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Diverse Alternative Town Planning
Approaches**

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Placemaking as Common Ground for Diverse Alternative Town Planning Approaches¹

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Abstract

Neo-traditional town planning and design, one of the alternative approaches to sprawl, has been since its early days a retrieval of universal values of placemaking adapting the good design of historic cities, thus focusing on human scale, slow pace mobility and diversity both, in respect to mixed uses and building types. Nonetheless, it has also been the center of debate and controversy due to its commitment to historic references in its architecture and due to a seemingly acquiescent attitude towards prevailing real estate development with its implicit results and effects. Despite these critical views on the neo-traditional movements, there are some timeless principles that transcend their arguable affiliation to historic styles. These principles deal with a depurated attention to proportions, details and relationships between buildings and buildings with public space, offering a quality environment to the community opposed to the unanimity of residential developments, in suburban settings. The attention to human scale and the pedestrian involvement in public spaces represent the quality of design, which is the most significant contribution of neo-traditional town planning and a tacit common ground with other contemporary urban design currents that do explicitly reject the rather nostalgic aura of the historic based imagery the first one calls for. When contrasting the placemaking of some neo-traditional towns and some of the most innovative experiences in urban design, like the Swedish *Symbiocities*, one can conclude that there is a common ethical and pragmatic approach towards a real alternative to the predominant suburban sprawl.

Key words:

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Introduction

The loss of human scale referred to the quantitative dimension of contemporary urban space, as well as the qualitative aspects of diversity and animation of public spaces, generates constant tension between the dynamics of urban development and the aspirations of citizens to create appropriate conditions for the progressive improvement of their cities. Since the advent of modernism and the utopia of the *corbusian* functional city -materialized within the framework of the urgency of the demands for dwellings during the post-war years-, alongside with the triumph of suburban sprawl and zoning in the United States of America, the traditional urban space as place of permanence and spontaneous encounters, has given way to the inexorable advance of the diffuse periurban *Antipolis*¹ (García, 2011), and the futility of non-places and the interstitial of the degraded city. This is manifested mainly in contexts that do not have a long urban tradition, where the dispersed monofunctional suburban model prevails. This is the case of the American² reality, as well as the case of many emerging countries, where land speculation on the urban periphery occupies an important role in the local economic activity. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of urban sprawl bursts also into places with centuries of historical evolution and with a strong urban identity, as is the case of Europe (Richardson & Bae, 2004), even into countries of Mediterranean culture.

This degradation of urban space, has occupied much of the specialized critique, and has motivated the emergence of different approaches and urban proposals towards reversing or at least mitigating the effects of a model associated to the quantitative development that has prevailed since the post-war era. From the writings of Jane Jacobs and her influential book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, to the recovery of the street as a place for the pedestrian, with some significant cases such as Jan Gehl's *Strøget* in Copenhagen in 1962, and the student housing project of Kresge College of Charles Moore in the late sixties and early seventies on the outskirts of the city of Santa Cruz, California, the desire to regain the historical value of the street, as well as the conception of public space as a meeting place, that is lively and diverse, has been a recurrent issue in contemporary urban planning. In respect to citizen organizations the emerging demands to recover the human scale in public spaces can be recognized in the principles of different organizations and advocacy groups, such as the International Federation of Pedestrians (IFP), accredited by the United Nations and based in Switzerland, that acts like an umbrella organization that gathers together groups supporting the rights of the pedestrian. Since its creation in the early sixties, and due to a growing concern of the negative impact of the car on human settlements, it has thrived and become a strong advocacy group, which in the year 2000 derived in the Walk 21 Congresses. Citizen participation through these channels or through direct

¹Concept used by Carlos García Vázquez in his book *Antipolis: el desvanecimiento de lo urbano en el Cinturón del Sol*.

²Referred to the United States of America.

local involvement has become a fundamental aspect to be considered in the urban design process.

An Alternative Path: A Phenomenon Under Construction

Since the sixties there have been various attempts and success stories dealing with utopian models and pragmatic experiences in urban planning as a reaction to Le Corbusier's radiant city and to the North American indiscriminate sprawl and its consequences; from the regional movements searching for their own identity in the framework of early modernist expansion, to the seventies and early eighties postmodernist agendas reacting against the aseptic quality of the international movement and the inanity of suburban landscape. However, it is in the last decades that the magnitude of the problems regarding the environment, energy and the progressive loss of quality of urban life, increasingly convoked and brought together diverse discourses around the search for viable alternative models of lesser or greater degree of pragmatism that, although minor compared to the predominant model, began to draw a path toward a qualitative improvement of our built environment and toward a more sustainable approach; trend that appeals to an ethical view on urban development in contrast to the overwhelming advance of urban sprawl and the mega-projects that break into the granulometry of consolidated cities. Indeed, although the alternative models are still unable to occupy a significant space in contemporary urban development, they have achieved to establish themselves as benchmarks that stimulate reflection and debate, not only in the academic world, but also increasingly in the informed public opinion, influencing the decision-making realm in both, the public and private sectors.

These lines of critical thinking represent a true alternative to the prevailing currents, that as of the eighties and with particular presence since the mid-nineties, have in effect known to articulate their ideologies towards a proactive and pragmatic posture, but thereby not necessarily being less purposeful or exploratory. Proof of this is the substantial increase of projects that are being materialized, especially in some European countries as of this alternative vision, along with creative urban policies that favour and encourage a sustainable development. These projects advocate for the recovery of the qualities of the traditional city, in the sense of conceiving the urban space mainly for the pedestrian; some in a more literal way, while others from a more innovative reinterpretation, coinciding nonetheless in the appreciation of certain values that are implicit in the traditional cities.

Neo-traditional Urban Planning and the Art of Placemaking

The so called neo-traditional currents (Katz, 1994), particularly in Europe and in the United States, have captured the longing for the recovery of the properties of urban design of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, adopting and adapting the principles and characteristics that define the construction of quality urban spaces where citizens can walk and meet with one

another. There is no doubt that the figure of Leon Krier and his brother Rob are essential to understand these lines of thought, first because of Leon's scathing critique of the modern movement and of the American sprawl, blaming them for the decline of the urban tradition (Porphyrios & Papadakis, 1984); and then because of Leon and Rob's proposals and projects that have fuelled the disciplinary debate and have influenced new generations of architects by demonstrating the feasibility of alternative models to urban sprawl. Both of them have certainly been instrumental in the construction of a clear, simple and didactic discourse, placing value on the virtues of the pre-industrial city and on the timelessness of classical architecture over the spectacularity of ever changing design. Their work and influence have derived in the so-called *urban villages* in Europe, and in the New Urbanism in the United States, transcending thereafter, in different geographical and cultural contexts. Their ideology has strengthened urban design, placing the discipline as an effective alternative to urban sprawl. Its set of principles aims at the achievement of better cities, seeking the provision of public spaces that meet the needs and aspirations of people over the predominance of the car. It is known that one of the strengths of neo-traditional urbanism is the creation of quality public spaces, streets, squares, plazas and parks that define the scenario of urban life, either embedded in a purely urban context, or in suburban settings. The configuration of these spaces is based on an urban structure of relationships and hierarchies, and on an architecture that highlights its role as a gesture to the public dimension of a city.

The renowned case of Poundbury by Leon Krier, focus of criticism because of both, its attachment to the historicist architecture and its elitist character towards the neighbouring Dorchester, yet stands out as a master example that gives account of the attributes of traditional urban patterns that clearly define public space as from the urban façade, and reaffirms thereby an ideological commitment of Krier's, regarding urban design as a manifestation to the public realm. The configuration of squares and Poundbury's street network alongside with the diversity of its architecture is conceived in consideration to the pedestrian, however recognizing the preponderance of the car in a suburban setting.

There are other notorious neo-traditional experiences in Europe by Rob Krier and his partner Christoph Kohl, being the cases of *Brandevoort* in the Netherlands and the new district *Kirchsteigfeld* in Potsdam, a clear counterpoint to the conventional suburban sprawl and zoning, presenting compact configurations with defined centers and explicitly outlined edges. The Dutch case, designed as from the principles that characterize its regional towns, with a center, the *Veste*, alludes to the historic city creating a physical fabric and a spatiality that provides better conditions to enliven the public space supported by the mixture of uses and the pedestrian prevalence over the car. But it is not only the compact condition and the mixture of uses that makes these experiences attractive, as Rob Krier himself explains it: it is 'the urban fabric conceived according to human scale, and concerned about the architectural quality of the dwellings, the network of streets and squares, the

location of public buildings...of course without excluding the proper consideration of all functional aspects which allow achieving better cities.’ (Krier, 2012).¹

The neo-traditional movements do in fact rely on a strong regional identity basis, that resorts to historical interpretation of their local context, such as are the cases of Duany and PlaterZyberk’s *Heulebrug* in Belgium, the picturesque new town of *Jakriborg* in Sweden, and the *nouvelle cité* or *quartier Le Plessis-Robinson* in the municipality of the same name on the outskirts of the French capital, with its architecture reminiscences of the French Neoclassical (Siegel, 2012). Among the various stages of the latter, the *Coeur de Ville* or district center, designed by François Spoerry, stands out as an example that incorporates a refined design of the street scene in a morphological sense as well as in regard to its uses. This kind of project includes an architecture with a mixture of functions, with local stores, restaurants and *cafés* on the ground floors and housing on the upper floors, using traffic calming to reconcile the requirements of road connectivity with the proper conditions to enrich the pedestrian experience.

These paradigmatic references of neo-traditional urban design currents, beyond the criticism of its historicist imaginary, capture the essence of those movements in terms of providing the right conditions for people to perform their daily activities within a refined design of public spaces. Their proposals are based upon the diversity of uses and on the design of internal mobility that facilitates and encourages walking and biking; stimuli that are provided by the design of public space with the right proportions, views, façade, textures, urban elements and compositional patterns, that host various community and cultural events, and thus contribute positively to the environmental quality and the healthy coexistence among the inhabitants.

Meanwhile, in the United States the neo-traditional New Urbanism bases its ideological and discursive corpus largely on the quality of design of public spaces, evoking the art of placemaking. This is reflected in many of Duany & Plater-Zyberk projects developed with community participation (Duany & Plater-Zyberk, 1991), mainly through the Charettes as a mechanism for achieving the planning objectives in a collaborative structure between the planners and the citizens, principles that the Congress for the New Urbanism itself postulates (Leccese & McCormick, 1999) when referring that ‘a primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use’, and that ‘streets and squares should be safe, comfortable, and interesting to the pedestrian’ and furthermore that ‘civic buildings and public gathering places require important sites to reinforce community identity and the culture of democracy. They deserve a distinctive form, because their role is different from that of other buildings and places that constitute the fabric of the city.’

¹Translated by the author from the Spanish transcript available in the web.

The Eco-technological Approaches and the Provision of Quality Urban Spaces

The art of placemaking is not unique to neo-traditional movements. There are multiple experiences in contemporary urban design that advocate for the return of human scale in public spaces based upon different approaches, no matter whether they ascribe to traditional configurations, or claim for innovation as their ultimate goal, representing though the cutting edge of urban design. In fact, many of those who claim to be heirs of the Modern Movement endorse direct- or indirectly, the finesse of traditional urban design even under the discourse of social sustainability and a participating community. This is the case of many of the current approaches to urban design, as is evidenced in various built experiences, mainly in the European continent. Remarkable are the cases of the *Symbiocities* in Sweden, which integrate diverse actors of urban development and focus them towards a sustainable urban planning with a holistic approach that gathers together the different scopes and scales of city planning, aiming at the creation of more liveable places.

In this path of sustainable development, the *Symbiocity* experiences of *Hammarby Sjöstad* and *Västra Hamnen* have gone beyond the technological approach, addressing the public spaces as a challenge for quality design, with more pleasant environments and a safe and lively atmosphere, ensuring functional as well as perceptual aspects that encourage people to convene for their everyday activities. A special concern for the design of the waterfront can be appreciated in both of the cases, creating public spaces and a net of paths that foster and provide the conditions for recreation and spontaneous encounters among its inhabitants, following the Swedish tradition of community involvement and sensibility towards the natural environment. The public places are also conceived and planned in relation to the different scales and intensities of use and to privacy degrees, differentiating the essentially broad public spaces from those smaller in scale, with semi-public character that serve a community in its needs. Especially in the case of *Västra Hamnen's* first phase, there is a clear will to organize the urban structure and the urban fabric in accordance to human scale, incorporating subtle particularities that grant the conditions for strengthening local identities and hence bring on the community's sense of belonging. The orthogonal geometry of the streets and blocks is slightly shifted so as to generate dynamic spaces and vistas, which is enhanced by its diverse and creative architecture, enriching the experience of the public realm.

In Germany there are also some highly visible experiences of the so called eco-cities or districts, as is the case of *HafenCity* in Hamburg and *Vauban* in Freiburg, which not only embrace the sustainable principles in regards to environmental issues, but also in respect to offering diverse and stimulating public spaces for their inhabitants. In fact, the magnitude of the *HafenCity* project that is part of Hamburg's smart growth strategy, does not imply that there is a lesser commitment and involvement in providing quality design of the public space and citizen participation, which is a strong factor in the development strategy. On the other hand, the *Vauban* experience, although paradigmatic in its commitment towards environmental responsibility and

alternative energy provision, represents a highlight in community participatory management and administration, which is reflected on the character and on the use of the various public and semi-public spaces, each with its distinct features that relate to its neighbourhood and housing units, limiting or conditioning the access of the car on behalf of pedestrians and bicycles through the *Verkehrsberuhigter Bereich* or shared space concept.

Placemaking as Common Ground for Diverse Planning Approaches

Despite the notoriety and commendations that many of these alternative urban experiences enjoy, there are many detractors that aim their strong critique upon them. On the one hand, the neo-traditional movements are labelled as subservient to the prevailing model, with little compromise in regard to reversing sprawl, since its projects focus mainly on the suburban landscape; sustaining their designs on an imagery that uses historicist citations with a pastiche architecture that does not reflect the real world. While on the other hand, the neo-traditional advocates single out the modernist or innovative attitudes as irresponsible towards urban space and local identities, as well as unconcerned towards the construction of community.

This criticism is indicative of a permanent tension between the traditional and the innovative attitudes, between the nostalgia for the past and the exploratory zest or, as formerly defined by Françoise Choay, the contradistinction between 'culturalist urbanism' and 'progressive urbanism'. This evident contradiction though, distracts from the paradoxical convergence that can be observed between diverse alternative tendencies and currents that seek a new paradigm in contemporary urban planning, emphasizing on the qualitative aspects of urban design.

An ethical approach towards urban planning and design has to be the inspiration when faced with the challenge of offering better cities with friendlier and healthier public spaces. In this sense, placemaking as the art of conforming quality urban spaces for the needs and aspirations of the people who live them, has to be understood as the thriving force in the building of human settlements. The concept originated in the 1960s, with the works of Jane Jacobs and William Whyte, aimed at the recovery of urban space for its inhabitants through the design of public places for people rather than places for the car. This seems to be of common sense nowadays; nonetheless it represents a change of paradigm when contrasted with the predominant model of development in the global context that focuses on a rather deregulated urban growth through sprawl. Hence, the seemingly opposing views on architecture and urban design, as the ones championed by the neo-traditional movements on the one hand, and the eco-technological approaches on the other hand, tend progressively to converge within a sustainable discourse and a participatory ethos. Transcending the dogmatic attitudes that confront the hypermodernity and the traditional currents, there is a common ground that summons the emerging alternative approaches opposed to the meaninglessness of

quantitative development and the automobile based sprawl landscape. This common ground has to do with the concern of providing quality public spaces on a human scale conceived for the pedestrian pace, addressing not merely the functional aspects of good design, but also those variables that enrich the everyday experience of living the public realm.

Indeed, when confronting alternative urban design projects as different as Rob Krier's neo-traditional *Kirchsteigfeld* and *Brandevoort* with the Swedish techno-ecological *Symbiocities* of *Hammarby Sjöstad* and *Västra Hamnen*, some amazing similarities in the quality of the public places can be found in spite of their antagonistic origins and different views on architecture. The urban structure basically defined by a hierarchical net of streets and small blocks, arranged in a way that generates a diversity of public spaces, are a characteristic of both approaches, as is the attention drawn on human scale and slow pace mobility. Places like the *Coeur de Ville's Grande Rue* in *Le Plessis Robinson*, *Brandevoort's De Veste*, Poundbury's rich sidewalk network and its Pummery Square, the diversity of public spaces in American towns designed by Duany & Plater-Zyberk, and even the picturesque *Jakriborg's* main square are some of those public places we long for in contemporary suburban developments, and whereby the neo-traditional trends are known to excel. Meanwhile, in some European eco-districts like *Hammarby Sjöstad* and *Västra Hamnen*, special attention is given to the design of the waterfronts providing strolling paths, playgrounds, gathering places, as well as of diverse smaller plazas and semipublic areas designed as shared spaces, drawing attention to materials and detail. The lineal park at the *GlashusEtt* in Hammarby Sjöstad, the promenade at *Västra Hamnen*, or the Magellan Terraces in *HafenCity*, Hamburg, are some eloquent examples that show the willingness to offer a true alternative to the anonymity of the car oriented model that proliferates worldwide as a sign of globalization.

This common attitude towards providing quality public spaces that encourage the building of lively and participatory communities can be understood as a new phenomenon that congregates different approaches towards a more sustainable development as a counterbalance to sprawl. As stated by Project for Public Spaces (PPS)¹, 'making a place is not the same as constructing a building, designing a plaza, or developing a commercial zone. When people enjoy a place for its special social and physical attributes, and when they are allowed to influence decision-making about that space, then you see genuine Placemaking in action' (PPS, 2009).

Conclusions

In the long term the unsustainability of sprawl as a model of urban growth and development, along with the increasing demands for effective citizenship

¹Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a nonprofit planning, design and educational organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities.

participation, creates an appropriate scenario for the thrive of alternative urban design currents and movements, be they traditional in spirit or innovative and technologically driven. These opposing views though, do in fact progressively converge towards more inclusive approaches that capture the essence of life on a human scale. The alarming magnitude of the proliferation of sprawl within the context of globalization, urges indeed to envision a real change of paradigm towards more sustainable models of development, concentrating on a qualitative rapprochement with the discipline of urban planning and design, seeking to incorporate good architecture and quality public spaces according to the demands of empowered citizens. The emerging alternative movements that seem to gain their place in urban development can be understood as a new phenomenon under construction and as a sign of hope in regards to future cities; cities that cater to the people and benefit them through real and effective placemaking.

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Placemaking as common ground for diverse alternative town planning approaches

Figure 1. *The neo-traditional town of Poundbury, Dorset. U.K. Photographed by the author, 2010*



Figure 2. *The neo-traditional town of Brandevoort, Helmond. Neatherlands. Photographed by the author, 2010*



Figure 3. *The public park at the GlashusEtt in the Symbiocity of Hammarby Sjöstad, Stockholm. Sweden. Photographed by the author, 2010*



Figure 4. *The Symbiocity of Västra Hamnen, Malmö. Sweden. Photographed by the author, 2010*

