

NEW URBANISM

American style New

British urban strategy is increasingly drawing on a US policy called the New Urbanism, whose strongest advocate is addressing the sustainable summit. **Robin Hambleton** examines what it means to towns and cities

The Delivering Sustainable Communities Summit in Manchester is a mega event. Around 2,000 delegates are expected to make their way to the G-MEX conference centre to hear speeches from a number of influential speakers – including Chancellor Gordon Brown and Home Secretary Charles Clarke, as well as the DPM John Prescott.

Mr Prescott has made no secret of the fact that he has been impressed by a number of US 'New Urbanist' developments and projects.

In his address to our international conference on City Futures, held in Chicago last July, he suggested that the UK approach to urban regeneration could be described as 'New Urbanism with a British accent' (*The MJ*, 29 July, 2004).

It is no surprise, therefore, that John Norquist, arguably the strongest advocate for New Urbanism, will be one of the speakers at the G-MEX.

Mr Norquist, who stepped down after 15 years as mayor of Milwaukee last year, is the new president of the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU).

Founded in 1993, and now based in Chicago, the CNU is a membership

American beauties: views of Florida in the US, where New Urbanism means sustainable communities



organisation which seeks to promote what members see as better urban development.

The origins of the New Urbanism movement can be traced to genuine frustration with the quality of urban development taking place on the perimeter of most, if not all, US cities in the post-Second World War period.

First and foremost, the founders of the CNU were opponents of 'conventional urban sprawl'. Architects, landscape architects and planners wanting to create more liveable communities were in the vanguard.

Stop disinvestment in central cities, challenge placeless development, do something to improve the quality of urban design – these were some of the aspirations of the movement in the early

stages. Sounds uncontroversial. But 'anti sprawl' is not the whole story. On the contrary, debates about New Urbanism in the US resemble a veritable battleground of ideas and approaches.

Colourful and opinionated personalities, Utopian thinking, ideologues who are convinced they have all the answers, opponents who seek to unmask the real motives of the enthusiasts – the debates and conflicts about New Urbanism have it all.

This is not just a debate about ideas. Starting more than 20 years ago, with the flagship development of Seaside, Florida – an 80-acre 'traditional neighbourhood development' on the edge of the ocean – the CNU can point to a substantial number of projects.

Several hundred New Urbanist developments have either been completed or are under construction within the US. And the CNU now has around 2,300 members in 20 countries and 49 US states.

Before attempting to map the contours of the debate, a word of caution is needed. New Urbanism is not a monolithic movement. Lively arguments over the details of different design strategies characterise the annual meetings. What the movement stands for is not crystal clear and, indeed, this ambiguity in core values is seen as a flaw by some critics.

With that said, the CNU has, at least, set out a Charter for New Urbanism

articulating 27 principles which should guide urban planning and design at three spatial scales (nine principles at each scale):

- the region: metropolis, city and town
- the neighbourhood, the district and the corridor
- the block, the street and the building.

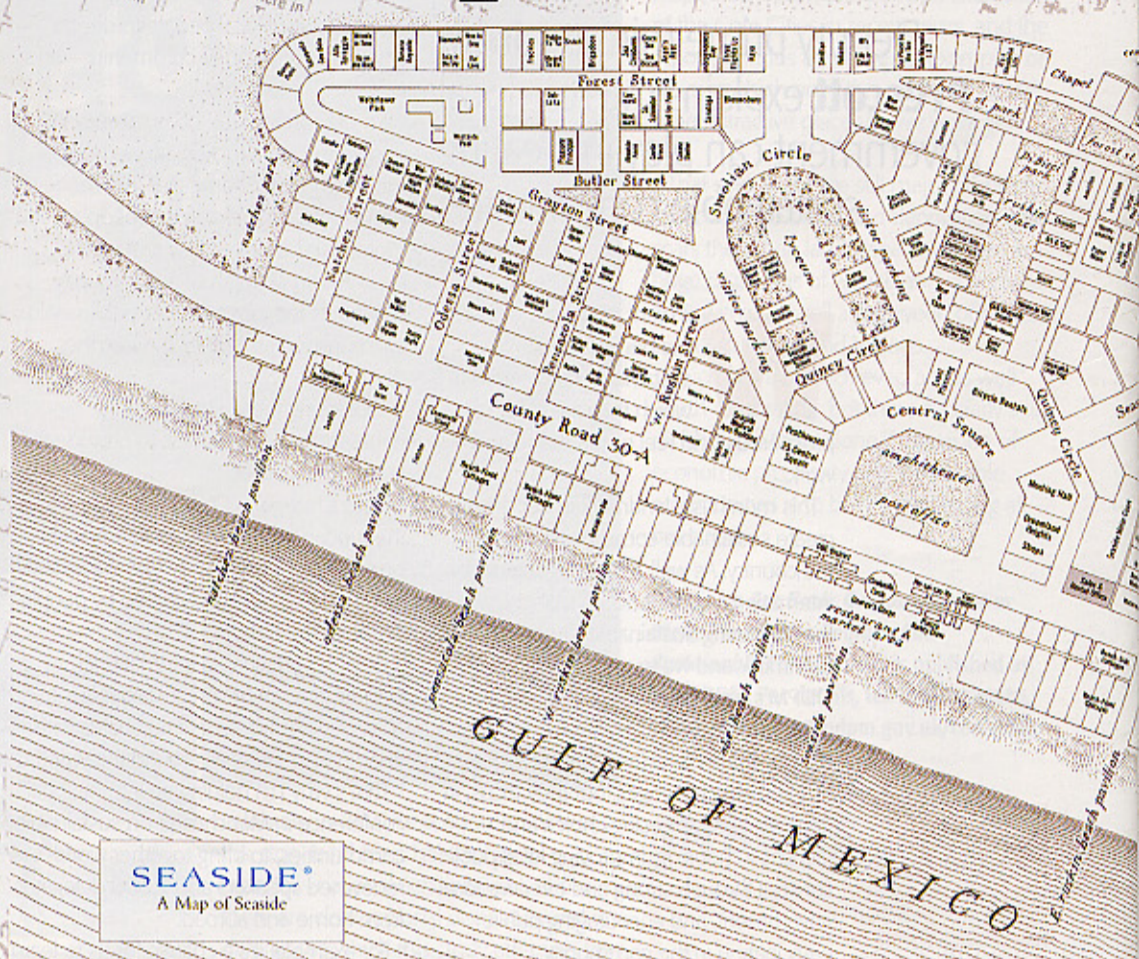
In some ways, the charter merely restates many town planning and urban design principles that have been well established in Europe for decades. For example: 'The development and redevelopment of towns and cities should respect historical patterns, precedents and boundaries'. And: 'Architecture and landscape architecture should grow from local climate, topography, history and building practice'.

In other ways, the principles go beyond city planning to set out aspirations for sound urban governance. For example: 'Revenue and resources can be shared more co-operatively among municipalities... within regions, to avoid destructive competition for tax base...'

So what is all the fuss about? Here are three of the main conflict zones you can expect to see aired in Manchester.

First let's consider the argument taking place within architecture. Some architects are passionately in favour of the planning principles, if not the stylistic implications, of New Urbanism – including George Ferguson, current president of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Mr Ferguson has carried out several



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A Map of Seaside

Urbanism for the UK?

architecture, urban design and the nature of desirable townscape. This, in turn, splits us into a wider debate about modernism and post-modernism in the arts as a whole.

Keeping to street level, we can say that on the one hand, New Urbanism can be viewed as either people-friendly design at a human scale or, alternatively, as 'kitsch'. Likewise, architectural critics of New Urbanism can be praised for challenging a movement which pulls architects back into the past, or dismissed for their obsession with new, dramatic individual buildings that win recognition for individuals.

In any event, it can be argued that New Urbanism is not, at its heart, concerned with 'style', but rather with the spatial structure of desirable neighbourhoods and cities.

And this takes us into the second conflict zone – spatial planning.

New Urbanists, consistent with town planning principles developed by Ebenezer Howard in England in the 1890s – notably, the 'garden city' concept – present a sound critique of the way low-density suburban development is eating up farmland and creating unsustainable communities.

It may surprise UK readers to learn that in the US there are, in fact, various writers who claim that sprawl is a 'good thing'. These urban scholars argue that those who advocate the virtues of compact cities have not demonstrated that they are more efficient, that the US does not have a land shortage, and that residents love low-density housing.

New Urbanists delight in hammering these writers by showing they pay little attention to the environmental and social consequences of sprawl, and that they fail to acknowledge that citizen preferences are influenced by what is available. Create new kinds of liveable neighbourhoods

and people will flock to them, is the New Urbanist response.

A more powerful critique of the New Urbanist approach to spatial planning, however, is that it is all over the place when it comes to urban density.

The New Urbanist rhetoric refers to walkable neighbourhoods, transit-oriented development, and compact urban form – all familiar features of sustainable development in European cities.

For this strategy to work – an approach involving mixed-use development with citizens enjoying the use of safe footpaths for many journeys and taking full advantage of high-quality public transportation – we must have relatively high density.

The reality is that the list of CNU projects includes many projects which do not, in fact, meet this test. Some New Urbanist developments have only 10 dwellings per acre – such as Kentlands, an 'edge village' in Gaithersburg, Maryland. In practice, we need more like 50 to 150 dwellings per acre to keep walking distances to local facilities really convenient.

Having said that, believe it or not, Kentlands exceeds the density of the sprawl that surrounds it.

The third zone of conflict is social equity. New Urbanists seek to construct mixed-use, mixed-income neighbourhoods. They

are against 'gated' communities which exclude people, and they aspire to create communities that value diversity.

These are fine ideals, but New Urbanists can be accused of naïve thinking.

First, some of the New Urbanists appear to subscribe to a simplistic belief in architectural determinism – they think design can create community.

In the UK, urban planners – and I was one for a while – involved with the design of the many New Towns, have known that this is a flawed idea, for the best part of half a century.

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 interactions and exchange. New Urbanism's scorecard on the wider challenge of creating more equitable cities by helping low-income families is less impressive.

True, some of the schemes have fostered residential mixing, but in many cases, the New Urbanist communities are turning out to be rather elitist settlements, with average income levels much higher than surrounding areas. This is certainly true for some of the flagship projects – such as Seaside and Kentlands.

And gentrification of mixed-income projects over time is an ongoing problem. Such a critique needs to acknowledge, however, that a good number of New Urbanist projects are infill developments, mixing people of different income groups within the same mixed-used development.

The debate is complex and this is not a comprehensive examination of US New Urbanism. I recommend the CNU website to anyone who wants to find out more: www.cnu.org.

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New Urbanism is concerned with the spatial structure of desirable neighbourhoods and cities

popular New Urbanist schemes in Bristol and – an important point – his views are grounded in successful practice.

Other architects are horrified by the guidelines New Urbanists seek to impose. They claim New Urbanism is backward-looking and anti-modern.

It is true that many New Urbanist projects have neo-traditional designs harking back to a bygone era. And this 'retreat into the past' is rejected as a sensible way forward by many architects, since it attempts to deny historical change.

This is to simplify a more complex debate about the aesthetics of