

US urban plan concepts set for UK import

Transatlantic thinking on city form has useful lessons for planners closer to home, writes **Robin Hambleton**

Anglo-American dialogue in the field of urban policy is nothing new. Back in 1968 prime minister Harold Wilson and president Richard Nixon agreed that the two countries should look together at some shared domestic and social problems.

We gave the USA enterprise zones and City Challenge, which directly shaped the Clinton administration's empowerment zone policy. The USA gave us urban development grants and directly elected mayors. The Local Government Act 2000 was heavily influenced by US approaches to city leadership. But now the transatlantic exchange is moving into mainstream city planning via the rubric of "new urbanism".

At this month's sustainable communities summit, deputy prime minister John Prescott voiced his enthusiasm for a number of US new urbanist developments and projects. At the international conference on City Futures we organised here in Chicago last summer, Prescott suggested that the UK approach to urban regeneration could be described as "new urbanism with a British accent".

John Norquist, who stepped down after 15 years as mayor of Milwaukee last year, is now president of the Chicago-based Congress for New Urbanism (CNU). Founded in 1993, the CNU seeks to promote what its 2,300 members in 20 countries see as better urban development.

The origins of the movement can be traced to frustration with the quality of urban development on the perimeter of most US cities since 1945. Starting more than 20 years ago at Seaside in Florida, a "traditional neighbourhood development" on the Gulf of Mexico, the CNU can point to a substantial number of projects across North America.

First and foremost, the CNU's founders were opponents of conventional urban sprawl. Architects, landscape architects and planners wanting to create more liveable communities were in the vanguard. But anti-sprawl is not the whole story. Colourful and opinionated personalities, utopian thinking, ideologues and opponents – the debates about new urbanism are full of controversy.

The CNU has set out a charter for new urbanism articulating 27 principles that should guide urban planning and design at three spatial scales:

- The region: metropolis, city and town.
- Neighbourhood, district and corridor.
- The block, street and building.

In some ways, the charter merely restates town planning and urban design principles that have been established in Europe for decades. But three main conflict zones in the new urbanism debate now permeate urban discourse in the UK.

The first is an argument taking place mainly within architecture. Some architects favour the planning principles, if not the stylistic implications, of new urbanism. They include Royal Institute of British Architects president George Ferguson, who has carried out several popular new urbanist schemes in Bristol.

Other architects are horrified by the guidelines new urbanists seek to impose, claiming that the movement is backward looking and anti-modern. They see the emphasis on neo-traditional designs along Poundbury lines as harking back to a bygone era and reject this "retreat into the past".

We have at least two urban design camps: those who see new urbanism spurring people-friendly design at a human scale and those who see the CNU agenda as a recipe for kitsch. Whatever the truth, it can be argued that new urbanism is not at heart concerned with "style" but rather with the spatial structure of desirable neighbourhoods and cities.

This takes us into the second conflict zone: spatial planning. New urbanists present a sound critique of the way that low-density suburban development is eating up farmland and creating unsustainable communities. Yet some US scholars claim that sprawl is a good thing. They argue that advocates of compact cities have failed to show that they are more efficient, that the USA does not have a land shortage and that residents love low-density housing.

US new urbanists delight in hammering these writers by showing that they pay little attention to the environmental and social consequences of sprawl and that they fail to acknowledge that citizen preferences are influenced by availability. People will flock to newly-created liveable neighbourhoods, they respond.

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However, a more powerful critique of the new urbanist approach to spatial planning is that it is virtually incoherent when it comes to density. Its rhetoric refers to walkable neighbourhoods, transit-orientated mixed-use development and compact urban form. For this approach to work it requires relatively high density. The reality is that many CNU projects do not meet this test. Kentlands, an "edge village" in Maryland, has only 25 homes per hectare – although it exceeds the density of the sprawl that surrounds it.

The third zone of conflict is social equity. New urbanists seek to build mixed-use, mixed-income neighbourhoods, reject exclusive gated communities and aspire to create neighbourhoods that value diversity. These are fine ideals, but new urbanists can be accused of naïve thinking. Some appear to subscribe to a simplistic belief that design can create community. This is nonsense.

A more defensible position is to argue that good planning and urban design can create opportunities for conviviality while bad design can work against social interaction. If this is seen as a sound social objective, then new urbanism offers a

contribution that will be of interest to UK city planners and developers.

New urbanism's scorecard on the wider challenge of creating more equitable cities by helping low-income families is somewhat less impressive. True, some schemes have fostered residential mix. But many new urbanist "communities" are turning out to be rather elitist settlements with much higher average income levels than their surrounding areas. This is certainly true for flagship projects like Seaside and Kentlands.

Mayor Daley of Chicago was one of the speakers in Manchester. This is significant. Transatlantic dialogue at national level can stimulate thinking in both countries. But city-to-city dialogue between politicians and professionals may be even more important in bringing about urban innovation that benefits citizens.

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