

## Urban Myths

Michael Mehaffy

**The architectural reform movement called New Urbanism is proving highly influential, and therefore it merits rigorous critique and analysis. But some recent arguments may reveal less about the movement's real flaws, and more about one line of attack and its deceptive polemical practices.**



A spectre is haunting America and the world, according to prolific libertarian author Randal O'Toole: the spectre of New Urbanism. As he wrote in the magazine *Reason* in 1999: "The New Urbanism is quietly sweeping the nation... If you live in a metropolitan area, your city planning bureau is probably infested with New Urbanists." <sup>1</sup> Yuck.

O'Toole was even more visceral in a recent exchange at the Claremont Institute with conservative New Urban architect Philip Bess, when he said "the truth is that I find New Urban designs to be truly repugnant. When I bicycle by New Urban neighborhoods in Portland, Denver, or elsewhere, I get a sick feeling in my stomach because I know many of the people in these neighborhoods have been forced to live there because of various government coercions, and that this has severely degraded their quality of life... Where are the backyards for their children and pets to play in? A little girl was recently killed by a UPS truck in a New Urban neighborhood in Eugene, Oregon, because the backyards were too small for children to play in so they all played in the streets." <sup>2</sup>

What a menace this nasty "New Urbanism" must be!

O'Toole, a self-described economist (though he has no degree in that field) <sup>3</sup> is head of the [Thoreau Institute](#), a veritable one-man army against the City of Portland, "smart-growthers," and, as he lumps them together, the "coercive" New Urbanists. This is in spite, it should be noted, of Portland's cool treatment of the New Urbanists, frequent feuds between the smart-growth and New Urbanist communities, and the New Urbanists' stated claims to embrace market processes and a "level playing field" to allow greater choice - more on that below.

In any case, O'Toole's views could easily be dismissed as being something other than, shall we say, mainstream. He recently challenged publicly the legitimacy of any government beyond 50-person homeowner associations - a sort of one-house, one-vote utopianism, perhaps. <sup>4</sup>

### Misguided Planning?

But to be fair, there have been enough horrifically misguided planning schemes in the past that we should indeed be wary, and we should carefully examine the merits of any critique, from whatever source. So is O'Toole right that the New Urbanism is just another coercive, top-down planning regime? Do his many sweeping claims (for example his recent claim that New Urbanism is "crime-friendly") have merit?

More accurately, the New Urbanism is not a "planning regime" but a member-based movement consisting of a cross-sector of professionals, backed with a charter of principles, and meeting at annual "congresses" (where O'Toole himself has been an invited guest). It is modelled on the hugely influential early twentieth-century architectural reform movement called the CIAM (Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne), which sought architectural and urban reforms for the genuine overcrowding and poor sanitation of nineteenth-century Europe. That movement's radical prescription was to get rid of the walkable urban street altogether, and to segregate housing, commercial and various other uses far out in the suburbs, accessed by wide freeways. As CIAM founding architect Le Corbusier put it, a secretary could work downtown and have lunch under a tree in the suburbs. (Obviously he didn't figure in the

traffic congestion; but his drawings feature little biplanes, so perhaps that is how she might do it nowadays.)

Of course a version of that suburbanization scheme became the ubiquitous model for US development after World War II - not as a "natural" result of market forces, but as conscious, restrictive - what O'Toole would call "coercive" - government policy.

### **Government's Futurama**

It began with policymakers' enthusiasm generated by a CIAM-inspired diorama shown in the 1939 World's Fair exhibit called "Futurama", and sponsored by General Motors and others. (No fools, they recognised the profits in such a far-ranging construction programme.) The plan was implemented with massive post-war Keynesian "corporate welfare" in the form of government-funded freeway construction, government-backed GI mortgages (red-lined away from inner-city areas) and a strict new zoning regime that heavily favored suburban "greenfield" construction over renovation. Where inner-city "renovation" did occur, it followed the disastrous "urban renewal" model of bulldozing older neighborhoods and replacing them with super-block complexes, many of which failed in short order. All of this was conscious, top-down government policy. [5](#)

It is true that market forces did respond positively to this suburban regime - of course economic behavior is often a complex mix of government and market processes -- and the affordable new communities did sell quickly, leading to ever more explosive growth. And clearly, there were major benefits offered by the new communities, at least in the early years. They were more affordable, more tranquil, and their yards were bigger. They left behind, at least temporarily, many of the problems of the older city: crime, congestion, ethnic tensions (yes, that too), and decay.

But what is notable is that the market forces served by this regime were monocultural - that is, they were almost exclusively single-family suburban ranch houses aimed at young families able to afford exclusive automobile transportation. If you were elderly or disabled and couldn't drive, tough. If you were too young, tough. If you were a mother in one of these communities, you could enjoy the privilege of dedicating much of your time as taxi driver to your children, who often couldn't walk or bike the dangerous "dendritic" hierarchy of arterials to school, friends' houses or other activities.

That these communities worked well for a significant if diminishing portion of the market is not in dispute. The point is that they were the only solution allowed by a top-down regime of zoning, finance and transport requirements - all government or government-initiated actions that under O'Toole's definition qualify as "coercive". (I will leave alone fascinating questions of where democratic decision-making ends and "coercion" begins for another discussion.)

Moreover, this government policy initiated an unsustainable pattern of leapfrogging older developments, leaving behind the problems of older communities rather than encouraging (or even allowing) creative market-based ways of regenerating them. The result was an ever-increasing requirement of driving longer distances, increasing levels of traffic congestion, spiralling cost of infrastructure, and increasing problems in the left-behind city cores - to be "remedied" with the disastrous inner-city "urban renewal" version of Le Corbusier's super-block scheme.

In later years the "holes" of these urban doughnuts simply got bigger, leaving first the downtown core, then consuming the inner suburbs that began as solutions to the problems, and ended as even more dysfunctional new additions to those same problems. (While there is much criticism of perimeter "urban growth boundaries," it is often overlooked that these expanding "doughnut holes" amount to an inner no-go "urban growth boundary" too, putting their own pressure on home prices from inner areas that could not effectively regenerate their housing stock.)

### **The New Urbanists' Response**

So what is it that the New Urbanists propose to do about this state of affairs? O'Toole seems to assume that the principles listed in the Charter [6](#) are supposed to be implemented in some sort of rigid government plan of restrictive use, mirroring the old so-called "Euclidean" zoning regimes. But many of the principles call for the liberalization of existing government controls, for example on use zoning, on the width of streets, on accessory dwellings, on

business use and the like.

Rather than prohibiting detached suburban single family dwellings, New Urbanists generally recognise that there is a legitimate and real sector of the market to be served with such dwellings, and they discuss and debate -- at the congresses, and on sometimes raucous listserv discussion groups like "Pro-urb" -- how such dwellings can be integrated into a broader range of dwelling choices, including a choice of healthy and vibrant mixed-use neighborhoods. They note, as do the developer organisation the Urban Land Institute, the National Association of Homebuilders and various economists (but curiously not O'Toole) that there is a strong market demand for such mixed-use developments. Where he acknowledges market demand for New Urbanism at all, O'Toole portrays it as a tiny segment, barely able to support work for what he says are the 1,200 members of the CNU (actually 2,400, but what's a doubling error between friends?)

When it comes to the role of government, New Urbanists are hardly of one mind. True, some New Urbanists do favor government activism with rather rigid top-down governmental controls, often centering on environmental issues; but they by no means represent the entire group, and there is vigorous debate within this politically and philosophically diverse movement on this and other matters. What New Urbanists do agree upon is the principle of diversity - that there should be, or should be allowed, a variety of choices to meet a variety of needs and lifestyles, unlike the government-prescribed monoculture we have now. In itself that is certainly a market-facing approach.

But quite apart from the role of government, this debate also calls into question the professional and consumer choices we make, and the responsibilities we share, as part of a culture -- and not merely as a random collection of individuals whose choices have no impact upon one another. We can probably find large areas of agreement that it is best to make these kinds of cultural decisions as close to the grass roots as possible, and with a mix of bottom-up and top-down approaches as each situation requires. This is where "communitarian" conservatives like Philip Bess, and more libertarian pragmatists like Andres Duany, part company with the more radical libertarians like O'Toole, who seem to think that there is no professional responsibility on the part of architects and planners - indeed, that there is no responsibility of citizens to act in any unified way beyond homeowner associations, and that we should just throw up our hands and see what the market delivers. History suggests it will deliver an atomized mess.

### O'Toole's Critique

In any case, there can be a lively and respectful debate on such issues. But what of the merits of O'Toole's attack on the *agreed* principles of the New Urbanism? Interestingly, since O'Toole described the New Urbanism as a passing "fad" some six years ago in these pages, the movement has become even more widespread; The CNU now has chapters around the world; a "Council for European Urbanism" modelled on CNU has been formed in Brussels; the Chair of the CNU has just become Chief Executive of the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment, Prince Charles' charity in London (where this author also happens to work); and the Deputy Prime Minister of the United Kingdom has explicitly embraced New Urbanist principles for his national planning authority, attended a recent Congress, and pledged to continue to work with the CNU. <sup>7</sup> (O'Toole rather coyly describes these developments as "Even Britain has its New Urbanists.")

These events seem to have prompted O'Toole to change tactics. Writing recently in *Reason* magazine with the English author Stephen Town, O'Toole now claims that the New Urbanism inherently generates high levels of crime - "criminogenic," as he dubs it. <sup>8</sup> Surely this polemical move will hit the New Urbanists in their Achilles Heel - the notion that their design principles really are "bad for the neighborhood," so to speak. Yet as the editor of New Urban News, Rob Steuteville, noted in a letter in response, O'Toole's argument is constructed entirely on sweeping theoretical claims and visceral anecdotes (like the one about the little girl hit by the UPS truck), with not a single genuine substantiating bit of evidence to back up these extravagant claims. Indeed, the available evidence seems to point in exactly the opposite direction.

Regarding the English "report" that O'Toole and Town cite in their February 2005 paper, "Crime-friendly Neighborhoods," Bill Hillier, a respected researcher into the relation of crime and spatial design, and a professor of Urban Morphology at University College London (and sometimes himself a rigorous academic critic of New

Urbanism) was asked to comment on its merit. He responded this way:

"I've just heard from Peter Knowles (the author of the report) that nothing else can be put in the public domain because of confidentiality. So no one else can look at his evidence! We can't even find out what these supposed 'New Urbanism' places are. At the moment I'm caught between disbelief and outrage. You can't claim the status of 'research' for a piece of polemic and at the same time deny all access to the evidence." <sup>9</sup>

In any case, a cursory examination of photos of the community by Hank Dittmar, Chairman of the [Congress for the New Urbanism](#), led him to conclude in a 2004 debate with O'Toole that the single supposed "New Urbanist" community cited in any detail is not a New Urbanist community at all, but rather a conventional cul-de-sac subdivision with a few added bike lanes and sidewalks. Dittmar made a compelling case that the report betrayed a very poor understanding of the issues under discussion. No matter to O'Toole; he cited the study again in 2005, with no mention of the successful challenge to his supposed "evidence".

Also typical of O'Toole's "evidence" is the following anecdote:

"British New Urbanists consider Hulme, in Manchester, a model of New Urban design. It consists of a mixture of low-rise and four-story apartment buildings with a semi-public interior courtyard. The latest Police Crime Pattern Analysis found that it suffers three and a half times the national average rate of crime, and a recent survey found that many children felt unsafe even in their immediate home environments because of the public nature of the streets."



**Hulme, Manchester, UK: on the left, the original crime-ridden "social housing", replaced with a park and street-friendly buildings.**

There's trouble in River City! O'Toole leaves the obvious implication that the high crime is a direct result of this "model" New Urbanist design. He fails to mention that the "New Urban" section is a small part of one of the worst existing high-crime areas in Britain, that it simply restores the original street pattern, and that it did not add to the existing crime level - in fact that level fell. <sup>10</sup> Such deceptive comparisons are rife in O'Toole's sweeping claims.

Indeed, the core of O'Toole's most recent line of assault is built upon the theories of Oscar Newman, who, long before New Urbanism was articulated, studied the failed Le Corbusier-style high-rise "project" Pruitt-Igoe and an adjoining low-rise project, and concluded (entirely without controversy for New Urbanists) that a measure of "defensible" private space was a good thing. From that O'Toole extended the argument to suggest that any shared community space is a bad thing - hardly conveyed in Newman's analysis, but that doesn't stop O'Toole. Perhaps, then, we should continue the logic and say that fortified, privatized single-family compounds with no public realm whatsoever would be best? Indeed, that seems to be the direction O'Toole would have us take: a world of gated compounds, 50-homeowner strongholds, surrounded by anarchy.

### Sweeping Claims

Here's another typically sweeping claim about a particular project in Portland, Oregon that O'Toole made in the exchange with Philip Bess, as a way of adding further "proof" of New Urbanism's fatal flaws:

"By the way, I don't know where the notion that Portland's Orenco (Station) commands 30 percent greater prices than other developments in the city comes from, but I am sure it is not true. The developers of Orenco have publicly called it their "non-profit development," which they did only to please the powers that be so that they could get permission to do the kind of developments that people really wanted to live in."



**Orenco Station features single-family houses with back yards**

Note the calm, assured dismissal -- as if these facts are well-known and beyond dispute. So is any of this in fact correct?

The fact-checking for this particular allegation is easy for me, as I happen to know the project manager and owner representative on that project for that same master developer, PacTrust. In fact he's me! For over five years spanning its planning and development I handled budgets, oversaw design, construction, all that sort of thing. <sup>11</sup> The 30 percent figure was from our own sales agents' commissioned appraisals and comparable sales; in fact it was quite a challenge at the beginning of the project when we couldn't get comparable sales from the surrounding community, and didn't have enough of our own comparable sales to qualify mortgages for the significantly higher prices we were successfully fetching; the resale prices that we later saw were even higher. Of course if O'Toole were intellectually honest about it he would note fairly that many New Urbanist communities tell a similar story of high appreciation (often then drawing criticism as being "elitist" and "only for the rich!") <sup>12</sup>

I also know that on a social occasion when I happened to be standing next to him, my good friend and colleague Dick Loffelmacher, our marketing and retail expert on the team, jokingly referred to our team as the company's "non-profit wing" - meaning that our project was more difficult, as we had to deal with the maze of typical post-war codes and regulatory burdens, and learn again how to make successful mixed-use designs - a complicated and expensive business, with high up-front costs. To his chagrin, Dick later learned that he was also within earshot of the local paper's architecture critic, who printed that remark. While the company is a privately-held pension-fund partnership and does not disclose its profits, I do not think I am telling tales out of school to simply say that, as of the last time I was privy to the figures, we enjoyed remarkable returns indeed on some portions, and were in line for a healthy return on the overall investment, in spite of the high start-up costs and management headaches of such a groundbreaking project. <sup>13</sup> Dick Loffelmacher later stated flatly to correct the record: "Orenco Station is successful."

Regarding whether the company did the project "only to please the powers that be so that they could get permission to do the kind of developments that people really wanted to live in," O'Toole is guilty here of pure invention. Very simply, our company was an industrial and commercial developer, not a residential developer, and Orenco Station's residential components were an exceedingly rare foray for us into residential development. However, our residential partner, Costa Pacific Homes, has gone on to do other New Urbanist projects. (As did I, by the way, prior to coming to London, where we follow similar principles in some 20 projects around the UK and more internationally.) The president and CEO of PacTrust, Peter Bechen, is on the record stating often that he is proud of Orenco Station, the contribution it has made to development practice and to the quality of life of those who freely choose to live there, [14](#) and pay a premium to do so - and, I might add, who report extremely high satisfaction with the community when asked. (See for example Podobnik, 2001, *The Social and Environmental Achievements of New Urbanism: Evidence from Orenco Station*. [15](#))



**Orenco Station's streets are designed to be pedestrian-friendly**

### **Libertarianism for me, but not for thee?**

O'Toole says he finds such communities "repugnant". Of course he has that prerogative. But ought not those who say they love living in Orenco Station and other such communities - or indeed, in Portland, Oregon for that matter - be able to have their choice too? Ought not they, like O'Toole, be able to vote with their feet, and with their pocketbooks -- and, perhaps even on occasion, with their ballots?

This is why many New Urbanists find O'Toole's attacks puzzling, and ultimately troubling. Why isn't he joining in lifting the restrictions that make such communities illegal, and in creating more choices? Why isn't he at least careful to affirm and support this well-documented libertarian goal of the New Urbanism, while maintaining his reservations about any additional "coercive" smart growth agendas? Is it that he simply has a strong personal aversion to any kind of urban lifestyle other than single-family large-lot suburbanism? Is his brand of libertarianism "for me, but not for thee?"

## "Siloed" Thinking

As for the matter of crime, if there is a central theme to the New Urbanism, it is that all of the factors of neighborhood design need to be treated as a whole; no one factor, nor one specialism, should be specified in exclusion of the others. That's the kind of segregated or "siloed" thinking that has caused us so many of our problems in recent years - looking too much in isolation at traffic engineering, fire codes, building codes, architecture - or even crime. When we do that, we are blindsided by unintended consequences (a famous example is the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster, where the engineers and the meteorologists didn't work together, and missed a crucial unintended consequence.) The lesson coming out of the segregated, hyper-rational era of Le Corbusier is that we have to be more integrated in our thinking.

But as we've seen, O'Toole's brand of polemic is in the habit of taking just such a single-issue matter out of context, inflaming it with an emotional anecdote. O'Toole's argument cited earlier about the little girl who was hit by the UPS van is typical: it leaves the insinuation that New Urbanist street and lot designs are inherently dangerous.

But the account contains three curious flaws. First, New Urbanist developments often do have back yards - indeed, many of Orenco Station's homes do. Second, children can be seen playing in the street in any number of neighbourhoods across the USA, including those with cul-de-sacs (which, remember, also require busy arterials as part of their traffic system design). Tragically, they are sometimes killed in those same streets. Third, this anecdote is presented alone, out of context, unsupported by any meaningful information. How many other children were killed by trucks in streets across the USA that same year? How many per community? How many per community type? We don't know. The anecdote is meaningless, or worse, deceptive.

So it is with crime - lots of nasty guilt-by-associations, very little real evidence that stands up to the barest scrutiny.

## Target-hardening fortifications?

O'Toole's argument, where it has merit at all, amounts to an exclusive "target-hardening" strategy. Of course we can always barricade and fortify, and thereby reduce crime - at least for those behind the fortifications. That may not be a surprising preference, for a man who seems to prefer an utterly privatised series of fiefdoms of around 50 homes each.

O'Toole is welcome to live in such a community with others who share his anarchic vision; but many of the rest of us do not favor such a radical approach. Using a combination of private and communitarian strategies - and yes, even democratic government on occasion -- we would rather roll up our sleeves and find ways to make our existing communities work better for human beings. We think we owe ourselves and our families that much.

---

*Michael Mehaffy is Director of Education for [The Prince's Foundation](#) in London, a charity that works in partnership with many UK and international organisations to offer a more humane basis for architecture and urban design.*

---

1. <http://reason.com/9901/fe.ro.densethinkers.shtml>
2. [http://www.claremont.org/projects/local\\_gov/essays/prconfotoole.html](http://www.claremont.org/projects/local_gov/essays/prconfotoole.html)
3. O'Toole stated his degree qualifications in a legal declaration made in August 1998: "I earned a degree in forestry from Oregon State University in 1974".
4. CNU 2004 public debate with Hank Dittmar.
5. There is a large body of literature on this subject, much of which O'Toole has demonstrated some awareness and sought to challenge. See for example the conservative observer Michael Lewyn, Associate Professor of the John Marshall Law School, "Why Sprawl is a Conservative Issue," <http://user.gru.net/domz/conservative.htm>, discussed on O'Toole's website. Also see the book by Owen D. Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape*, Oxford University Press, May 2004.

6. [http://www.cnu.org/cnu\\_reports/Charter.pdf](http://www.cnu.org/cnu_reports/Charter.pdf)
7. See for example the following article in the conservative UK paper The Daily Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/01/15/nditt115.xml&sSheet=/news/2005/01/15/ixnewstop.html>

See also Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's inaugural speech at the January 2005 Urban Summit, where he said "In the United States, anger at the unchecked sprawl of suburbia led to the rise of New Urbanism. I've seen how the New Urbanists are working in communities like Chicago, Washington, Milwaukee and in new places like Seaside in Florida. Like us, they're working to reconnect the art of building with the making of communities." [http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm\\_about/documents/page/odpm\\_about\\_034864.hcsp](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_about/documents/page/odpm_about_034864.hcsp)

8. <http://www.reason.com/0502/fe.st.crime.shtml>
9. Personal email, published with permission of Dr. Bill Hillier, Professor of Urban and Architectural Morphology at University College London - who, incidentally, reviewed this essay in its entirety and made comments reflected herein.
10. O'Toole should be well aware of this, as these facts are contained in the "Design Against Crime" website cited by O'Toole's co-author Stephen Town: <http://www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/cri/adrc/dac/hulme.pdf>. For example, quoting from the website case study: "This case demonstrates the value of design in creating a safe, green and communal environment within an area of a city, previously notorious for high levels of crime especially in relation to robbery and burglary."

Also New Urbanist Laurence Aurbach wrote a letter to *Reason* in response to O'Toole's polemic, rebutting this and other points in great detail: <http://users.rcn.com/aurbach/correcting.htm>.

11. See for example a case study on the project that I wrote for Planetizen, <http://planetizen.com/oped/item.php?id=95>
12. See for example "New Urbanism and Housing Values: A Disaggregate Assessment," the Journal of Urban Economics, Volume 54, Issue 2, September 2003, Pages 218-238: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/B6WVG-49C4NVC-3/2/49c98cc033e8473d31ac8d1f888ae31f>
13. Note that as a "patient-money" pension-fund developer much of PacTrust's return comes in the later years of long-term ownership in growing areas like Orenco's. This "patient money" investment approach is a common feature of the best new projects, in contrast to the "pump-and-dump" nature of so much low-quality residential development today.
14. See for example Peter Bechen's press release statement on the occasion of Orenco Station winning the "Masterplanned Community of the Year" award by the National Association of Homebuilders: "'This is a great honor for the Orenco Station development team,' said Peter Bechen, PacTrust's President and CEO. 'The industry has nationally recognized the impact of good planning, design and development in our region--a testimonial to talent, hard work and the much talked about but rarely achieved, 'public/private partnership.'" [http://www.costapacific.com/CP\\_press\\_119.html](http://www.costapacific.com/CP_press_119.html)
15. <http://www.lclark.edu/~podobnik/orengo02.pdf>