



CHAPTER 17

Urbanism — New, Landscape, or Otherwise: The Case for Complementarity

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WE EACH VIEW THE WORLD THROUGH OUR OWN CULTURAL LENS, a set of ideas and behaviors that are mutually understood, yet constantly changing. Part of that lens is language — shared understandings regarding written and oral communication. Another part is urbanism — shared understandings regarding the arrangement and use of space. These shared understandings regarding language and urbanism provide the stability that allows them to be dynamic, evolving with changing needs and desires over time. When cultures converge, misunderstandings often arise, at times provoking conflict. Cultural convergence can also incite innovation and progress toward improving the human condition when a willingness to learn from one another and collaborate prevails.

Our professions comprise subcultures that add additional lenses through which we see and act upon the world. Like all subcultures, the professions dedicated to urbanism — principally urban design, urban planning, architecture, and landscape architecture — have different languages as well as urbanisms, as do subgroups that form alliances within and between the professions. These subcultural differences have clearly marked efforts to address the shortcomings of modern urbanism.

Like the proverbial blind men and an elephant, these groups have identified different parts of the problem and therefore proposed varying solutions. One group focused on the lack of sense of place, sense of

identity, neighborliness, and walkability as well as environmental devastation, urban fragmentation, social isolation, and public health issues. This group — an alliance of architects, planners, and urban designers — turned to pre-modern cities for inspiration and introduced Neo-Traditional Urbanism in the 1970s, later renamed the New Urbanism.¹ Another group, comprised primarily of architects and landscape architects, identified the privileging of built objects as the problem, and in response, accorded priority to landscape. Members of this group introduced Landscape Urbanism and then tried to rename it Ecological Urbanism (Mostafavi and Doherty, 2010), though the prior moniker has stuck.

Like all subcultures, New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism have their own languages and urbanisms. For New Urbanism, these largely revolve around built form and how it is experienced, while landscape is the defining element for Landscape Urbanism. New Urbanism continues the humanist tradition of urbanism while Landscape Urbanism draws from a widely appealing blend of the form-making avant-garde and landscape ecology traditions. In the humanist tradition, the role of the professional is to reflect or illuminate (mirror or light). In the form-making avant-garde tradition, the professional is an aesthetic/cultural leader who produces work that may be transgressive (shock), while the landscape ecology tradition calls for understanding and respecting the larger ecosystem (going with the flow). Extending these various traditions, New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism identify different goals and apply different methods to achieve them.

The convergence of these two subcultures — New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism — has, not surprisingly, bred misunderstandings and, at times, conflict. It has also produced a creative tension leading each to question assumptions, sharpen skills, and learn from one other to become transformative in the best way. Indeed, the respective contributions of New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism, as well as the debates their rivalry has engendered, have been integral to a profound change in the conception and construction of places, helping elevate urbanism onto the next rung of sustainability, or what might be called prosperity.²

Though there remain potholes and blind corners along the path, we are witnessing propitious changes signaling a redefinition of urbanity.

Programmatic density (horizontal and vertical mixed-use) has been emerging in suburban areas and small towns³ while nature is increasingly being integrated into urban and suburban areas as conservation areas, parks of all sizes, connected greenways, and agriculture. Many new developments, older suburbs, and urban cores have been introducing transit-oriented development, bike trails, permaculture, neighborhood business districts, and other strategies to enhance livability. Whether city, suburb, or countryside, local farming may coexist with importing food, local businesses with global ones, and mass transit with the automobile or perhaps even automated personal rapid transit (PRT).

At the same time, the importance of cities to economics and environmental quality has become a given and urban design trends have been aligning fortuitously with political and social trends including the sustainability, smart city, creative city, historic preservation, community garden, urban agriculture, land trust, and public health movements. Around the US, regions and groups⁴ have been reviving passenger railroad systems, implementing extensive new mass transit, adaptively reusing existing buildings, creating some great public spaces at all scales, remediating brownfields, adaptively reusing grayfields and redfields, and undertaking significant initiatives to protect air and water quality. Performance- and form-based guidelines, encouraging walkability and integrating nature into the city, are increasingly replacing regulations that focus on traffic flow and risk mitigation. In addition, the overall quality of new development — urban infill as well as greenfield — is far superior to what it was in prior decades.

Urban designers have been practicing an evolved contextualism whereby geography, history, culture, experiential qualities, and post-occupancy evaluations become significant generators of form. Just as complementary medicine looks at the whole person including their physical environment, this “complementary urbanism” looks at the whole environment including people. The older contextualism, which asked new buildings to be harmonious with surroundings rather than scream “look at me,” has also taken stronger root. As Rem Koolhaas recently declared, “an icon may be individually plausible, but ... collectively they form an ultimately counterproductive and self-cancelling kind of landscape. So that is out” (Koolhaas 2010: 68). Visual representations express this evolved contextualism, a welcome departure from the conventional

pristine architectural rendering devoid of people, often from a birds-eye view, as though the viewer is peering down upon a model.

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Complementary urbanism has been emerging around the world parallel to rapidly proliferating complementary currencies such as travel miles, time banking, and local currencies. Similar to complementary currencies, complementary urbanism *complements* what is already there rather than attempt to replace it or compete with it. In the case of urbanism, what is already

there may include existing buildings and infrastructure, market economies, and cultural traditions, as well as theories about which approach may be optimal. In the same way that complementary currencies liberate people from the pyramidal global economy’s concentration of power and control along with its excesses and predatory behaviors (Collective Intelligence Research Institute 2012), a complementary urbanism is not bound to the pyramidal urban development process and can benefit from the innovation, dynamism, and resilience allowed by leveraging collective intelligence.

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Asset-based and place-based, complementary urbanism builds upon what is integral to people and locales, their “DNA.” It supports existing local businesses while also incentivizing innovation and entrepreneurship and providing an attractive place for national and global businesses to establish themselves. It builds upon cultural assets, supporting the rich diversity of communities, including historic buildings and districts, expressive arts and culture, and the wide range of creativity and expertise in any given place. And it showcases environmental assets, often connecting public

space systems and integrating more nature into the city.

Complementary urbanism combines strategy with serendipity. In contrast to popular efforts to “conspire with reality,” it is not principally tactical. The tactical approach may be that of the spy or double agent,

fulfilling an agenda that might be covert and self-serving. Or it may be that of the guerilla community-builder aiming to make specific interventions, usually in their own neighborhoods, skirting political processes.⁵ While the tactical approach is typically cynical and sometimes passive-aggressive, complementary urbanism aims clearly and idealistically to enhance places for all people.

The emergence of complementary urbanism is part of what environmentalist and entrepreneur Paul Hawken described several years ago as a worldwide “movement with no name” that will prevail because it is not based on ideology but on the identification of what is humane, behaving like an immune system (Hawken 2007) to heal social and urban malaise. Practitioners of complementary urbanism tend to regard human habitat as part of nature, rather than as a machine for living. They aspire to prosperity for all, rather than aiming principally for power, prestige, and profits. Many are developing and implementing important tools for engaging others, unleashed by social media and ubiquitous interactive mobile technologies (Searce, Leadbeater, Onuma, Collective Intelligence Research Institute). The goal is to render the planning, design, and development processes more inclusive, accountable, and effective, deeply inflecting the product. For example, the Onuma software system allows real-time collaborative design on a previously unseen scale through BIMStorms that allow users to contribute to a project according to their inclination and regardless of their expertise by using whatever software they have at hand from wherever they may be (Onuma 2010).

In the course of this shift, the architectural profession has grown more multi-faceted, inspired by ecological flows and minimizing energy usage as much as by form-making. Landscape architecture has entered the urban fray in a big way and planning is becoming more proactive and visionary, rather than reactive and responsive. Each of these fields has been partnering with the others as transdisciplinary teams, as well as approaches, have grown commonplace.

Describing the evolution in planning and urban design, John Landis contends: “Planning is in the midst of a major paradigm change.... Planning’s first paradigm, which ran in the U.S. from the turn of the 20th century until the early 1970s, was all about plan-making and regulation: Community plans were developed to lay out future land use and infrastructure patterns, and accompanying land use regulations — typically

subdivision controls and zoning — were adopted as implementation tools. Planning's second paradigm, which rose out of the environmental movement during the 1970s, was all about making the planning process more participatory; and then, beginning in the 1980s, more cognizant of uneven power relationships.... The new planning paradigm, call it Planning 3.0, will be all about measuring outcomes and developing implementation models that generate successful outcomes.... Planning 3.0 will be instantaneous in speed, collaborative in nature, and global in scope" (Landis 2011). For urban design, Landis maintains, this new paradigm "will leave dogmatic labels behind, take on an international bent, and focus on how people actually use public and private spaces, and how they add to the urban livability" (ibid).⁶

The practice of complementary urbanism begins with an understanding of, and appreciation for, current conditions, rather than ignoring or critiquing them. It then builds upon these existing assets instead of focusing on resolving problems or filling deficits. The latter tendency, which prevailed during the last century, was exemplified by the "hierarchy of needs" introduced by psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943. This model implied people have deficits that need to be addressed, rather than intrinsic qualities and abilities that may be developed.⁷

Modern urbanism aligned with this view, identifying a need or problem, proposing solutions, establishing goals, and attempting to implement them. Subsequent efforts toward sustainable urbanism, for the most part, did not challenge this conventional approach. Indeed, the most widely applied definition of sustainability includes the word "needs" twice: "Meeting the *needs* of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own *needs*" (United Nations 1987, emphasis added).

In contrast, complementary urbanists begin by uncovering their own hunches and engaging other stakeholders to consider the assets of a place and how best to leverage them: buildings, neighborhoods, businesses, cultural institutions, natural landscapes, or creative and intellectual capital. Directing attention first to opportunity-finding, this approach counters the tendency to begin with problem-finding by applying *two kinds of vision*: the ability to see things clearly and a vision for a better future. In the process, the greatest problems often become the greatest solutions, revealing blessings that may be disguised and making virtue of necessity.⁸

Just as a good manager builds on the existing strengths of an organization, complementary urbanism builds upon given assets of places and people. Instead of the modernist tendency to begin with a *tabula rasa*, it begins with a *tabula plena*. This approach cultivates good ideas while leveraging resources and support to realize them. It also sets a generative and dynamic self-adjusting feedback mechanism into motion, enabling communities to build creatively upon their strengths in an ongoing fashion.

Urbanists who are moving beyond sustainability to prosperity — New, Landscape, and others — are thereby introducing subtle changes with large impacts. Organizational consultant Otto Scharmer describes the larger context in which this incipient evolution in urbanism is inscribed, saying: “I personally believe that the biggest of all shifts is yet to come. It’s a shift that does not deal with a technological transformation but with a social transformation: the transformation of the relationship between business, government, and civil society from manipulation and confrontation to dialogue and co-creation.” This will occur, Scharmer maintains, with “collective leadership capacity to draw together all key stakeholders and involve them in a process that begins with uncovering common intention and ends with collectively creating profound innovation on the scale of the whole system” (Scharmer).

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Prospects for Good Urbanism

Thanks to concerted efforts over the last several decades to improve places, there is now a virtual consensus among urbanists about what constitutes good urbanism.⁹ This consensus holds that our regions should be comprised of networks of quality public spaces, punctuated and lined by vital hubs of activity. Conversely, good urbanism consists of mixed-use cores (large hubs and smaller nodes) connected by corridors of transit, bicycle, pedestrian, and automobile routes and amply interspersed with linked quality public spaces. Key to success is the connective tissue: infrastructure and public spaces. Whether retrofitted or new, for practical purposes or pleasure, the consensus holds that this connective tissue

should be multipurpose, beautiful, highly functional, and efficient. It should benefit from the most recent technologies and harmonize with its natural and cultural settings.

While there are numerous iterations and a range of foci, most place prescriptions converge on these general principles. Along with this knowledge of the component parts of good urbanism, we also have the will and the tools to achieve those desired ends. Nevertheless, good urbanism still eludes in far too many instances, hence the continued proliferation of prescriptions for healing places and lingering doubts as to the efficacy of professionals dedicated to urbanism, principally architects, urban designers, and planners.

With regard to architects, sociologist Nathan Glazer declared: “The long history of the relationship of architects to the design of cities seems to have come to an end, or at least a temporary stop. Architects no longer design cities, and they are not being asked to. A relationship between architects and the design of cities that goes back to the Renaissance and perhaps before, and continued through the American City Beautiful movement and through early modernism, is for the moment in suspension” (Glazer 2007, 290).

Alex Krieger registered a parallel lament about urban designers, saying: “The heroic form-giving tradition may be in decline. After all, the twentieth century witnessed immense urban harm caused by those who offered a singular or universal idea of what a city is, or what urbanization should produce. But our cultural observers remind us that pragmatism and technique cannot be a sufficient substitute, nor can design professionals be mere absorbers of public opinion waiting for consensus to build. One must think and offer ideas as well.... But such deliverers of bold saber strokes (to borrow a phrase from Gideon) are rarer today than they were at the turn of the 20th century, or we heed their visions less often” (Krieger 2009).

Almost two decades ago, James Howard Kunstler queried, “Does the modern profession called urban planning have anything to do with making good places anymore?” (Kunstler 1993). More recently, Glazer remarked: “Most observers of the city today would agree that the image of the planner in the public mind is not very defined or compelling, indeed rather dim. City planning, large-scale planning in general, is not in high repute these days.... It is clear the dominant element in the image

of the planner is no longer that of the reformer, the bringer of hope, which is what the image of the city planner, I believe, used to be.... The planner today knows many details of many programs and the arguments that support one or another, but larger visions are beyond his responsibility.... And as a corollary, we do not normally think of calling in the professional planner when we consider today what has gone wrong with the city and suburb, and what can be done about it. These days we call him in to help with the details” (Glazer 2007, 270).

Just this past year, Thomas Campanella sounded a similar alarm, asking: “How did a profession that roared to life with grand ambitions become such a mouse?” (Campanella 2011). Campanella posed this challenge: “How can we cultivate in planners the kind of visionary thinking that once characterized the profession? How can we ensure that the idealism of our students is not extinguished as they move into practice? How can we transform planners into big-picture thinkers with the courage to imagine alternatives to the status quo, and equipped with the skills and the moxie to lead the recovery of American infrastructure and put the nation on a greener, more sustainable path? We have become a caretaker profession — reactive rather than proactive, corrective instead of preemptive, rule bound and hamstrung and anything but visionary. If we lived in Nirvana, this would be fine. But we don’t. We are entering the uncharted waters of global urbanization on a scale never seen. And we are not in the wheelhouse, let alone steering the ship. We may not even be on board.” (ibid)

How can we ensure those specially trained to plan and design cities play principal roles? How to prevent this job from defaulting to private developers in negotiation with city councils and development review boards? How can we, as urbanists, work to achieve good urbanism more reliably?

During a period of rapid urban growth one century ago, Daniel Hudson Burnham sang the praises of big plans and the creation of numerous city plans and visions ensued for half a century. Widespread disappointment with modern urbanism, however, conspired to diminish such visioning. This disappointment owed to both product and process, the *what* as well as the *how*. With regards to product (the *what*), modern urbanism’s principal banes were the separation of functions, the death of the street, and the reliance upon the automobile. In terms of process (the *how*), problems inhered in the imposition of these plans upon

places without regard for place (built and natural), history, or culture. In the wake of modern urbanism's demise, numerous "open society" and participatory efforts emerged that avoided the heavy hand, but proved largely unsatisfactory in terms of improving places.

The first shortcoming (product) has been ably addressed since then by the emergent consensual prescriptions for good urbanism described above.¹⁰ The second (process), however, has yet to be adequately addressed, severely impairing the advancement of urbanism. Retreating from fully addressing this core issue, the professions dedicated to urbanism largely deflected attention to narrower pursuits, technological preoccupations, and turf wars.

Needless to say, prescribing good urbanism without the ability to heed such prescriptions is insufficient, likely explaining the ongoing lament about the paucity of bold plans ever since the failure of modern urbanism. Throughout history, all the way through modern urbanism, visionary planning and urban design were essentially top-down. The reaction since the 1960s was emphatically bottom-up. Since then, diluted versions of both have characterized most efforts with, for the most part, mixed or underwhelming results.

Complementary urbanism is neither top-down nor bottom-up, but *sideways*. Turning the pyramid on its side, it begins with an idea hatched by one or more people, who invite all stakeholders to participate in refining and realizing the vision. While professional urbanists can catalyze this process, it may also be initiated by political or community leaders, artists, developers, philanthropic organizations, cultural institutions, or anyone else interested in effecting change.¹¹ Along the way, an entity may be established to oversee the project and institute enabling policy to facilitate implementation and allow others to easily adapt it for other circumstances. Complementary urbanism thereby responds to both shortcomings, process as well as product, enriching (complementing) the conventional approach toward urbanism and moving it beyond sustainability to prosperity.

While the onus previously was on those at the top of the power hierarchy, complementary urbanism often accomplishes the bulk of the work before reaching them. *Instead of diminishing their power, however, this approach actually extends it* because they have enabled the process to occur, or at least sanctioned it, and through co-creation, the process

delivers a product that has been polished by the interested parties who have already taken ownership of the project, invested in making it happen, and will feel proud of it when it does. Indeed, so much has already been accomplished by the time it reaches the final decision makers that the process greatly reduces the huge investment typically required to get an idea approved, allocate resources to build it, and obtain necessary support and buy-in. Without this process, these steps are unreliable at best. With it, the project has actually already started happening and the simple rubber stamp of decision makers, now at the side as true civil servants, ensures their popularity and continued support from the community. Plus they can claim bragging rights to a highly successful transformation in their city or town.

While everyone can contribute to produce good urbanism, professional urbanists play a special role by lending a range of expertise while imparting the wisdom to reflect, illuminate, shock, and/or go with the flow. The best urbanism has always drawn appropriately from humanist, avant-garde, *and* landscape ecology traditions. Applying the two kinds of vision (seeing clearly and envisioning a better future), we can discern when and where to apply each, and in what combination. The opportunity is ours to be transformative in the best way by continuing to learn from cultural convergence and transmute the creative tensions of contending urbanisms into a complementary one that forges better places for all into the future.

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Endnotes

- 1 For an overview, see Ellin 1999, 93–105
- 2 For those already strongly committed to, and invested in, the pursuit of sustainability, or who do not find the term prosperity particularly appealing, this could just as well be described as a shift to the next level of sustainability.
- 3 See Dunham-Jones and Williamson.
- 4 Rapidly proliferating border-crossing organizations are important allies in this general shift. These include the Center for Ecoliteracy [ecoliteracy.org],⁴ Design for Health [designforhealth.net],⁴ Shaping Footprints [sfppinc.org],⁴ Active Living by Design [activelivingbydesign.org],⁴ Project for Public Spaces [pps.org], Walkable Communities [walkablecommunities.org], Society for Organizational Learning [solonline.org], Well Community Association and Foundation [well-community.org], the Urban Institute [turnstone.tv/theurbaninstitut.html], Project for Livable Communities [projectlivablecommunities.org], and the Slow Cities Movement [cittaslow.net], among others.
- 5 See Lydon et al.

- 6 design.upenn.edu/city-regional-planning/letter
- 7 While Maslow recognized that people who are self-actualizing favor “Being-cognition,” which focuses on what they have (their own gifts), as opposed to “Deficiency-cognition,” which is self-critical, his hierarchy of needs is a model that focuses on deficiencies.
- 8 I have described this approach as VIDA, Spanish for “life” and an acronym for Visioning, Inspiring, Demonstrating, and Advocating (Ellin 2010b).
- 9 Zeynep Toker and Henrik Minassians (2011) also suggest this.
- 10 See Ellin 2012.
- 11 In *Urban Design Reclaimed*, Emily Talen provides step-by-step instructions for anyone interested in advancing an urban design proposal (2009).