

Conservatives and the New Urbanism:  
Do We Have Some Things in Common?

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## Introduction

We begin this study of conservatives and the New Urbanism where we began the first of our studies of conservatives and public transportation— namely with a bit of Gilbert and Sullivan:

*I often think it's comical  
How Nature always does contrive  
That ev'ry boy and ev'ry gal  
That's born into the world alive  
is either a little Liberal  
Or else a little Conservative  
—Iolanthe*

Just as it is with people, so it also is with issues. For reasons (or lack thereof) we find puzzling, New Urbanism is perceived by Left and Right alike as a "liberal issue." Conservatives are not supposed to be interested in it – certainly no more than conservatives were interested in public transportation before Free Congress pointed out the many ways in which good public transit (rail, not buses) serves conservative ends.

The same, we think, is true of good New Urbanism. On the face of it, it is hard to see why conservatives should oppose offering traditionally-designed cities, towns and neighborhoods as alternatives to post-war "sprawl" suburbs. As conservatives, we are supposed to prefer traditional designs over modern innovations in most things (and we do). We hope to demonstrate traditional designs for the places we live, work and shop encourage traditional culture and morals. This should not surprise us. Edmund Burke told us more than two hundred years ago that traditional societies are organic wholes. If you (literally) disintegrate a society's physical setting, as sprawl has done, you tend to disintegrate its culture as well.

This study divides into two sections. In the first, we define New Urbanism, both broadly and in some detail. Then we examine its principles (27 of them in The Charter of the New Urbanism, to be precise) from a conservative perspective, with a goal of determining which are consistent with conservatism and which are not.

In the study's second section, we consider two paths to New Urbanism. One is based on government mandates and the other on a free market. The latter, we hope to show, is not only conservatives' natural choice but also far more effective in getting to where New Urbanists want to go.

Of the three authors of this study, Paul M. Weyrich and William S. Lind are well-known political and cultural conservatives. They have contributed the political analysis to this joint endeavor. Andres Duany is an urban planning conservative, someone who understands how previous generations of planners and architects built cities and buildings as they did and why they were wise to do so. He has contributed to much of the content of New Urbanism – not only in this study but in the wider world. Gilbert and Sullivan to the contrary, he does not regard himself as politically liberal or conservative, but as an

American pragmatist: He is interested in what works best in the long run.

If this study begins to do for New Urbanism what the Weyrich/Lind studies of public transportation have done for that much-misunderstood field, all three authors will rest satisfied.

At its simplest, New Urbanism

*aims to build hamlets, neighborhoods, villages, towns, and cities rather than subdivisions, shopping centers, and office parks like those found in conventional suburban developments ... Maximizing walkability is essential.*<sup>1</sup>

We might add that the architecture of most buildings will reflect local traditions.

A reasonable conservative reaction to this basic definition might be, "OK, I've got no problem with that." While conservatives are supposed to love sprawl suburbs, many of us actually like the idea of living in traditional neighborhoods, villages and towns (cities perhaps a little less). We have nothing against walking; many of us do it for exercise, and would as soon have nice places to do it. As conservatives, we believe traditions should be upheld, in architecture as elsewhere. And conservatism has always favored the local variety over broad-scale uniformity.

Is that all there is to it? Well, no, as the rest of this study will show. We begin to see the significance of New Urbanism for conservatives when we move beyond looking at architecture and urban design to a more important subject, namely how life is lived in neighborhoods, villages and towns (and traditional neighborhoods within cities). Put simply, genuine community can grow more easily and develop more fully in those traditional places than in typical modern suburbs.

Why is that the case? Because in the traditional community types, we interact a lot with the people who live around us, while in conventional suburbia we usually do not. It is a cliché to say that people who live in such suburbs don't know their neighbors, but it is often true. It is easy to see why by looking at a typical suburban day.

You get up in the morning, grab a quick cup of coffee and head out the door. But the door leads to your garage, not outside. You get in the car, open the garage door, turn on the air conditioning and the radio, and back out. You might, at most, wave to a neighbor in his car. You know where he lives but you don't know his name. You couldn't stop and talk to him if you wanted to.

At work, you may be stuck in an office park, or on a strip center, unable to walk down a sidewalk for lunch with your fellows.

Coming home in the evening, you do the same thing in reverse. If you stopped at a store or restaurant on the way, it was probably several miles from where you live. The other people there were drawn from a wide area. It is a rare occurrence to see anyone you know from your community.

Once home, you probably stay in the house. If you exercise, you drive to a gym. Most evenings you spend in front of the TV or the computer. You may go outside on weekends to cut the grass or barbecue, but most of what you or your kids do requires a

trip in the car. You couldn't walk or ride a bike if you wanted to; the streets have no sidewalks and in any case, you would quickly hit a major road that has lots of fast traffic.

It is not hard to understand why community seldom forms under these conditions. People have no places where they can meet their neighbors casually, or in passing.

Contrast that suburban life to life in a traditional town, village or neighborhood. Grocery stores, shops, restaurants, coffee houses, churches, the library and the post office are all in walking distance. So is at least the elementary school, and maybe the high school as well. All streets have sidewalks, and a grid street pattern means you can always find a "back way" with less traffic if you want to walk or bicycle. Kids play outside structured, supervised activities. To get to work, you may drive, but you may also walk to the bus or Light Rail stop.

All of these conditions draw people out of their houses and out of their cars. They spend a lot more time walking to things. And because the area is small and relatively self-contained, the people they meet live near them. They get to know their neighbors, which is the first step toward the formation of community. Unless that happens, community is impossible. That is important because many of conservatives' goals can best be attained in communities.

Most conservatives agree that two of the most important things we want to conserve are our traditional culture and our traditional morals. Conserving those means we must pass them on to the next generation, despite the surrounding "pop culture" which does its utmost to undermine them. We can do so much more effectively where they are supported by a community than when we have to try to teach them in isolation.

The family is the most important institution for ensuring the survival of traditional culture and morals. Churches and schools probably come next. Both churches and (good) schools can do their jobs better if the people who attend them know each other outside them as inside them. That happens much more easily when students walk to a local school and families walk to worship than when they have to drive miles away.

Beside these institutions as inculcators and upholders of traditional culture and morals stands the community. As anyone who has children knows, peer pressure is a powerful force with them (and with adults as well). When both adults and children live in a genuine community, the peer pressure to do the right things instead of the wrong can be intense. It can be powerful enough to push back the deadly messages emanating from the pop culture, which is the source of so many young people's downfall.

The role of the community in transmitting the culture to the next generation and upholding traditional morals for young and old alike is one of civilization's most basic texts. If that role goes unfilled, as it tends to do in suburbs where people do not know their neighbors, conservatives lose one of their most important instruments.

This, then, is the basic equation as we see it: traditional towns, villages and neighborhoods, which the New Urbanism seeks to offer as alternatives to sprawling suburbs, greatly facilitate the growth of community. Community ought to be something

conservatives value highly because of the vital role it plays in transmitting and upholding the culture we have and the morals we hold. Conservatives, therefore, should find the New Urbanism worthy of their support.

This is our fundamental argument, to which we will frequently return. But if we look at the New Urbanism in a bit more detail, we find some other reasons conservatives should find it of interest.

### Flying Buttresses

Co-author Andres Duany offers this more specific definition of New Urbanism, based on four of its central characteristics:

The New Urbanism can be described as a movement that fosters human communities that are, so far as the market will support, compact, connected, complete and convivial.

1) Compact in order to allow walkability. A resident's ordinary daily needs should be available within walking distance. These would include an elementary school, a grocery and general store, recreational and meeting places. Residents should not have to own an automobile in order to survive.

Compactness also conserves open space, particularly places of beauty and spaces for recreation, and also land that can be farmed. Food self-sufficiency is an ideal, though it will seldom be attained in practice.

2) Connected by a variety of choices of transportation: walking, bicycles, cars and transit, preferably electric streetcars.

3) Complete in that each community should contain a range of housing types, suitable for a variety of people, including the next generation. Each should also contain a variety of shops and workplaces. Its setting should be such that it can become agriculturally self-sufficient in basic produce.

4) Convivial in that the public spaces of the community should be safe, participatory and enjoyable. People should be able to know their neighbors.

If we examine this definition of New Urbanism from a conservative perspective, we see it buttresses our basic argument of the need for community with other features conservatives value.

First, New Urbanism recovers many of the practices that created the original North American settlements, the common urban pattern common until the 1930s: traditional villages, towns and cities. Some of these still survive (and are highly valued places to live), despite being undermined by the imposition of suburban practices. But new ones had not been created between World War II and the advent of New Urbanism.

Conservatives like making old things new.

New Urbanism is conservative in that it has an aversion to experiments. There have been too many failures throughout the 20th century – experiments in architecture and urbanism. New Urbanist designers tend to work within well-tested precedents.

The best New Urbanist codes do not ban things such as large house lots, multi-car garages, and parking lots; they just put them in appropriate places and they provide other choices as well. No one is intrinsically "wrong" when it comes to their urban preferences. They may only be wrong in where they want to do it. Good New Urbanist plans endeavor to accommodate most of society's preferences, from churches to tattoo parlors.

Second, the New Urbanism, at its inception and still in the majority of its projects, has been primarily market-driven. These projects are developed by the private sector for profit; residents elect to purchase them in an open competitive market. Except in a few specific instances, such as the HOPE VI program of public housing and public transit, they do not require subsidies.

New Urbanism's primary problem is that most of the market is not free. It is not a level playing field. In most places, people are not given a choice between New Urbanism and sprawl. New Urbanism is illegal under most current regulatory regimes, where the codes and standards mandate sprawl. Building a New Urbanist project typically requires securing a large number of variances, which is expensive in both time and money.

New Urbanists believe the rules should offer a choice of urban and suburban patterns, including sprawl. Conservatives who believe in free markets, and most do, should be with New Urbanists in demanding codes that level the playing field and let the market decide. New Urbanists think that, given the choice, a very substantial number of people will choose New Urbanist communities. Conservatives should insist they be given an equal chance to prove their point in a genuinely free development market.

Third, while New Urbanists accept that subsidies are necessary for public housing, they are generally against subsidies elsewhere. Even in housing for the poor, they think subsidies could be cut back if we eliminated unnecessary, gold-plated standards that raise building costs, and if we removed intractable bureaucratic procedures that have eliminated the small builder, including the self-builder.

Some New Urbanists favor toll roads as alternatives to publicly subsidized highways; especially where parkways are concerned, commuters should shoulder the true cost of their travel and lifestyle choices. Many also believe parking should be metered rather than subsidized. Most New Urbanists favor congestion charges for use of urban streets where good transit is available. Subsidies may be required for building and operating transit, but only at the same level as building and maintaining highways. The object, again, is a level playing field, which a free market requires.

Fourth, New Urbanism allows working at home, which incubates small businesses. Virtually every home in the 21st century will be a live-work unit; that is one of the effects of the Internet. New Urbanists believe that providing affordable business quarters is no

less important than providing affordable housing. There are in fact two American dreams, not just the "little house in the woods" but also "being your own boss." New Urbanism provides opportunities for both.

Further, the New Urbanist housing practice encourages ancillary dwellings for rent, either within the principal dwelling or as an outbuilding. The income from the rent helps the homeowner pay the mortgage, and the rented room or outbuilding provides housing students, newly-married couples or the elderly can afford.

Finally, the New Urbanism fosters community by making walking easy and pleasant, by providing places such as coffeehouses and diners where people can meet, and by creating attractive public spaces. It fosters social cohesion and local democracy that can look beyond individual interests. While housing is carefully designed to provide privacy in the back yard and indoors, it is also designed to be inviting and sociable to the pedestrian realm in front of the house. And so we come full circle, back to where we started, with community and its importance to conservatives.

Thus far, we have examined New Urbanism in terms of what it offers to conservatives, which turns out to be quite a bit. Now it is time to turn the telescope around and offer a conservative critique of New Urbanism.

### The Twenty-Seven Faces of New Urbanism

Like Fu Manchu, New Urbanism has many faces, twenty-seven to be exact. These are the principles laid out in *The Charter*, which is the formal document on which the New Urbanism defines itself.<sup>2</sup> The bold, numbered items below are the principles of the *Charter* itself, upon which there is a published book of commentary called "The Charter of the New Urbanism," from which we will quote freely. Here we will look at each principle (and its official commentary) and critique it from a conservative perspective.

First, however, we need to consider two principles which many people think are part of the New Urbanism but are not. They have led some conservatives to be critical on a false basis. The principles falsely attributed to New Urbanism are first that it is against automobiles, and second that it is against suburbia.

In fact, New Urbanism accepts cars and driving and believes in providing adequate roads and parking. It just does not want the car to be the only option for almost every trip. Communities should be designed so people are free to choose between driving, walking, riding a bike or taking public transportation.

Here is what the *Charter* says, in principle twenty-two:

**In the contemporary metropolis, development must adequately accommodate automobiles. It should do so in ways that respect the pedestrian and the form of public space.**

The *Charter* commentary states:

*Automobiles are a fact of modern life, and they are not going away... Most people will continue to drive their cars, so streets must oblige traffic. But we need better streets and public places than most new ones being built. They must be reasonably pleasant and convenient for motoring, but delightful for walking and cycling... One successful design strategy [to provide parking] is to move storefronts flush to the street and to locate the off-street parking out of the way [behind the buildings]... Too often we vilify the car without acknowledging its central place in our culture. When we shape our investments in automobile infrastructure more carefully, we can reclaim public spaces in cities while designing new communities that celebrate the pedestrian as well as the automobile.*

"Celebrating the automobile" does not sound to us like being against cars.

Similarly, New Urbanism does not ban suburbia, not even sprawl suburbs. As we have already noted, what New Urbanists want is a level playing field where home-builders and home-buyers are free to choose between New Urbanist communities and sprawl suburbs. What they object to are government regulations that rule New Urbanism out.

In fact, New Urbanism itself offers suburban living. It regards a "sub-urban" area as a natural part of the progression from the inner city "core" to the countryside (this progression is often called "the Transect"). It is termed "sub-urban" to emphasize that it is not as intense as the city. Here is how one book describes the sub-urban area:

*The [sub-urban] tier differs from conventional suburban development of the past 50 years. It hews closer to an Olmsteadian aesthetic or to the character of early 20th-century US suburbs... The lots are larger, the streets more crooked, the curbs few. Plantings are informal. Setbacks from the street are larger in this tier, generally ranging from 20 to 30 feet. Porches are plentiful, and should be allowed to encroach on the setback. Lot widths usually range from 50 to 80 feet. Lots are often deeper in the Suburban tier – ranging from 110 to 140 feet – to accommodate a larger back yard. Lots generally range from 5000 to 12,000 square feet... Of all the neighborhood areas, density is least in the Suburban tier, ranging from 2 to 8 units per acre net.<sup>3</sup>*

This is a good description of the suburbs many Americans now live in. It has a rural feel – which is just what most suburbanites want. The New Urbanists just want to make sure that it is walkable.

With those two common misperceptions out of the way, let us now consider the actual principles of New Urbanism.

The New Urbanist *Charter* divides its 27 principles into three groups. The first is "The Region: Metropolis, City, and Town." Each group includes nine principles. Under "The Region," we find:

**1. The metropolitan region is a fundamental economic unit of the contemporary world. Governmental cooperation, public policy, physical planning, and economic strategies must reflect this new reality.**

Conservatives recognize the plain fact that regions are what now count economically. Regions generally rise or fall in prosperity as a whole. Because we believe in economic growth, we want regions to function well as economic units.

That does not mean we want regional government. In most cases, we do not. One of conservatism's long-standing principles is subsidiarity, the belief that all problems should be dealt with at the lowest possible level. It begins with the most basic social unit, the family, and progresses only reluctantly up through the neighborhood, the town or city's municipal government, the county, the state and finally the federal level. Adding a regional layer of regulation and bureaucracy will only increase costs, burden land-owners, builders and developers, and create one-size-fits-none solutions to problems best dealt with locally.

What we want instead of regional government is regional cooperation and coordination, working bottom-up, not top-down. Government should have the power to convene an ongoing discussion between municipalities in a region, but not try to overrule them. Some matters do need to be dealt with at the regional level, through cooperation. But most are best handled locally, with each village, town, city and county, reflecting both common and adversarial interests, establishing its own policies. By allowing each community to develop in its own way to the greatest practicable extent, we both reflect conservative subsidiarity and support the New Urbanist goal of keeping each community true to its individual character.

In the *Charter's* discussion of its first principle, the commentary states,

*Viable urban schools are essential to healthy cities and balanced regional growth ... [One] strategy is the school voucher.*

As conservatives, we say Hear! Hear!

Next we read:

**2. Metropolitan regions are finite places with geographic boundaries derived from topography, watersheds, coastlines, farmlands, regional parks and river basins. The metropolis is made of multiple centers that are cities, towns, and villages, each with its own identifiable center and edges.**

This principle states some physical facts, which are obvious enough; suggests that regions should continue to have multiple identifiable centers, which serves conservatives' long-standing belief in variety; and then, in the *Charter's* discussion, goes on to call for a comprehensive regional plan.

Conservatives would offer a qualifier to the idea of a regional plan.

Comprehensive regional plans can be of benefit, if they are good plans. An example is the Burnham Plan for Chicago, which was put in place a century ago and worked splendidly. On the other hand, a bad plan, like Le Corbusier's infamous Plan Voisin for Paris which would have bulldozed most of the city and replaced its historic structures with high-rises, can be worse than no plan at all.

The question, then, is how best to ensure a good plan? The *Charter's* commentary on its second principle suggests a way:

*Regional governments are not essential to implement regional strategies. Yet some form of regional governance is necessary. This can be provided by a civic group with powerful business or community leadership ...*

In fact, it was exactly such a group that sponsored the Burnham Plan for Chicago. In the first half of the 20th century, Cleveland was shaped (for the better) by the two Van Sweringen brothers, businessmen and developers (of Shaker Heights) who never held public office. Virtually all American cities, from the Pilgrims onward, have been shaped more by private interests than by government.

Regional plans are more likely to be good plans if they are created and implemented outside the framework of government. Government planning consists mostly of political log-rolling, which excludes long-range vision because it mainly serves the interests of current officeholders. If a regional plan developed by private citizens working in a civic capacity is a good plan, local governments can choose to follow it. If it is a bad plan, they can reject it. That is an approach to regional planning that both conservatives and New Urbanists should be able to support.

**3. The metropolis has a necessary and fragile relationship to its agrarian hinterland and natural landscapes. The relationship is environmental, economic, and cultural. Farmland and nature are as important to the metropolis as the garden is to the house.**

This is a principle with which conservatives can strongly agree. Most conservatives are agrarians. We recognize that agriculture is exactly that, a culture, and a beneficial one. Farms are good places for children to grow up, and children (and adults) that live in the city need easy access to farms and to natural landscapes. Farms near cities need to be protected from endlessly encroaching suburban development.

People in cities also should have access to farm-fresh produce, not just to wilted vegetables picked weeks ago in California. In its commentary on this principle, the *Charter* comments:

*One third of all American farms – that's 640,000 farms – are located in the nation's 320 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), or areas with at least 50,000 residents...*

According to American Farmland magazine, farms in metro areas produce 70 percent of our fruits, 69 percent of our vegetables, and 52 percent of our milk.

We want those numbers to rise, not fall.

The *Charter* quotes a Colorado rancher, Bill Gay, as saying, "Asphalt is the last crop you'll grow on the land." As conservatives, we want to conserve America's farms and farmland.

**4. Development patterns should not blur or eradicate the edges of the metropolis. Infill development within the existing areas conserves environmental resources, economic investment, and social fabric, while reclaiming marginal and abandoned areas. Metropolitan regions should develop strategies to encourage such infill development over peripheral expansion.**

America's cities have long been following a pattern of development that leads to decline. The city expands ever-outward, as a decaying semi-abandoned core expands toward the edge. Decay chases after development. At some point, it will catch it.

As conservatives, we don't want America's cities to turn into empty holes. We want them to be the splendid, uplifting, productive places most of them once were. We therefore agree with this principle: we need to reverse the pursuit of development-by-decay by refocusing development inward, not outward.

We offer one caveat: sprawl needs to remain an option for those who want it. This does not contradict the principle.

The *Charter's* discussion of this principle again addresses a point of concern to conservatives, namely how the desired refocusing of development is to be achieved:

*Only a few metropolitan regions have been able to grapple with growth and suburban sprawl by forming effective regional governments. But numerous other regions are finding that grass-roots efforts – led by citizens, civic organizations, environmental groups, and churches, frequently in coalitions – can work toward regional planning goals that focus on reviving city centers as a strategy to curtail sprawl.*

As long as it is done by private efforts, not government mandates, conservatives should have no objection.

**5. Where appropriate, new development contiguous to urban boundaries should be organized as neighborhoods and districts, and be integrated with the existing urban pattern. Noncontiguous development should be organized as towns and villages with their own urban edges, and planned for a jobs/housing balance, not as bedroom suburbs.**

This principle restates the basic definition of New Urbanism, found at the beginning of this study. New Urbanism offers neighborhoods, villages and towns rather than subdivisions, shopping centers and office parks, all separated by distances that

require people to drive. Again, as conservatives, we're all for it, so long as sprawl also remains an option for those developers, builders and home-buyers who prefer it.

We would note that there is an economic conservative reason for developing as this principle recommends. By focusing development where infrastructure already exists, and designing new developments to require as few new roads as practicable, the burden on public finances is reduced and tax rates can be kept lower.

**6. The development and redevelopment of towns and cities should respect historical patterns, precedents and boundaries.**

This argument is conservative in itself. Conservatives respect the past and desire historical continuity. The *Charter's* discussion of this principle states that

*In Colonial New England, towns were laid out collectively by the community, and the boundaries extended only as far as the town meeting bell could be heard [we would add, the church bell as well]. The building of homes and businesses once was focused around the "heart" of the community – the town green was its cultural, economic, and spiritual center. From the local hilltop, people could see their community laid out and could understand it.*

This speaks directly to the main conservative goal served by New Urbanism, community. Community grows best where people can physically see their place as an entity, and find it lovely. Pride in a place they can "put their arms around" becomes a shared sentiment, one of the bonds that create and reinforce a sense of community.

We would add that when you look at those colonial New England towns, you see that the most imposing building on the green is usually the church. It is the most imposing building because to those New Englanders, it was the most important building. It had charge over their immortal souls and their salvation. The great conservative writer Russell Kirk said that culture comes from the cult. Similarly, community comes best and most strongly from the church. Some New Urbanists neglect to provide suitably prominent sites, and enough of them, for churches in their plans. If enough are provided, churches and other places of worship will be constructed over time, as congregations obtain the resources.

**7. Cities and towns should bring into proximity a broad spectrum of public and private uses to support a regional economy that benefits people of all incomes. Affordable housing should be distributed throughout the region to match job opportunities and to avoid concentrations of poverty.**

The conservative response to this principle is "yes and no, but mostly no." Authors Weyrich and Lind see this embodying one of the Left's current mantras, "diversity." People of all sorts and kinds, races and classes are to be forced to mix, whether they want to or not (and mostly they don't). They reject forced "diversity" in all its manifestations. Author Duany notes that nothing in the *Charter* requires "forced diversity." Rather, the *Charter* promotes the freedom and level playing field for developers to create a broad range of housing types in close proximity, where market conditions allow.

Conservatives know that people do best in life when they live by standard middle-class values. Distributed, affordable housing serves that conservative goal by dispersing the poor among the middle class, where peer pressure reinforces positive rather than negative values.

But that plus is outweighed by two large minuses. The first is that "diversity" works against community. Communities form most easily, and often only form at all, among people who are similar. The more "diverse" a place's population, the less likely it is to form community. The genuine benefits of community outweigh any imagined benefit of "diversity."

Second, simply forcing the urban poor out among middle class communities risks shattering those communities. It usually leads the middle class to move out into the countryside, unless it is done by volunteers who respect each others' social ties and culture. The flight from people who are uncivil -- or worse -- is perhaps the single most powerful factor behind the decline of our cities. New Urbanism that refuses to acknowledge the importance of social cohesion renders itself a fairy tale.

There are two types of diversity conservatives find acceptable. Both occur naturally, not in response to ideologically-driven "mandates." The first is a diversity of communities, such as Chinatowns or Little Italies or Slavic Villages, within a larger city. The distinctiveness of such places strengthens rather than weakens the bonds of community. The second naturally occurring diversity is variety *within* the middle class. A place may have residents who are lower-middle, middle-middle and upper-middle class that still cohere sufficiently to create a sense of community. Small towns offer a classic example of this sort of variety (a word conservatives much prefer to the ideologically-laden "diversity") within a range that is solidly middle class from top to bottom.

In general, the conservative reply to this principle is the same as our reply to the New Urbanist critique of sprawl suburbs: people should be free to choose. Developers, builders and home-buyers should be free to choose neighborhoods, villages and towns that include affordable housing or those that do not. Let the free market decide. We predict the large majority will choose community over "diversity." Many of the people making that choice will doubtless be liberals.

**8. The physical organization of the region should be supported by a framework of transportation alternatives. Transit, pedestrian, and bicycle systems should maximize access and mobility throughout the region while reducing dependence on the automobile.**

We agree, although we do not see this as a left/right issue. Few conservatives enjoy being stuck in traffic congestion, and we use good public transportation in large numbers. If you look at the demographics of commuters on Chicago's excellent Metra commuter rail system, you will find that most riders have middle-class or upper incomes, have a car available for their trip and live in areas that elect Republican Congressmen. One of the authors of this study, Mr. Lind, whose politics are approximately those of Kaiser Wilhelm II, commutes on Washington's Metro or by bicycle.

The well-known Weyrich/Lind studies of conservatives and public transit make two points that are worth repeating here. First, the current domination of the automobile is not a free market outcome. Beginning in World War I, government at all levels has poured immense subsidies into highways. Those highways competed with what was then a vast network of streetcars, interurbans and passenger trains, almost all of which were privately operated, received no subsidies and paid taxes. Not surprisingly, the subsidized mode put the competing unsubsidized modes out of business.

Second, all public transit is not created equal. While many Americans like riding rail transit – streetcars, Light Rail, Heavy Rail and commuter rail – they do not like riding a bus. Few will take the bus if they have a car and can drive. But these "riders from choice" will take rail transit.

This means New Urbanism needs to favor not just transit, but specifically rail transit. Only rail transit can reduce traffic congestion. Only rail transit, not buses, spurs development, including the redevelopment of urban cores that is one of New Urbanism's aims. When it comes to public transportation, New Urbanism's slogan should be "*Bring Back the Streetcars!*" That just happens to be the title of one of the Weyrich/Lind studies.

Rounding out its discussion of the region:

**9. Revenues and resources can be shared more cooperatively among the municipalities and centers within regions to avoid destructive competition for tax base and to promote rational coordination of transportation, recreating, public services, housing, and community institutions.**

This principle calls for turning tax money over to a regional government, forcing middle- and upper-class communities to cross-subsidize the poor inner city. It includes spending on schools; the discussion in the *Charter* says, "School spending in particular illustrates the need for equity."

As conservatives, we reject this principle outright. It is anti-community. A community is stripped of much of its meaning when its tax revenues are taken from it and given to someone else. Politics minus control over how revenues are spent are empty politics. People will respond to this sort of robbery by moving out, further into the countryside, which is what New Urbanism seeks to avoid. Of course, if communities decide voluntarily to share some revenues for the common good, that is fine with us.

This concludes the *Charter's* discussion of the region. In general, we find conservatives can agree with most of it. What we insist on is that people be free to choose, not coerced by government. Regional cooperation and coordination based on private citizen activism is something we welcome. Conservatism is civic-minded. But it dislikes coercion by the power of the state, and it recognizes that people will vote against regional coercion by moving out. Neither conservatives nor New Urbanists should desire that outcome.

The *Charter* groups its next nine principles under the heading "Neighborhood, District and Corridor." In the introduction to the discussion of this section, the *Charter* states,

*This is the heart of New Urbanism: the reassertion of fundamental urban design principles at the neighborhood scale and their unique accommodation to the contemporary world.*

*This section also describes an ideal structure for towns and cities. As opposed to the destructive single-use zoning of most contemporary city plans, the New Urbanism proposes a structure of three fundamental elements – neighborhoods, districts, and corridors. Viewing a community as the integration of mixed-use places rather than isolated land uses is a profound change. It provides a planning superstructure that respects human scale and community...*

We will find much here that supports community – and other conservative goals as well.

**10. The neighborhood, the district, and the corridor are the essential elements of development and redevelopment in the metropolis. They form identifiable areas that encourage citizens to take responsibility of their maintenance and evolution.**

Here, the *Charter* discusses that there are three basic "building blocks" to cities. The first is the neighborhood.

*The New Urbanism reaffirms the neighborhood as the basic building block of all residential districts. Within the 10-minute walking circle, a neighborhood includes a mix of different house and apartment types. Streets make legible connections that are easy to walk as well as drive, and there are neighborhood shops, schools, and civic buildings, all within walking distance.*

Conservatives can accept this with enthusiasm. Community is strongest at the neighborhood level.

The second building block, the districts, are the next level up. New Urbanism agrees with present zoning that most industries should be separated from residential districts, but that business districts should include residences as well as stores and offices. This is called "mixed-use zoning."

The whole question of zoning is troublesome to conservatives. Some conservatives and many libertarians oppose all zoning, at least until a pig farm moves in next door. As cultural conservatives, we accept zoning as necessary to maintaining continuity. We don't like to see the character of places changed radically in ways that obliterate their history and traditions.

An interesting book on the New Urbanism, [Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith](#), discusses zoning in a common-sense way:

*It makes sense to have a law preventing a pulp mill or a slaughterhouse from moving into a residential neighborhood. But is it as clear that a coffee shop or a mom-and-pop grocery is detrimental to neighborhood life?...*

*An important feature of the mixed-use neighborhood is that it has a symbiotic relationship with public spaces. Mixed-use neighborhoods give people additional reasons to travel on or through public spaces by giving them interesting and useful destinations to which they can walk...*

*A neighborhood that has a mix of uses as well as a good network of public spaces provides for a richer experience of community than does one that is lacking in either or both.<sup>4</sup>*

Mixed-use zoning is merely a return to the way cities and towns used to be, up until World War II. As conservatives, we find places like that to be pretty nice.

The third building block, corridors, connect districts. Unfortunately, what that has come to mean in America is highways lined with strip centers. With almost everyone else, conservatives find strip malls (literally) ugly as sin.

New Urbanism offers alternatives to the strip center corridor, including parkways, rail transit lines and the clustering of stores and businesses at one-mile nodes along a corridor. Compared to the strip center, almost anything has to be an improvement.

**11. Neighborhoods should be compact, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed-use. Districts generally emphasize a special single use, and should follow the principles of neighborhood design when possible. Corridors are regional connectors of neighborhoods and districts; they range from boulevards and rail lines to rivers and parkways.**

This is a more detailed re-statement of principle 10, and because it represents the recovery of traditions, conservatives should be comfortable with it.

A few points in the *Charter's* discussion are worth quoting at length:

- The neighborhood has a center and an edge. A beautiful center is a necessity; a beautiful boundary is a luxury. The center is the location for civic buildings, such as libraries, meeting halls and churches
- Streets designed for pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers also encourage the casual meetings among neighbors that help form the bonds of community.
- A quotation from *A Better Place to Live* by Philip Langdon: "The country can learn much from the neighborly kinds of housing we used to build. They made – and continue to make – good places for living."

**12. Many activities of daily living should occur within walking distance, allowing independence to those who do not drive, especially the elderly and**

**the young. Interconnected networks of streets should be designed to encourage walking, reduce the number and length of automobile trips, and conserve energy.**

We have already noted that conservatives want alternatives to dependence on cars and traffic congestion, just like most other people. The main focus of the *Charter's* discussion here is something else: street patterns. Traditional towns and cities usually had a grid of streets, which offered multiple possible routes from point to point. In contrast, sprawl developments' streets follow a "pod and collector" model, where most residential streets are cul-de-sacs. The only way to go anyplace is to get on the large "collector," or the larger "arterial" road.

This is a sure-fire way to guarantee traffic congestion, as millions of Americans are reminded every day. Conservatives are not surprised that our ancestors laid out streets and roads a lot more intelligently than have modern professional planners.

**13. Within neighborhoods, a broad range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.**

Here's "diversity" again, and conservatives won't fall for it. Authentic communities arise from commonality, not diversity. Conservatives would welcome a mix of housing sizes, types and prices that would allow different generations of a family to live in the same neighborhood. What we reject is an admixture of people who do not live by middle-class values. Nothing destroys a community faster than having to fear for the safety of your family and your property.

The *Charter's* discussion (below) moves on to something conservatives and New Urbanists can agree on: public housing should be designed as neighborhoods and towns, not bleak blocks of Soviet-style apartments.

- Superblocks are divided into smaller blocks. High-rise buildings are demolished and replaced with townhomes, single-family homes, and smaller apartment buildings.
- Back and front yards belong to individual units, creating "defensible space."
- Tenants are carefully screened, and rules are strictly enforced.

Conservatives, like New Urbanists, want the benefits of traditional design to be available to everyone, not just the wealthy. Well-designed public housing, especially when coupled with programs that assist residents to become owners, can help the poor acquire the middle-class values and habits they must have if they are to be integrated into middle-class society.

**14. Transit corridors, when properly planned and coordinated, can help organize and revitalize urban centers. In contrast, highway corridors should**

**not displace investment from existing centers.**

In plain language, what this principle argues is that driving limited-access freeways through cities chops them up and leaves them to wither, while rail transit corridors both spur and shape development. We agree with both points, which are not matters of political philosophy but of fact, demonstrated over and over.

Importantly, the *Charter* here recognizes the qualitative difference between rail and bus transit: "[An] attraction of rail is that people usually prefer trains because they are faster and more comfortable than buses." Rail and bus transit are generally not fungible; they tend to serve different people, purposes and markets. Providing bus transit, while necessary to serve the transit-dependent, does nothing to encourage or guide the pattern of development.

**15. Appropriate building densities and land uses should be within walking distance of transit stops, permitting transit to become a viable alternative to the automobile.**

This is called "Transit-Oriented Development" (TOD), and it only works if the transit is rail, not buses. It is natural for development to be intense within walking distance of a rail transit stop, and it only makes sense – including from the standpoint of increasing local property tax revenues – for zoning to allow dense development in these locations. Conservatives believe in common sense.

We cannot forebear quoting one caption from this discussion of the *Charter*: "People will walk a quarter-mile to catch a bus, but when rail transit is available and the walk is pleasant, they'll walk up to half a mile." That's really voting with your feet!

**16. Concentrations of civic, institutional, and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes. Schools should be sized and located to enable children to walk or bicycle to them.**

New Urbanism's call to return to neighborhood schools resonates powerfully with conservatives. Local schools, locally controlled can offer better educations than can vast, centralized facilities, fed by busing and run by educrats.

The *Charter's* discussion of this principle points to another issue of interest to conservatives: public order.

*... large concentrations of housing in areas far removed from workplaces and shopping have led to empty neighborhoods during the day that are easy prey for thieves and vandals without the "eyes on the street" that would contribute to safety and security.*

Mixed-use zoning and better provision for pedestrians mean more people at home and on the sidewalks, which improves public safety. Empty streets are dangerous streets.

Two sidebars in this section of commentary point to other benefits from mixed-use zoning that conservatives will find valuable:

- *"Pushing a stroller along the sidewalk, you naturally meet the eyes of other parents similarly occupied; after running into them again and again at the butcher's, the bakery, the supermarket, you're bound to strike up acquaintanceships. You can't make those kinds of connections when all your travel time is spent in a car, your shopping done in a vast mall nowhere near your home."* – Wendy Smith, [Preservation](#)
- *"Public policy should encourage compact, pedestrian-scale development with shopping, services and employment close to home. If we follow this course, many other benefits are likely to follow. Communities would be less fragmented. Parents would be less coerced to spend their leisure time as chauffeurs for their offspring. Children would have more opportunities to become self-reliant and to gain experiences that prepare them for responsible adulthood. The elderly would find fewer obstacles to staying in their longtime neighborhoods."* – Philip Langdon, [A Better Place to Live](#)

**17. The economic health and harmonious evolution of neighborhoods, districts, and corridors can be improved through graphic urban design codes that serve as predictable guides for change.**

As the *Charter's* discussion of this principle states, "It's ... not a question of whether to control land development, but rather what to control, and to what end." The goal of New Urbanist codes is a long-standing conservative good, namely harmony:

*One underpinning of the New Urbanism is the compatibility of building types – or buildings with the same relative mass, height, and architectural styles, regardless of their uses, which may change over time.*

There is a danger here, namely inventing a new form of cookie-cutter monotony, Levittown's with front porches. The *Charter* recognizes the problem:

*Codes must achieve a delicate balance of assuring compatibility ... without inhibiting creativity (buildings should read as distinct and have individual character) ... Codes should encourage variety while ensuring the harmony that gives a community character.*

Variety with *harmony* describes conservatism's goal in many things, not just architecture.

Some conservatives and many libertarians may object that New Urbanist codes overly constrain builders' and home-buyers' freedom. The answer to that, again, is choice. New Urbanist buildings may be built in a wide variety of styles, not just traditional styles. People should be able to build or buy whatever style they want, just not always where they want. That is a matter of limiting behavior that trespasses on other people's rights, namely the right to harmony in their neighborhood.

Of great importance to conservatives, the *Charter* here acknowledges the right to build and buy sprawl. Under "Implementing Strategies," it says:

- Adopt a set of parallel ordinances. Keep the current ordinances but also offer an alternate track that will produce a mixed-use neighborhood.

This free market approach is central to conservatives' acceptance of New Urbanism.

Rounding out the discussion of the neighborhood:

**18. A range of parks, from tot lots and village greens to ballfields and community gardens, should be distributed within neighborhoods. Conservation areas and open lands should be used to define and connect different neighborhoods and districts.**

This is a no-brainer. Conservatives want parks and playgrounds, ballfields and natural landscape to walk in just as much as the next guy. These open spaces and the activities that go on in them help build community. As the *Charter* discussion says,

*Parks and open areas are the places that support neighborhood life and its celebrations. The Fourth of July picnic, Halloween "dark in the park," and the summer concert series all happen in the park...*

*These parks often serve as the only form in the suburbs of what Ray Oldenburg calls "the great good place," in his 1989 book of the same name. Oldenburg's premise is that vital neighborhoods and towns offer three realms: home, the workplace, and the great good place, an informal gathering spot – such as a park, community center, coffee shop, or bar – where people create and celebrate community.*

This principle concludes the *Charter's* discussion of New Urbanism at the scale of neighborhood, district, and corridor. Despite our rejection of imposed "diversity" and our insistence on giving people a wide range of choices, including sprawl, we think conservatives can and should embrace most of it with enthusiasm as providing a physical setting where genuine community can grow.

The *Charter's* last nine principles group the smaller scale under the heading "Block, Street, and Building." The *Charter's* introduction to this section discusses,

*At this scale, we need to accommodate automobiles as well as pedestrians. New Urbanism does not naively call for the elimination of the car. Rather, it challenges us to create environments that support walking, biking, transit, and the car.*

We agree.

**19. A primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use.**

This principle argues that the exteriors of buildings create either welcoming or alienating public spaces. Think of a public park: if the buildings around it are impermeable, forbidding Modernist architecture, the park itself is not a pleasant place to be.

As the *Charter's* commentary makes clear, this principle is inherently conservative, because it is a call to return to tradition:

*The liberation of architecture and landscape from their traditional civic duties as the walls, portals, and passages of the public realm is a recent phenomenon that tends to displace what has stood as shared wisdom for millennia...New Urbanists regard this condition of formlessness as neither beneficial nor irreversible.*

Sometimes New Urbanism is just a matter of not forgetting old knowledge.

Amen.

**20. Individual architectural projects should be seamlessly linked to their surroundings. This issue transcends style.**

This principle and the *Charter's* commentary on of it are so conservative they could have been written by Russell Kirk:

*The architecture of our time is dominated by obsessively self-referential, isolated projects. Such projects aggrandize the individual interests of their clients. They highlight the formal language and signature of their authors. They endeavor to express in stylistic terms the mood of the cultural instant when they were designed and built...*

*We are left with a cultural and physical landscape of unprecedented confusion, monotony, and fragility...*

*In contrast to an Architecture of Time, New Urbanist architecture is an Architecture of Place ... New Urbanist architecture strives to evolve by exercising critical design choices across time.*

The villain here is the Modernist architect who designs buildings wholly inappropriate to their settings as monuments to ego – the "random doodad" school of architecture. Conservatives rightly abominate this practice as desecration of the past, which is represented by surrounding traditional buildings. Such architects should be condemned to an eternity looking at their own buildings.

As the *Charter's* commentary says,

*A genuine architectural culture can only exist within the accumulated experience*

*afforded by historical continuity. For architecture and urbanism to prosper as disciplines, they need the wisdom and guidance of enduring values, traditions, methods, and ideas.*

**21. The revitalization of urban places depends on safety and security. The design of streets and buildings should reinforce safe environments, but not at the expense of accessibility and openness.**

This is another conservative principle, perhaps the conservative ur-principle: without public order and safety from crime, no society is viable.

Here, the discussion could have been taken straight from the pages of The American Conservative:

*Urban safety is perhaps the most fundamental problem cities face. No one wants to live, work, start a business, or shop in a city unless it's safe...*

*Safe places ... are orderly, well lit, and clean.*

*Design, once considered only a minor factor in security concerns, is now known to be an essential component of urban security ... Design alone, however, is powerless: Community safety and security requires a partnership among designers, community leaders, residents, and community-based police.*

Conservatives have long taken the lead in fighting crime, and we know the most effective way to fight it: identify the habitual criminals, arrest them, and put them in jail for a long, long time. But New Urbanism adds an important element most conservatives have not considered: design.

There are two ways to design for safety. The first is to make everyone live behind high, thick walls. The courtyard house is found world-wide because it provides this kind of security. While courtyard houses can be lovely behind their walls, they create one of the worst imaginable streetscapes.

Conservatives instinctively reject this sort of hide-under-the-bed security. To us, if that is how we have to live, the criminals have won.

New Urbanism offers an alternative approach to security that meshes well with conservatives' desire to defeat the criminals rather than cower in fear of them. It uses design to create urban spaces that are both open and safe. They are safe because they are open but also clearly someone's responsibility. New Urbanism ensures there are no places that cannot be read as someone's territory. The street is "our street."

The *Charter* commentary discusses "Seven Qualities of Safe Spaces:"

1. Human presence. People in a public space must feel the presence of other people in the space and in the buildings surrounding the space. The sense that we are not alone and are being observed helps us behave properly and feel safe.

2. Congeniality. The dimensions and scale of the space should encourage comfortable interactions among people.
3. Humane protection. Mechanical devices such as cameras and gates should be invisible. Where possible, police presence should be personal, on foot or bicycle, so police officers can interact with others.
4. Visibility, light and openness. Open views that enable us to see other people and to be seen ... provide natural supervision.
5. Order. Coherent landscapes, streetscapes, and signs ... make a clear statement that a space is well-managed and safe.
6. Connections. Spaces must be perceived as part of an interconnected network of streets and public open space ...
7. Legibility. The clarity with which each space connects to the rest of the city ... keeps us from feeling lost.

Conservatives would add emphasis to point number 3. Community policing, where police on foot, on bicycles or on horseback patrol a regular beat, getting to know the people and what is or is not normal in the neighborhood, is essential for urban safety. Nothing undermines effective city policing more than putting officers in squad cars where they just respond to calls. By the time they receive a call, it is too late; the city's peace has already been broken. Safe cities prevent crimes, not just respond to them.

The *Charter* commentary concludes its discussion of this principle with more conservative wisdom:

*Traditional building types and spaces offer more than architectural form; they also coincide with how our society works. If we follow traditional principles of public and private domain – front yard, back yard, correct design of streets to promote neighborliness and discourage through traffic – we will avoid trouble. In general, you will find opportunities for crime – or at least the perception of being unsafe – where these basic principles have been violated.*

**22. In the contemporary metropolis, development must adequately accommodate automobiles. It should do so in ways that respect the pedestrian and the form of public space.**

Here again we see that New Urbanism is not against cars. It just wants to free us from dependence on cars by giving us other practical alternatives.

**23. Streets and squares should be safe, comfortable, and interesting to the pedestrian. Properly configured, they encourage walking and enable neighbors to know each other and protect their communities.**

This is simply common sense. The discussion in the *Charter* states the obvious:

*The details of the right-of-way and the design of adjacent buildings should work together to comfort, satisfy, and stimulate pedestrians...*

*People walk more when the streets connect destinations along logical routes.*

Unfortunately, it has become necessary to state the obvious, because in too many recent developments it has been forgotten – as the absence of any sort of pedestrian life demonstrates.

**24. Architecture and landscape design should grow from local climate, topography, history, and building practice.**

This is a long-standing conservative theme. From Edmund Burke to Russell Kirk, conservatives have sought to preserve local variety from forced or mass-market homogenization.

The *Charter* comments:

*This principle roots architecture and landscape design in local culture and the genius loci. It is a reaction against the standardization and homogenization of Modernism ... This attitude celebrates and delights in what is different about a place.*

In a sidebar, the *Charter* commentary quotes James Kunstler's excellent book, [The Geography of Nowhere](#), in a passage that is almost paleo-conservative:

*We have lost so much culture in the sense of how to build things well. Bodies of knowledge and sets of skills that took centuries to develop were tossed into the garbage, and we will not get them back easily. The culture of architecture was lost to Modernism and its dogmas.*

Conservatives are happy to welcome New Urbanists to a hill we have occupied for a very long time.

**25. Civic buildings and public gathering places require important sites to reinforce community identity and the culture of democracy. They deserve distinctive form, because their role is different from that of other buildings and places that constitute the fabric of the city.**

Again we find a conservative theme. Conservatives have long lamented the decline of civic architecture, from the magnificent, neo-classical buildings of our grandfathers' time to structures that often resemble cheap hotels or industrial warehouses.

We happily cheer what the *Charter* commentary has to say on the matter:

*It is surely one of the minor mysteries of modern times that civic buildings in*

*America have become cheap to the point of squalor when they were once quite magnificent as a matter of course. Our post offices, public schools and colleges, fire stations, town halls, and all the rest are no longer honored with an architecture of fine materials, tall spaces, and grandeur of form. The new civic buildings are useful enough, but they are incapable of providing identity or pride for their communities.*

We concur, and would like to see a return to the design principles of the City Beautiful movement, which the *Charter* notes "was responsible for much of what is successfully civic in cities today."

The *Charter* denounces the utilitarianism behind much bland, sad modern civic architecture; conservatives have opposed utilitarianism since the days of Jeremy Bentham. We applaud what the *Charter* commentary has to say about schools:

*This way of thinking [utilitarianism] is even more devastating when applied to schools. Efficiency of administration does not yield what is best for the students or the community. It leads only to very large centralized schools. To deprive neighborhoods of small schools that also act as local civic centers is a great loss.*

The first conservative principle is the need for public order, and the *Charter* commentary quotes the late and great Senator Moynihan on a connection that goes back to the late Roman Empire:

*Twentieth-century America has seen a steady, persistent decline in the visual and emotional power of its public buildings and this has been accompanied by a not less persistent decline in the authority of public order.*

Civic order and civic architecture join their cries for restoration.

**26. All buildings should provide their inhabitants with a clear sense of location, time and weather. Natural methods of heating and cooling can be more resource-efficient than mechanical systems.**

Few conservatives enjoy working in cubicles resembling veal-fattening pens, cut off from natural light and air. We want sunlight and fresh air coming through open windows as much as anyone, if only to waft away the smoke from the cigars we insist we be free to smoke. We want to be able to look out and see where we are, what time of day the sun says it is and what weather the sky portends.

We concur with the *Charter* commentary's recommendations and share its memories of better houses and schools:

*All buildings should be designed so that people live and work close to operable windows, to provide access to natural light and air...*

*Until recently, almost all building types fostered a strong relationship between the inside and the outside. The American front porch is an icon of the house's*

*relationship to the outside world of the street and neighborhood. School classrooms had large windows and courtyards.*

This principle offers an environmentalist argument for natural light and fresh air as ways to reduce energy consumption. This may make some conservatives leery -- unnecessarily we think. Conservatives are not environmentalists, because we recognize in much environmentalism a new ideology, and we know where ideology inherently leads: to tyranny.

We are, however, conservationists. Conservatives dislike waste. If we can be as or more comfortable with the window open than with the air conditioning on, we have no desire to run up our electric bill. We remember how our grandmothers kept their houses cool on warm summer days, simply by opening the house at night and closing it in the heat of the afternoon.

Just as traditional morals and manners made for a more comfortable society, so traditional designs for homes, schools and offices made for more comfortable buildings. As conservatives, we look forward to reviving both.

**27. Preservation and renewal of historic buildings, districts, and landscapes affirm the continuity and evolution of urban societies.**

Here we find another New Urbanist principle that is inherently conservative. Respect for the achievements of our forefathers and maintenance of continuity with the past are basic conservative themes. The *Charter* commentary puts it well:

*For ... urban evolution to occur successfully, there must be an implied "contract" about the nature of city building in which the contributions of previous generations are understood and creatively reinterpreted, even where change is substantial ... New Urbanism reinforces the importance of being aware of and honoring the historic fabric of urban places.*

Here, New Urbanism, with G.K. Chesterton, recognizes that conservatism is a democracy that includes the dead.

A sidebar in the *Charter's* discussion quotes Charles, Prince of Wales, as saying,

*I believe that when a man loses contact with the past he loses his soul. Likewise, if we deny the architectural past – and the lessons to be learned from our ancestors – then our buildings also lose their souls.*

We cannot imagine a more conservative sentiment, or source, with which to end this twenty-seventh and last New Urbanist principle.

On balance, then, we have found that conservatives can accept almost all the principles of New Urbanism. Some are inherently conservative; New Urbanists have discovered things conservatives have known for a long time. Many others elicit our enthusiastic support, as they provide physical settings conducive to attaining conservative

goals, especially community. We insist New Urbanism be a choice in a free market, with developers, builders and home-buyers equally free to choose sprawl if they want it. New Urbanists say that is what they want, too. As conservatives, we reject imposed "diversity," but if some people want it, they are welcome to it. That, too, should be a choice in an open market. But if New Urbanists try to force it on us, we should fight it.

That completes the first section in this study. In the next, we ask, how can conservatives and New Urbanists move forward together toward goals we share?

### How To Get There

In the first part of this study, we have seen that conservatives and New Urbanists have many goals in common. Most importantly, we both want places that are designed so they facilitate and encourage the growth of community, an important conservative value. We both recognize that traditional neighborhoods (including those within cities), villages and towns do that better than sprawl suburbs.

But common goals are not enough. If conservatives are to accept New Urbanism, we must also find common means. Conservatives do not accept that the end justifies the means. We reject government coercion beyond certain traditional limits, such as preventing crime, even if the purpose of such coercion can be called "good." We fear Leviathan, the all-powerful and ever-intrusive state.

Fortunately, there is a road to the New Urbanism that conservatives and New Urbanists can walk together. Instead of government mandates, it relies on both the free market and free choices by local governments. We have already touched on it several times: dual codes. Dual codes would allow developers, builders and home-buyers to choose freely between New Urbanism and sprawl. Let the market determine which one America builds to a greater extent. We would note that where New Urbanism has been allowed to compete with sprawl, it has sold well, often at a substantial premium over the same floor space in surrounding sprawl developments.

Here, we will take a look at current codes and why they make it difficult or impossible to build new communities to traditional, New Urbanist designs. Then, we will analyze the codes New Urbanists prefer, so conservatives understand what it is they are being asked to approve. Our approval, always, is in the context of free choice. We insist those Americans who prefer sprawl always have that option.

First, however, we will consider an approach to New Urbanism that is based on government coercion: the Portland model. For conservatives, this falls under the category, "Know your enemy."<sup>5</sup>

### The Failure of Leviathan

If you mention New Urbanism to conservatives, the first thing that comes to mind is Portland, Oregon. Portland's approach to controlling suburban sprawl is not something conservatives like. We find it arbitrary, intrusive, and unfair to property owners. It represents Leviathan at its worst, at least on the local level.

As we will see, many New Urbanists can be very critical of the Portland model. It is not really New Urbanism; in fact, it predates the New Urbanist movement by almost twenty years. And – no surprise to conservatives – it has not worked as advertised.

Portland, Oregon's regional government (something else conservatives generally don't like) manages its growth through the use of an Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). The UGB, an arbitrary line drawn around the city by government, separates rural land from land where development is permitted.

Again, Portland's UGB pre-dates New Urbanism, which therefore should not be blamed for it. According to Portland's regional government, Metro:

*Urban growth boundaries were created as part of the statewide land-use planning program in Oregon in the early 1970s. Gov. Tom McCall and his allies convinced the Oregon Legislature in 1973 to adopt the nation's first set of land-use planning laws ... The new goals and guidelines required every city and county in Oregon to have a long-range plan addressing future growth ... [including] setting urban growth boundaries ...*

*When Metro was created by the voters in 1979, it inherited the boundary planning effort. A year later, the Land Conservation and Development Commission approved the boundary as consistent with statewide planning goals.<sup>6</sup>*

New Urbanism cannot be held responsible for Portland's UGB. It did not exist in the 1970s. The movement's founding dates to the first Congress for the New Urbanism, held in Alexandria, Virginia, in October of 1993. The Portland model is a product of Oregon liberalism, not New Urbanism.

More, New Urbanism is critical of the Portland model. Metro's use of the UGB to control sprawl has had, at best, mixed results. One New Urbanist put it this way:

*They predicted that the suburbs would become ugly and overly dense. That has happened. It has happened because the governmental regulation is binary. You're either in or you're out; you can either develop or not. There is no nuance. The UGB merely creates compressed sprawl.<sup>7</sup>*

The UGB is expanded as population grows, but in Portland, most such expansions have been too small, not keeping up with demand; the scarcity consequently increasing

housing prices which have become out of reach of too many of Portland's residents.

That is the key to the critique from the New Urbanist point of view. The Urban Growth Boundary is too blunt an instrument. The New Urbanism, particularly by mastering the natural progression from the inner city to the countryside, offers an appropriate level of development for every piece of land. That is central to understanding New Urbanism. It bans very little. It just allocates types of development to the appropriate Transect zone.

It is no surprise to conservatives how people have responded to Portland's Urban Growth Boundary. They have voted on it with their feet, by moving out. One website devoted to urban planning, Demographia, noted,

*What is clear is that people are choosing to move to the parts of the Portland area that are outside the command and control planning policies of the regional land use agency, Metro.*<sup>8</sup>

A scholarly article in Urban Studies reinforces this observation:

*Intermetropolitan comparisons do not support the conclusion that Portland's UGB has been effective in slowing down suburbanization, enhancing infill development and reducing auto use. A significant level of spillover from the counties in Oregon to Clark County of Washington took place in the 1990s, indicating that the UGB diverted population growth into Clark County.*<sup>9</sup>

As co-author Andres Duany puts it, "On one trip to Portland, I finally escaped my Intourist handlers and took a look at what lies inside their Urban Growth Boundary. What I found was sprawl."

Conservatives should cease blaming the New Urbanism for Portland. The New Urbanists join us in criticizing it where it does not work. To see what does work, we now turn to considering codes.

### Breaking the Code

All across America, the codes developers and builders are required by law to build sprawl. They require extreme single-use development, where residences, shops and workplaces are physically separated from each other by so much distance you can only get from one to another by driving. A housing development cannot even include a coffee-house, a local restaurant or a small store that carries basic items such as bread and milk.

To build according to New Urbanist principles, a private developer must get multiple variances, as many as three dozen for a small neighborhood. Each requires a process that takes both money and time. This is not the level playing-field a free market requires and conservatives want.

To break the government-imposed monopoly sprawl codes now hold, we need to

understand how they work to stop New Urbanism. There are a variety of types of codes. Sprawl's monopoly is upheld primarily by two types of codes, zoning codes and subdivision regulations.

Zoning codes govern the use of lots. They generally separate uses into single-use districts. This contradicts a basic principle of New Urbanism, which likes to mix uses to some degree everywhere. That is necessary to create neighborhoods, which in turn create community.

Rather than distance, or geographic separation, New Urbanism uses physical barriers to buffer uses that would interfere with each other, while current zoning codes use distance. For example, New Urbanism uses floors to mix uses vertically; apartments sit over stores. It also uses fences, freestanding walls, and party walls to separate uses. This permits proximity with privacy, whereas current codes can only create privacy by spreading everything out into sprawl. New Urbanism's goal is not cramming more people into less space, but giving people the option to build in proximity while still having the privacy home life requires.

Current codes also make New Urbanism difficult with their demands for parking. Most zoning demands huge parking lots surrounding any kind of business, parking lots that don't fit in residential neighborhoods and that create a hostile environment for pedestrians. New Urbanists agree that parking must be adequate, but think there are better ways to get it than by demanding huge surface lots. In business areas, the New Urbanism prefers parking garages and on-street parking, so parked cars buffer pedestrians from fast-moving traffic. The New Urbanism prefers to put most parking behind buildings, where cars are out of sight from the sidewalk.

Subdivision regulations create more obstacles for New Urbanism. Most of the problems come from regulations dealing with "thoroughfares," i.e. streets and roads. These regulations effectively require the "pod-and-collector" model, where suburban cul-de-sacs feed into an arterial road. The traditional street grid is not allowed. More, the subdivision regulations usually demand excessive street widths and turning radii, which make streets hostile to pedestrians and encourage drivers to go too fast through residential neighborhoods.

Traffic engineering regulations make the problem worse. They often forbid alleys, which New Urbanism relies on to get garages behind houses instead of thrust forward toward the street, where they create an ugly streetscape. They require that all thoroughfares and intersections be built so wide they form breaks pedestrians cannot comfortably cross. Traffic is given precedence over everything else, including neighborhood life.

Fire and emergency officials add their regulations, which demand overly wide streets and intersections. New Urbanists ask why emergency vehicles have to be so large that they determine the scale of the public spaces, rather than vice-versa. There is a tension between ever-bigger fire trucks and cozy, people-friendly streets.

Then come energy and environmental regulations. Many New Urbanists think the

so-called LEED regulations (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) do not acknowledge the intrinsic energy-efficiency of traditional building designs. There is a strong sentiment within New Urbanism that LEED encourages expensive piles of gizmos that will short out, rust and obsolesce while ordinary wise building practices continue their centuries of usefulness. Fortunately, some LEED regulations are beginning to move decisively in a New Urbanist direction, in a recent cooperative effort with New Urbanism.

Finally, we come to another regulatory burden that conservatives and New Urbanists agree on, namely regulations under the Americans for Disability Act and the Fair Housing Act Accessibility Guidelines. Some New Urbanists complain bitterly about them. Both New Urbanists and conservatives agree that adequate provision must be made for the handicapped. But that should not lead to the extinction of traditional building types. For example, these regulations make a raised front porch difficult, but a street-level porch does not have sufficient privacy to be usable.

All these regulations, and many more, make up the demands current codes levy on developers and builders who want to offer New Urbanist, traditional neighborhoods. Again, this is not a level playing field. Conservatives want this package of "gold-plated" codes and regulations to remain, as an option for developers who want to build sprawl. These codes were written for sprawl. They don't work for anything else.

### New Urbanist Codes

As conservatives, we want codes to support choice: A typical sprawl code would be retained, and a New Urbanist code. So we know what it is we are proposing, let us take a short look at New Urbanist codes.

New Urbanist codes permit mixed-use development. Beyond that common element, there are several approaches. Perhaps the best is called the "Smart Code."

The Smart Code is based on the Transect. The Transect identifies six zones:

- T-1: Natural. This is wilderness landscape with un-built private land and preserved land, such as parks and national or state forests.
- T-2: Rural. Mostly farms.
- T-3: Suburban. Big lots, plenty of green areas.
- T-4: General urban. A mix of individual houses, townhouses, small apartment buildings and some shops and small offices. Think of the old "streetcar suburbs."
- T-5: Urban Center. Businesses, towns houses, large apartment buildings, civic buildings; most buildings are attached, as on a main street.
- T-6: Urban Core. The city center, with tall buildings, almost all attached. Mostly

commercial offices and stores.

The way the Smart Code works is very simple. It allows developers and builders a range of options to do what they want within the appropriate zone of the Transect (or, when that is not desirable, a Special District, such as an industrial district).

New Urbanists codes are often combined with other codes that specify things such as architectural style. But this is usually done neighborhood-by-neighborhood. A developer or builder is constrained within a given neighborhood and if he wants to build something different, he can do so in a differently coded neighborhood. As we noted earlier in this study, the goal is to combine harmony and variety.

New Urbanist codes should be of interest to conservatives because, compared to current codes, they offer much more freedom in the form of wide parameters of choice. Somewhere within each zone of the Transect, a builder can build and a buyer can buy virtually anything.

There are no regulations that demand inappropriate streets and roads, ineffective energy-saving measures or excessive handicapped access. All these concerns are addressed, and plenty of parking is provided for cars, by simply allowing what was traditionally done. It wasn't just yesterday that we needed to heat and cool our buildings economically, or help people in wheelchairs get where they want to go, or drive and park our flivvers or horses and buggies. One of our favorite conservative sayings is: what worked then will work now. New Urbanist codes are the proof of that.

There is nothing in New Urbanist codes that conservatives should find objectionable. On the contrary, the huge number of rigid government mandates contained in the current codes are what should rile conservatives. New Urbanist codes are shorter, easier to understand by non-professional people, and they offer far more options. And, of course, we only want New Urbanist codes to be an option, beside the current codes.

## Conclusion

So, do conservatives and New Urbanists have some things in common? Quite a lot, we find. We both want to give our fellow Americans the option of living in traditional neighborhoods – often in traditional architecture. We both think such neighborhoods offer a setting far more conducive to the rise of community than are suburban sprawl developments, where it is a challenge to know your neighbors.

We agree sprawl should remain an option for those who prefer it. We simply want a level playing field for New Urbanism, one that will let the free market decide what gets built. The key to that is dual codes.

We conclude with two recommendations to our fellow conservatives. First, do not fear New Urbanism. It is not calling for more Portlands. On the contrary, most of what it wants is a return to tradition, tradition in architecture and in the design of our cities, towns, neighborhoods and villages, and also in preserving family farms. That is not merely consistent with conservatism; it is conservatism. The maintenance of, and, where they have been lost, restoration of our traditions is what conservatism is all about.

Second, join with New Urbanists in fighting for dual codes. Our belief in the free market demands this, quite apart from the fact that New Urbanism serves some important conservative goals. The market is not free when New Urbanists have to wade through a thicket of codes and other regulations, seeking variance after variance from government regulations, in order to build what many people want. So far, New Urbanists have not found difficulty in selling their products – only in offering them for sale. That is not conservative economics.

Working together, we hope conservatives and New Urbanists can offer many people the option our grandparents had: life in a genuine community, more, in a beautiful community, a place they enjoy residing in and in which they take civic pride.

Is it too much to hope that the 21st Century can offer what the 18th and 19th and early 20th centuries did? What worked then will work now, and in the future as well.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> New Urbanism: Comprehensive Report & Best Practices' Guide, by Robert Steuteville, Philip Langdon & Special Contributors, 3rd Edition (New Urban News, Ithaca, NY, 2003), p. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Charter of the New Urbanism, Congress for the New Urbanism, (McGraw-Hill, NY, 2000). Technically, the Charter includes only the principles, not the discussion. Here, we refer to both as “the Charter,” because that is the title of the book.

<sup>3</sup> Op.cit., New Urbanism: Comprehensive Report, p. 1-6, 1-7.

<sup>4</sup> Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith by Eric O. Jacobsen (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003) p. 88-89

<sup>5</sup> The authors are grateful to Bruce F. Donnelly for his assistance with this section.

<sup>6</sup> From <http://www.metroregion.org/index.cfm/go/by.web/id/277> Urban Growth Boundary

<sup>7</sup> Michael Mehaffy, via personal communication with Bruce F. Donnelly, Feb. 20, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.demographia.com/db-porugbmigr.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> “The Effects of Portland’s Urban Growth Boundary on Urban Development Patterns and Commuting,” by Myung-Jin Jun, Urban Studies, Vol. 41, No. 7, June 2004, pp. 1333-1348.

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