The Sheep's Clothing
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Response to Dan Solomon's "The Other Illness"
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I. the promise of NU as a new agenda for responsible, urban architecture
Thanks Dan for a remarkable, supremely eloquent paper. I don't agree that academia is
quite as unprincipled as you and Moneo make it out to be – although it's hardly
consistent. I share much of your concern about the role of architecture in NU – but I may
be more optimistic than you about the future.

Dan's paper struck such a chord, that I didn't feel I could respond by trying to be
strategic or by providing the audience with tactics that might be particularly useful.
Instead, I thought the only way to respond was to just try to be honest. So, here are my
own observations of CNU over this 15-year period –but from the perspective of
academia.

The early promise of NU didn't win me over as quickly as it did Dan. I have to admit that
I went to my first CNU, CNU III feeling like an academic spy. Who was this group
advocating nostalgic stage-sets like Seaside as a new form of urbanism? I had all the
academic snobbish biases, but I learned that CNU's agenda was NOT the production of
cutesy projects, but the reformation of the regulations that reproduce sprawl. I was
immediately attracted to the radicality of new urbanist reforms, the challenge to the status
quo – both the status quo of suburban development patterns, and the status quo of
suburban architecture.

I also realized that I learned more at that congress than I'd learned at most of the
academic conferences I'd attended. I keep coming because I keep learning (and because
the bonds of friendship established in a common cause are awesome!). I learned about
development, planning, traffic engineering, public processes, etc. I didn't learn about
Architecture per se, but I was seduced by the promise of how this information (not taught
in schools) could empower architects to more effectively build all the creative and critical
ideas fomenting in the schools. (Having taught contemporary architectural theory for 20
years, I remain frustrated at how ineffective architects are at actually implementing
promising ideas.)

For me, as an architecture professor – not teaching urban design, but teaching architects
how to think about and design buildings, the exciting promise of NU wasn't just the
environmental or the cosmopolitan (those were rightfully more the territory of the urban
designers and admittedly, the deservedly higher priority.) Given that, the promise of new
urbanism for architects was two-fold. **One: the re-engagement of architecture in the
design of everyday buildings, middle-class housing, the areas that architecture had
more or less abdicated.** I was thrilled at the prospect of raising the bar of design of
ordinary buildings. The second promise was embedded in this agenda but operated at the

more philosophical level: the re-engagement of architectural <u>thinking</u> in a principled project of reforming how we make cities. I believed the mantra "design matters." I was excited about re-imagining <u>better</u> urban places. Re-interpreting the Aristotelian goal of living together well for the next century. Heady stuff! <u>Great</u> new challenges! NU promised to <u>free</u> architects from having to make object buildings in the suburbs and <u>promised</u> to challenge them to envision what a new city <u>should</u> be now that we're empowered to make it more sustainable, more affordable, more equitable. Challenging architects to integrate concerns for the environmental and the cosmopolitan into urban buildings for a new urban culture. Free to learn from precedents AND to challenge the status quo. More heady stuff!

<u>II. the trajectory: architecture as the sheep's clothing over the unmarketable wolf</u>
So, what happened? Seaside brought in a <u>remarkable</u> range of architects, high-design folks as well as ordinary builders. The <u>public</u> buildings weren't coded. In the late 80's the argument was that public buildings were where architects <u>should</u> be given the greatest freedom to express the highest cultural ideals, expand the poetics of construction in new ways, and challenge society to have great aspirations – perhaps to endorse the possibilities of continual societal evolution and progress, perhaps to aspire to live up to traditional ideals and heritage.

As we know, new urbanist architecture became increasingly neo-traditional. <u>It had to</u>. The style and quality of the buildings ISN'T as important as getting the planning right, and initially, the planning was simply too threatening to most of suburbia. Density, mixed-use, mixed-income, public transit, public space – these were all <u>unmarketable</u> throughout most of the country. The wolf of these threatening planning ideas had to be made marketable by the sweetest, most popular, least threatening, imagery possible. Neo-traditional architecture became the sheep's clothing masking the wolf. This has been an important role and I have great respect for where it's been done well – but it certainly doesn't live up to the role I thought was originally promised. Instead of making <u>better</u> urban places, it sets the bar at recreating what we imagine good places <u>were</u>.

But, I know I'm in the minority within CNU. Many within CNU genuinely <u>love</u> traditional architecture and <u>never</u> saw it as the necessary subversive marketing I do. The fact that neo-traditional architecture has an embedded urban syntax (from porches to clearly articulated fronts vs backs, etc.) is immensely important and it fits extremely well with CNU's planning goals. And the architectural <u>quality</u> of the neo-traditional architecture continues to get better and better through the efforts of many new urbanist firms. Some of it is astonishingly good. Sadly, some of the kitschy stuff still has a high wince factor. Many in <u>academia</u> criticize it as <u>inherently regressive</u> <u>or reproducing the patterns of patriarchy</u>. I've just established a program at GT in Classical Design with the ICA, because although <u>I'm</u> a modernist architect, I respect the value of a rigorous education in classical principles for those seeking it. (if you're interested, you're probably not in this room, but anyway, we're still accepting applications for this fall!) My concern really is over the quality, not the style of the architecture, and its ability to both reflect and direct our culture.

III. assessing our success
So how do we assess the success of architecture in new urbanism today? This is perhaps where the divide is strongest between academia and new urbanist practices.
        -desperate search for respect from peers
        -success as art vs success in marketplace
The third measure of success however, and the one that I think has to be most meaningful for us is – have we made better urban places? The answer of course, is better than what. Better than sprawl? You bet. Better than Manhattan or Venice? No. Another way to frame the question is, are they really urban?

In MY opinion, and I don't pretend to speak for anyone else, but I think my opinion on this is pretty representative of academia, the most significant qualitative difference between urban places and suburban places comes down to predictability. Urban places stimulate us with their physical, social, and economic diversity. Most urbanists delight in the perpetual unpredictable surprises offered by cityliving. Suburbia on the other hand thrives on control and orderly predictability. I'm always struck by the pre-chewed quality of suburban experiences – whether it's the perpetual déjà vu of chain stores, half-acre lots, or SUVs.

Have new urbanist places taken on the funkiness of urban surprise? Some have really managed to incorporate tremendous variety and their architecture charms us and contributes certainly to unfolding delights – but all still deeply, and to me somewhat disturbingly controlled. As we succeed in honing the brand of new urbanism, refining the formula, I'm also seeing a lot of predictability. A feeling that my experience has already been designed for me and the covenants have protected me from any possible deviations.

Andres argues that modernist architecture is fine in modernist new urbanist developments, but is incompatible with traditional environments. He argues for the immersive environment. With all due respect, I completely disagree. To me, the best cities are alive and ever incorporating new surprises, new innovations, new ideas about what it means to live together well. We can't live together well and be exclusive of anything but exclusivity. Period.

V. the future of architecture in NU

So, what's the future of architecture in NU? Do we even need architects any more? We can continue down the road of greater control and predictability by simply selecting buildings from NU catalogs and pattern books. We're close to that already. Architects design the catalog and may be involved in the selection of this design vs that for this site vs that and select this ornament vs that from this catalog vs that, etc. But, that isn't a role that asks how do we live together well. It is a highly marketable system for providing consumers with choices. It plugs right into the production builders but sadly without the integration of critical and creative architectural design and thinking that I was hopeful for

15 years ago. Instead, it gets rid of the angst of dealing with architects asking intellectual questions about larger cultural readings.

I think we all still believe that design matters too much to really envision this future for CNU, but I think there will be more and more NU projects that move in this direction. The market's there and it isn't asking for philosophy.

However, I'm actually also optimistic that new urbanism is embarking on a _new_ promise for the role of architects in NU. The fact is that the market _is_ beginning to embrace the wolf. Density and mixed-use aren't the threatening words they used to be. They're by no means an EASY sell, but they're not AS dreaded as they were 15 years ago. Now that the wolf has become more acceptable, the architecture doesn't have to be a sheep. Architecture's role in NU doesn't have to be to market the plan, to mask the radicality of urbanism AS the means of living together well. NOW, architecture really can both comfort AND challenge us to integrate the environmental and the cosmopolitan imperatives. Plus, as we begin to build even more densely with even more integration of mixed-use (including major workplace, not just grade-level retail) – we will need creative buildings that are _beyond_ what the catalogs and production builders can provide. The new promise is going beyond the village scale of the immersive community, towards _truly_ urban places with diverse AND delightful architecture.