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Adaptive Urbanism

Kristina Hill and Larissa Larsen

Introduction

Cities are an emergent phenomenon. From a long human history of impermanent communities, cities appeared only five to seven thousand years ago.[1] The fact that the majority of the Earth's population now lives in dense, permanent settlements speaks to the advantages that these settlement types afford. Our human capacity to occupy, comprehend and manage cities as a cultural and biophysical phenomenon continues to grow over time. However, the depopulation of city centers in the middle of the twentieth century, the explosion of urban fringe growth (especially along rivers and coasts),[2] and current megacity growth rates provide ample evidence that cities are vulnerable to booms and busts. If our goal is to manage cities as just and sustainable human living environments, it's not clear that humans are meeting that goal on a global scale.

In recent literature, many urban design scholars have suggested different "urbanisms" in an effort to guide how we shape cities and neighborhoods. In the first section of this chapter, we begin by recalling the origin of the term urbanism and then use Barnett's[3] categorization system to illustrate how the many terms may be sorted into some logical order. We end the first section by highlighting some of the key characteristics of New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism that help reveal their

priorities, strengths and weaknesses. In the second section, we argue that the tensions between New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism return us to an older debate about the relationship between technology and nature, specifically to the effects of industrialization and an industrialized economy on landscapes. Finally, in the third section of our essay, we suggest that global climate change, one of our most pressing challenges, requires moving beyond these past debates and ideological divides toward a conception of adaptive urbanism. Adaptive urbanism recognizes the interdependence of people and ecosystem services, and points to the need for design interventions to consciously address urban social inequalities.

Organizing the Urbanisms

The term urbanism made its way into English from the French *urbanisme*, which came into use in 1801 to refer to a branch of study "dealing with urban life." But it was not recorded in English until 1884, and by 1929 it was still referred to as a "newly-coined word" by the London *Times*.[4] Before the nineteenth century, and the proliferation of the terms urbanism and urbanist in the twentieth century, the only real predecessor to the term was "urbane" — an adjective used to describe refined human behavior, not human settlements.[5] "Urbanize" originally referred to improving people's manners, not expanding city districts.[6] In the last twenty-five years, without conducting an exhaustive search, several prominent schools of thought have arisen in the design and planning professions that call themselves a form of "urbanism" — New Urbanism,[7] Landscape Urbanism,[8] postmodern urbanism,[9] everyday urbanism,[10] green urbanism,[11] and many more.

In a recent categorizing essay, Jonathan Barnett divided more than sixty recently coined "urbanisms" into six categories:

- System urbanisms: frames cities as the product of systems, and a matter of systems design
- Green urbanisms: frames cities as linked to natural processes through food and other materials
- Traditional urbanisms: emphasizes opportunities to learn from places that evolved successfully
- Community urbanisms: emphasizes the need for wider participation and power-sharing in cities

- Sociopolitical urbanisms: identifies political and social critiques of city life and city design
- Headline urbanisms: labels situations, rather than more fully organized points of view.

After reviewing a multitude of these competing notions, Barnett gives up and describes this proliferation as a process of self-negation, in which each aspect of the wide variety of urban conditions is given its own urbanism.[12] He also identifies some as "territorial claims," in which the central issue is whether the hegemony of architecture over landscape architecture will continue, or whether planning will reassert its claim to urban ideologies. But in his half-serious, half-humorous review of the various forms of advocacy involved in these various urbanisms, as in all "-isms," Barnett misses the opportunity to reflect on their origins, as well as the timing of this ism-explosion. While the proliferation of "isms" almost trivializes their intents, it also demonstrates our collective need for larger ideas that remind us of our priorities and advance our practices. In this essay, we feel compelled to briefly describe the key concepts and characteristics of New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism as we see them. In these brief summaries, we hope to contrast each movement's design priorities and highlight some important strengths and weaknesses.

Dissatisfied with the perceived loss of community within many postwar suburbs, New Urbanism's primary focus is how we can "build" better communities through design and improve residents' quality of life. New Urbanists believe that mixing uses, offering a diversity of housing types, and including prominent public spaces builds better communities. By creating compact developments, neighborhoods are expected to facilitate greater social vibrancy and encourage walking over driving. New Urbanism has called for a more "human" scale. This has returned designers' attention to the pedestrian environment, to street connectivity, and to grid-based urban street patterns that simplify wayfinding. It has also meant that New Urbanist developments incorporate community public spaces, cultural institutions, and destinations that serve residents' needs. New Urbanism has become a social movement over the last twenty years. The reason for this success may be largely the result of its utopian aspirations and its clear identification of design elements.

But in applauding New Urbanism's aspirations and noting its popular support, we must also revisit two of its weaknesses. The first is its reliance on physical design to address social problems. While physical design can encourage walking and serendipitous social interactions through proximity, it cannot address the problems of housing segregation by income and race. Fainstein[13] notes that the New Urbanist towns and neighborhoods are, "only slightly less exclusive suburbs than the ones [New Urbanists] dislike." The history of urban renewal reminds us of how simplistic physical responses cannot overcome larger social problems of racism and poverty. Every designer and decision-maker must be wary of the logical fallacies and social consequences of advocacy based on environmental determinism. If the meaning of diversity in New Urbanist communities is to extend beyond the physical aesthetic to include social diversity then design efforts must be coordinated with public programs. In part, proponents for New Urbanism in the design and development community should feel some sense of relief that they alone aren't expected to solve some of society's most divisive problems. But by acknowledging that design can't solve larger structural injustices, New Urbanists must temper their expansive claims. Duany once stated his belief in, "the ability of architecture to transform society." This statement exaggerates the power of physical design, neglects the darker, potentially exclusionary side of community, and undercuts New Urbanism's positive contributions.

A second critique of New Urbanism is the movement's limited impact on reducing sprawl. New Urbanism's desires to reduce the need for private vehicle use and to construct well-defined (non-sprawling) edges have obvious environmental benefits. But while they may be potentially walkable, these neighborhoods have been less successful in reducing vehicle miles and preserving natural areas and agricultural lands. We acknowledge that ecosystems are not the primary focus of New Urbanists' concerns. Some New Urbanists would argue that a greater sensitivity to environmental issues has developed within the movement as low-impact development strategies have been incorporated into their design practices. So while the movement has successfully increased density within, most of the heralded examples are still located in exurban and suburban areas.

The primary focus of Landscape Urbanism is to reveal geomorphologies and other natural systems that underlay our human settlements. Waldheim states that Landscape Urbanisms offers designers two key

insights. The first insight is that twenty-first-century cities are not like nineteenth-century cities. Therefore, we need to accommodate emerging urban functions and not simply emulate earlier models of urbanism. The second insight is that urban designers can protect the environment if they prioritize natural functions. Therefore — in contrast to New Urbanism, which saw the neighborhood, the block, and the street as the key urban design elements — Landscape Urbanism broadens the scale to a natural system (generally the watershed, but also to multi-scale systems of plant succession and animal dispersal), highlights ecosystem services, and sees infrastructure as an opportunity for revealing how natural and man-made systems intermingle. When asked how this newer movement differs from McHarg's regional environmental planning tradition, some Landscape Urbanists have stated that McHarg's notion of preserving the most desirable natural areas first and then integrating development in the remaining areas sets up an unnecessary opposition between human activity and natural systems. The popularity of this newer movement reflects increasing environmental concerns, the belief that by exposing the extent of natural systems within urban environments society will recognize their importance and fragility, and the perceived need for self-organizing, less capital-intensive solutions for large brownfield remediation efforts and park development proposals.

We agree with the need to recognize the intrinsic values of natural systems as part of the urban environment and highlight these systems, and we agree that people are active agents shaping environmental systems. However, we are concerned with two weaknesses within Landscape Urbanism. The first weakness is the movement's use of language and the obfuscation that imposes. From a lyrical perspective, the words of Landscape Urbanism sound intriguing. However, identifying the key characteristics based on the writing of leading proponents can be frustrating. Landscape Urbanists assert that flexibility, open-endedness, and indeterminancy are the hallmarks of their design practices. They believe that these hallmarks reflect the dynamism of ecological systems and that flexibility is essential in a time when social and technological changes happen rapidly. But when pressed to explain in greater precision what this explicitly means for design, Landscape Urbanists generally engage in a tautological style of debate that is impenetrable. The characteristics of flexibility, open-endedness, and indeterminancy can be used to

avoid specific answers. Intermingled within these conversations are references to natural processes and environmental sciences. Again, language imprecision makes it hard to discern how this information contributes to their designs but we feel that Landscape Urbanists are largely inspired by information from the natural sciences. The intricacy and complexity of natural systems is amazing and should inspire us. However, instead of using this information only for inspiration and speculation, we believe that is important to use it to 1) create more resilient and adaptive systems and 2) advance our understanding of how we can measure the quality of these complex human-environmental systems.

Our second concern involves the issue of density and some Landscape Urbanists' acceptance of lower-density settlement patterns. We believe this concern involves the implications of boundary setting. We agree with Landscape Urbanism in their position that biophysical conditions must be considered when setting boundaries. Locating a site within a watershed instead of a municipal jurisdiction provides a more useful way to understand how water moves through a site as part of a larger system and how small site-specific actions can have cumulative impacts on water quality and quantity. But boundaries for environmental evaluation need to vary. When biologists create a quadrant of an acre or even a larger expense of several hundred acres to measure the presence of a particular species, the extent of biodiversity, or surface water quality, low-density settlements produce better environmental results than higher-density settlement areas. However, to advance environmental sustainability it is necessary to remember that the true boundaries of our collective impacts need to be measured at the global scale. Currently, cities occupy approximately three percent of the Earth's land mass but they accommodate more than half of the Earth's population. While the area of a city can't be self-sustaining, we must preserve natural areas and agricultural lands beyond our urban areas to supply our needs and absorb our wastes. As the demands of population and consumption continue to increase, urban patterns must increase in their density if we are serious in efforts to advance global environmental sustainability. Therefore, increasing urban density is imperative. Landscape Urbanists correctly note that city/suburban divides are meaningless from both natural system and economic perspectives. While this is true about these boundaries, that information doesn't mean that low-density patterns are permissible if we seek long-term, global survival.

Now we will step back to place New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism within a larger debate that helps us to understand these two movements.

Echoes of a Classic Debate

We argue that there is in fact a common genesis to New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism and that they — quite unsurprisingly — arise from one of the most persistent intellectual and popular tensions in Anglo-American society: our ambivalence about industrialization. When Leo Marx wrote his 1964 essay on the representation of machines in American literature, *The Machine in the Garden*,[14] he was writing about the fiction literature of the nineteenth century. But he wrote the book and amplified the motif at a moment in time when that ambivalence had broken out into culture wars over social authority, conflicts which reflected that same tension between un-checked industrialized systems driven by historical necessity versus a simpler, kinder conception of nature as an unbroken envelope around human lives.

This ambivalence about industrialization speaks to a long-standing debate about the unresolved relationship between people and non-human nature. The Marxist geographer Neil Smith[15] believes that this debate can be distilled to a question of whether nature is internal or external to the human. William Cronon[16], an environmental historian, recasts it by illustrating how nature is a "profoundly human construction" and thus internal to the individual. However, the cultural notions of nature as either the sublime or the frontier continue to place it external to the individual. Cronon notes that if we view nature as the sublime we "forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit ... [and we continue the] dangerous dualism that sets human beings outside of nature". If we view nature as the wilderness frontier, we view modernity with hostility for destroying that frontier and thus ending, "the nation's [America's] most sacred myth of origin".

But beyond this uncertain place for nature is the question of sentiment. The modernism–postmodernism rift described by Charles Jencks[17] persists in these debates about machines and systems versus natality[18] and membership in a community of living things. At the root of it all is the turn to secular philosophy and governance that accompanied the Enlightenment, which fundamentally altered cultural and political hierarchies. Since the

Enlightenment made religious authority less important, where could new sources of authority come from? Will authority come from the narrative of industry and pursuit of efficiency, from a notion of systems, from nature, or from the community of human beings? If authority is ascribed to a source that mirrors human consciousness, whether secular or religious, then sentiment has a justifiable presence; if authority is vested in a machine-like logic of systems, then sentiment has no place except as a reminder of human illusions.

As we reflected on the ideas of New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism when we agreed to write for this book, it occurred to us that these polemical schools of thought can logically be seen as splintered philosophical shards produced by the oedipal clashes between modernism and postmodernism. Where postmodernism embraced sentiment, New Urbanism also embraces sentiment and the attachment of meaning to symbols. Where modernism sought an unsentimental rejection of confining moral codes and aristocratic social orders, Landscape Urbanism rejects sentimentality in favor of representing the world and the city as amoral (not immoral), non-hierarchical, mechanical assemblages,[19] criticizing the small-mindedness of urbanists who denigrate the American love of automobiles, and rejecting what some see as the nostalgia inherent in New Urbanists' sentimental goals.

The reason these schools of thought have become polarizing for some in the design and planning professions is two-fold. First, both make aggressive territorial claims.[20] New Urbanism claimed city-making for architects, and sometimes bemoaned planners' lack of vision;[21] leading proponents of Landscape Urbanism claimed city-making for landscape architects, ideally based on the application of ecological knowledge.[22] By rejecting the traditional hegemony of building architecture as the discipline that claims to give form to city landmarks and districts, they prompted many practitioners in both architecture and landscape architecture to choose "sides" as a matter of positioning. Second, as a result of the Enlightenment's success in Europe and its former colonies, urban design professionals of all stripes must in fact make arguments to establish their authority in a secular world. In doing so, they have constructed a kaleidoscopic patchwork of sources for that authority. New Urbanism has tended to make moral arguments that build on the perceived evils of sprawl, adding functional arguments supported by less than complete

evidence (for the pedestrian-friendliness of their formal strategies, for example). Landscape Urbanism has claimed its authority from landscape ecology, but its proponents are generally more fascinated with science as a source of unresolvable indeterminacies, rather than the progressive construction of theory via hypothesis-testing that would be familiar to most actual scientists.

It's not clear how New Urbanism can make claims that extend beyond moral ones without establishing a body of evidence for the relationships between traditional urban forms and human behavior, regional urban growth patterns, and psychological perception that form the basis of their advocacy. Some peer-reviewed research has certainly been published on these relationships,[23] but rarely by the best-known proponents of the New Urbanist school of thought and practice. And some of it shows tenuous or negative results, which should be acknowledged and addressed.[24]

To develop the ideas of Landscape Urbanism, its proponents would have to incorporate some of the insights and perhaps even the experimental methods of landscape ecology and other ecological fields.[25] Almost none of the science related to urban processes and systems is cited in the most widely read theoretical works on Landscape Urbanism.[26] Without that, the movement could easily continue promoting a kind of "systems nihilism," rejecting moral arguments in favor of a fascination with indeterminacy. It is also quite telling that both forms of urbanism have arisen in our current post-industrial era, when the elephant of industrialization has left the room and now pulls most of its strings in the Anglo-American political economy via the financial industry. Perhaps the philosophical and aesthetic aspects of our former production systems can be embraced on an industrial scale only once they have actually moved to Asia and are many steps removed from our immediate experience. Or perhaps hundreds of varieties of urbanism can only arise now because there is no longer any economic logic to urban expansion anymore, other than a recurring finance bubble and a long-term trend towards smaller households.[27]

Global Challenges Require Adaptative and Equitable Approaches to Urbanism

Our own work on cities is done from an epistemological perspective that might be called "normative functionalism," for the sake of building some

constructive ambiguity into this debate. We seek active debates about the values of different functions, and we try to increase the successful performance of these functions through programmatic and formal strategies. We look to science for some of our methods, and in general rely on observation as a critical form of knowledge. But we also actively incorporate scholarship on human emotions and ethical positions in translating our observations into recommendations for cities. Cities must be as livable and as sustainable as possible. It is in that spirit that we'd like to consider some of the general ideas of Landscape Urbanism and New Urbanism in relation to what we see as the most significant challenges facing cities.

The new elephant in the room is rapid climate change, and we fully expect to see its effects over the next several decades and more. Our explicitly ethical position is that any "urbanisms" that don't address the pressing need for adaptation to these rapid, overwhelming trends are going to be obsolete very soon. From this position, we advocate specifically for forms and philosophies of urban adaptation that support the most vulnerable humans in our societies, who will be less able to adapt using their own resources. Public space and public funds should be used to increase our broader adaptability, since private funds will surely be used to the advantage of the groups that control them. Our basic philosophy is that today's imperative is for all designers to participate in adaptive urbanism, ideally in support of the most vulnerable human beings, who cannot easily adapt on their own.

Setting Priorities for Urbanisms

As we review the range of possibilities for urban function, we have returned again and again to the magnitude of the changes that climate trends predict over the next several decades. We believe that the disruptions that are predicted to come within the next hundred years are so significant that adaptation should be the primary focus of urban design and planning.[28]

In addition, we have noted that the economics of market-based urbanization have not been widely supportive of New Urbanism.[29] For their part, Landscape Urbanists have yet to promote alternative models of urban development that are ready for implementation. New economic conditions have already begun to emerge that will draw our attention away from Fordism vs. post-Fordism,[30] and these conditions are likely to

increasingly constrain our visions for alternative futures that involve New Urban structures.[31]

Significant new burdens on public budgets will be produced by frequent extreme weather events, the gradual processes of reducing freshwater resources, and much higher rates of sea level rise — just to name a few obvious pressures that will result from climate change. Public budgets for infrastructure have already been drastically altered by disinvestment and reduced tax rates, and private asset values have declined precipitously with recent adjustments in the housing market. Current infrastructure projects will tie up the debt capacity of cities for decades, and may not allow them to respond to new demands for additional performance (e.g., holding more rainwater, protecting against more frequent storms, weathering under hotter conditions, protecting a growing residential land area). Coastal changes alone may produce another major readjustment in home values and related markets, as the reality of sea level rise and land erosion becomes apparent to potential buyers, lenders and insurers. In short, we believe that urban development pressures are going to change over the next twenty-five years in ways that will fundamentally alter our conversations about urban design and planning — forcing us to focus more on adaptation and the evidence-based (not purely theoretical) linkages between form and function.

One of our primary concerns is for the most vulnerable members of societies. While this includes many people living in developing nations, we are also deeply concerned about the many American families who are living close to their economic "edge." These at-risk families, who may be just one crisis away from poverty, have been recently estimated to include half of the US population.[32] As climate disruptions occur, producing extreme weather events that challenge public budgets to maintain basic infrastructure and social services, the people most at risk will have a thinner safety net and fewer resources to rebuild than in the past.[33] Climate change will force local, state and federal governments to replace the old "one disaster at a time" response strategy with broader, adaptive approaches.[34] Relatively wealthy families will use their resources to rebuild and eventually relocate as an adaptive response. But if many Americans are one crisis away from poverty, we may see a pattern for those families that looks more like the dislocations produced by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans — in which people with fewer resources were forced to

start over in new cities, to which they were evacuated both by choice and by chance, and could not afford to rebuild their former homes. Flooding will have more severe impacts on people without significant savings than on the wealthy. Urban planners and designers have already begun to develop innovations in stormwater detention as a way of mitigating additional flooding, but these have not yet been widely implemented.[35]

We will also see greater impacts on some neighborhoods, and on all people with cardiopulmonary illnesses, from an increased frequency of summertime heat waves and a related decrease in air quality.[36] Individuals and families are likely to adapt by buying more electrical appliances to cool their homes, producing more electricity demand and waste heat, which will add to the problem. Urban planning and design must address this problem quickly, developing tools that can help predict the performance of alternative programs, plans and designs.[37] Innovations such as green walls and stormwater evaporation trenches can add to the benefits of urban forests generally, but without reasonably accurate predictive models at site, district and metropolitan scales, investments may be made in many cities and districts that do not provide significant performance and health benefits.

We believe this is the time for urbanists to engage in a conversation that sets priorities. Cities in the developed world, and the much larger cities of the developing world, are going to face shape-changing problems driven by extreme weather, lost water resources, flooding and overburdened public budgets. Fundamental ecosystem services that all humans rely on today will be stressed as well; some are likely to be significantly reduced, placing additional burdens on human systems. Regional conflicts are likely to be exacerbated, and many people will be dislocated.[38]

If we look at the data and the trends they imply, the irrefutable priority should be on developing adaptive strategies for urban regions. These strategies will have to consider sentiment as well as systems. We will have to acknowledge human psychology and emotions in our future strategies, as well as the fact that most cities do not have the fiscal capacity to build infrastructure that will prevent major dislocations, even if our technological capacity were adequate — which is a debatable point in itself.

If designers and planners do choose to refocus on what we have called normative functionalism — i.e., structuring debate around the functions we want to provide in cities, using arguments that consider both evidence

and ethical positions — we think that professionals and academics will need to position themselves along new lines. The oppositions of modernism and post-modernism might be replaced by a more basic recognition that the machine of industrialization has now fundamentally altered the garden of the environment. Humans are not in control of the changes we have set in motion and now must adapt on a global scale, altering familiar economic and political relationships and even, on the most basic level, altering our sense of what it means to be human in our time — when we can't assume that levees will control floods, cities will have enough water, or that we can cool our homes or breathe city air freely.

The aesthetic experience of people living in cities under these conditions might be a major factor supporting their ability to adapt and incorporate these new realities. Our definition of normative functionalism includes the aesthetic function of design and planning. We will need to activate our cultural strengths of resourcefulness, courage, and compassion to function as urban people, and as communal societies generally.[39] If we hope to develop refinements in our initial ideas over the next several decades of rapid change, designers and planners must begin to address this need today. Can the design of public space help urban communities be more resourceful, or courageous, or compassionate? Excellent design has prompted us to adapt and allowed us to experience shared emotions before — we think of the successful housing experiments of the nineteenth century, when rapid changes in the density of urban populations required adaptations that would support quality of life; infrastructure innovations in the same period that supported human health; and, more recently, memorial designs that have found success as sites of collective memory and places to experience shared emotions.

Components of the contemporary array of "urbanisms" — including the higher-density models of New Urbanism, and the process fascinations of Landscape Urbanism — will undoubtedly persist as necessary strategies in the coming period of rapid urban adaptation we have described in this chapter. The persistent ambiguous attitudes towards technology and industrialization that have been part of the Anglo-American intellectual world for hundreds of years will probably persist as well. But one thing is certain — we will definitely move beyond any dichotomous false oppositions between New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism, since neither advocacy position is sufficient to address these challenges on its own. We

hope something called "adaptive urbanism" or "equitable urbanism" may emerge to replace them. The sooner this happens, the better off we will be fifty years from now.

Endnotes

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35 For example, the series of workshops known as the Dutch Dialogues has identified a wide range of options for storing additional stormwater in the city of New Orleans (see dutchdialogues.com). An effort is underway to implement pilot projects via a new Water Management Strategy, which is being developed for the city of New Orleans by a group of local and international participants in the Dutch Dialogues workshops.

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37 See for example new predictive models being developed at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, which are being considered as evaluative tools by Swedish municipal authorities: Svensson, M., S. Thorsson, et al. 2003. A GIS model for creating bioclimatic maps. *International Journal of Biometeorology* 47: 102–112; Thorsson, S., F. Lindberg, et al. 2010. Potential changes in outdoor thermal comfort conditions in Gothenburg, Sweden due to climate change: the influence of urban geometry. *International Journal of Climatology* 31, 2: 324–35.

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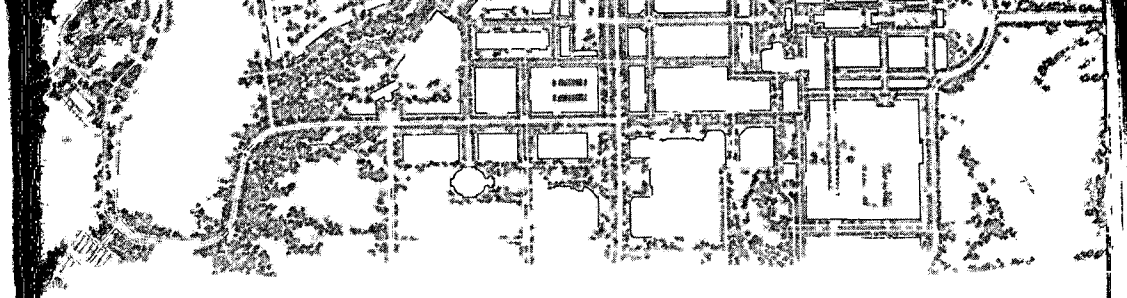

14

Talk of Urbanism

Jason Brody

The design movements that are the subject of this book have been advanced through talk in a variety of venues public and private, professional and informal. I define talk as any communication via language between speaker and an audience. In the early urban design conferences and in contemporary debates, across urbanisms ranging from the New to the Everyday to Landscape and Ecological, through touchstone concepts like design and sustainability, we make sense of our world through talk with others. The social nature of talk *moves us* — in the sense of spurring us to action as well as evoking empathy. Talk in this sense is largely moral, addressing what ought to be done.

Talk of urbanism is complex, contingent and embedded in practice: Discursive communities shape our talk by setting norms, framing ways of seeing, sustaining or closing debate, and ordering communicative relations between members and the larger world in which they operate. Talk of urbanism can be rational and sophisticated or ambiguous, contradictory, dishonest or inarticulate.

In this essay I address the talk of urbanism with the hope of rehabilitating the reputation of theorizing in discursive communities — not because we need more dogma, but because I believe that discursive communities and their often-tiresome refrains play minor but necessary roles in preparing design to guide urbanization through the very difficult years

Landscape Urbanism and its Discontents

Dissimulating the Sustainable City

Edited by Andrés Duany and Emily Talen

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