

# **A Request for Living Urbanism**

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*"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." –Charter for the New Urbanism*

A coral reef has a balanced structure of plants and animals interacting for food, shelter and the needs for daily life. The reef requires many items such as sunlight, pleasing temperatures and care given by the inhabitants. The reef provides an arena of life giving elements to be exchanged. At what point does a place become a neighborhood? Complex elements must come together to create a condition where a reef may prosper and create a home. To re-examine where humans reside, ideally the neighborhood, we might wonder if a level of complexity must be reached for these places to be considered true human habitats? Just as the reef and it's schools of fish, we require a certain set of conditions to be present in order to consider a place a true neighborhood in balance with nature. Living Urbanism is the fullest realization of this principle and in-turn the creation of real neighborhoods.

Are our projects too thinly settled? Are we planning for complete villages and towns? If we are to create places that support "jobs & housing balance" we must be able to build the dense urbanism required by the economy of a neighborhood. We must implement solutions to the urbanization of the suburbs where in these plans truly bring together all those items needed to support life within walking distance.

Shall we continue to suggest a neighborhood is the fundamental unit of human habitat, a unit that is sustaining and that supplies, at minimum, the daily needs of contemporary life without the convenient automobile? We should be achieving more than the minimum needs. Our projects should create abundance and enhance the locale. All complex aspects of the human habitat: social, cultural, economic, academic and environmental, must come together to create Living Urbanism... urbanism where we shall not have to worry about the effects on future generations.

Context sensitive design is used throughout our practice. However, we must evaluate what context we are being sensitive to and whether deference to that context is hindering our ability to produce urbanism. The E.P.A. believes 1/3 of all Americans will soon prefer to live in walkable neighborhoods.<sup>ii</sup> We will continuously be faced with the demand for urbanism in a suburban context. How shall we create the density essential to providing a set of daily services within walking distance if this demands an urbanism that, by design, could be too far out of context within the existing condition?

It is time to stop producing only bedroom communities, even within the New Urbanism. The green movement is setting levels of expectations in America regarding the quality of our built environment. The appeal for neighborhoods has now become the domain of the environmentalist. LEED-ND states that credit will be given for proximity to a diversity of uses.<sup>iii</sup> The list describes what is needed to sustain daily life outside the automobile (a bank, dry cleaner, restaurant, school, etc.) But these uses are dependent on economic realities related to the population of a project and its' immediate surroundings. We must respect this if we are to truly create functioning neighborhoods. The greening of America presents us with an opportunity to educate the populous about the fundamental minimum size of a neighborhood.

We are creating community. Yet we must acknowledge a fundamental difference between a community and a neighborhood. A community can exist within a single home, between several families, across several streets or even as a group of like-minded individuals linked via Myspace. This flexibility in scale is different than that of the neighborhood. Community can exist in these many forms due to the ability for those included to communicate frequently and exchange knowledge. The letter, the telegraph, the cell phone have all led to an increased idea and geography of what community can be to an individual. Neighborhoods however have a finite size.

The different relationship each possesses with the physical world suggests a community can exist without a neighborhood. This difference creates two sets of principles that govern the design of a community and that of a neighborhood. One set is linked to geography and the physical relationships of objects in space, the neighborhood, and the other is linked to the organization of individuals and their communication of knowledge. Understanding the differences between what creates community and what

creates neighborhood is pinnacle to the success of our plans. Creating places of a scale without the ability to support the creation of a true neighborhood is un-natural. We can live without community, however it may be a life less fulfilling, but we cannot, naturally, live without a neighborhood. Embedded in these two sets of principles is Living Urbanism... urbanism in balance with our physical limits and needs as humans.

How often are we able to plan for a population within a new pedestrian quarter that is of the size needed to establish the economy of a neighborhood? Are we too comfortable planning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> transect zone? I propose we are, and if we are to aspire to create Living Urbanism the default transect zone cannot be the 3<sup>rd</sup>. The sweet spot along the Transect is in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> zones. It is with these classes of the built environment that people can be organized to form a whole neighborhood. This suggests that the Transect has two classes of zones, those that are foundational for the creation of livable places composed of neighborhoods and those that are not.

The Transect only explains and gives us a way of speaking about the built environment. We need to understand how well a neighborhood functions, or provides life by foot to be possible. The people inhabiting these places must be foremost on our minds. Can one wake in the morning, pick up a paper at the corner-store, enjoy a coffee at the café, walk to the trolley for a ride to work and grab some food on the way home? We must ensure one's core sets of actions are possible. There is a spectrum of human existence with the fully auto oriented sprawl on the bottom and the most complex and metropolitan of urbanism on the top. At the middle is a place where all ones daily needs can be gathered by foot. It is at this point where Living Urbanism begins and we must strive to create places that reach this level of human existence.

This will be a challenge, but we must progress our craft, science and art. How will we confront the issues of context relating to the sprawling suburbs? How will we provide for an ever-increasing number of people looking for places with the benefits of urbanism to live? Do we as modern humans have the ability to be both stewards of the land and the street? Will we be able to define, both horizontally and vertically, a balanced type of growth for our built environment that will ensure our future generations enjoyment of the planet? Do we truly understand what is needed to craft places that are not only walkable, but livable as well?

**“Organized as neighborhoods”<sup>iv</sup> suggests that we plan in complete wholes... a place filled with commerce, jobs, art, children, hopes and dreams. We can no longer afford to brush the surface. We plan in 5-minute walks, but the car and the developer-run corner store are all too often ubiquitous. We must strive to build the framework for natural neighborhoods to prosper. With the greening of America upon us, it is our time to fully commit to this principle of neighborhood creation. We must no longer compromise on the balanced complexity required for Living Urbanism to flourish.**

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<sup>i</sup> Charter of the New Urbanism.

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “White Paper: The Market for Smart Growth.” Gregg Logan, Robert Charles Lesser & Co. 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> U.S. Green Building Council, “LEED for Neighborhood Development Rating System: Pilot Version”. 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> Charter of the New Urbanism.