is entirely possible.

How can something so basic and simple—the need for accessible, well-designed and well-situated public spaces—have become so complex? It is true that public life in the classical open spaces of street, square or park has given way to a thriving public life in shopping malls and parking lots. But public life that emerges in a parking garage is public life desperately looking for a place to land, evidence that the public is willing to work with, however awkwardly, whatever place happens to be there. This is a testament to the tenacity of public life: it springs up here and there in spite of planning policies that for years have actively degraded a meaningful physical context. This hardly justifies a call for planning and building more of these de facto venues.

New Urbanists seem to be getting into trouble by asserting that there can be guidelines for designing a

better public realm. Often their designs for town centers, village greens and commons are seen as being in the same tradition as the anti-urban bias that pervades American culture. This amounts to a downgrading of the urban qualities of places like town centers. This is ironic, since office tower atria and parking lots—among the venues apparently preferred for a genuine public life—are the types of places associated with an ideal that *is* truly agrarian: suburbia.

That skyscraper atria and shopping mall hallways are not particularly noteworthy public spaces should be of concern, but some New Urbanist critics do not seem troubled. Instead, they seem to want to capitalize on some sort of missed opportunity for the public life potential of semi-public spaces such as these. New Urbanists, on the other hand, are proactively hoping to replace these de facto venues with something based, more concretely, on an explicit normative theory about public space. That is, promoting spaces that are not only publicly owned (and therefore more genuinely public than a shopping mall), but are also easier to reach by being integrated into neighborhood spatial design and adhering to principles of good urban form. That these goals have become a basis of criticism is a clear sign that the Emily Latella school of criticism is alive and well.

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