

A Renowned Planner On

What Makes A Good Town

Architect Andres Duany explains the principles of the New Urbanism

By Steven S. Ross ■ *Editor-In-Chief*

When we caught up with planner and architect Andrés Duany in January he was at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas. His firm, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., designed the college campus. He'd come back to design a 130-acre new town next door. Duany was talking to us, in-between meetings with local residents. These community brainstorming meetings, with Duany holding center stage, may go on for a week or more and are designed to allow him to explain his ideas, while getting feedback. They are a far cry from the norm of local planning board sessions, held only after a design is close to final.

Duany was born in Cuba, and raised in Spain. In 2001 he and his wife, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, were awarded the Vincent Scully prize by the National Building Museum in recognition of their contributions to the American built environment.

The firm has completed designs for over 250 communities. It has received two American Institute of Architects national awards. The firm's Seaside, Florida, project was by some measures the first authentic new town to be built successfully in the United States in over 50 years. In 1989, Time Magazine selected Seaside as one of the 10 "Best of the Decade" design achievements. The firm's Web address is www.dpz.com.

Q. You are often called the leading New Urbanist guru. Could you start with a good explanation of New Urbanism?

A. New Urbanism is a reform movement that is attempting to change the way America builds its communities. It is basically a backlash against suburban sprawl. It is pro-development. It is not primarily a pro-environmental movement. It is a movement that says what we're building out in the suburbs — the office park, the shopping center, the housing subdivision, the apartment clusters — are the basic ingredients to make traditional towns and villages, but the ingredients are not well mixed. We would like to make traditional towns and villages again. The reason is,



Duany conducts a "charrette," an intensive meeting, with community representatives to discuss specific issues in a design.

they are walkable, they are truly diverse in terms of the people living in there, and they are compact. Thus they are better environmentally. They consume less land and people drive around less. The sense of community is more marked. New Urbanism is market-driven. It is not policy-driven. It is not about writing laws or preventing things from happening. It is simply allowing us to do towns and villages again.

In the 21st century every residential unit will be a live-work unit. Basically we have reverted to the condition of more-or-less working from home. That is probably the single biggest change since the garage. DPZ is now generating

a series of house plans, new town houses and houses that proactively accommodate the computer, even in the kitchen. Areas can be turned into potential offices for working at home. The designs allocate “preamble” rooms, associated rooms to each bedroom, for computers. So you can actually have a lot of equipment and a lot of mess — because computers are still terribly messy — without bringing it into your bedroom. The computer as a workplace is getting as much attention as the TV set.

Q. How might this change the 9 to 5 traffic jams and patterns that we’ve established in the current era?

A. When you work from home there are tremendous advantages. You don’t commute, it’s comfortable, you’re paying one mortgage that actually covers both your work place and your residence; you’re your own boss. The disadvantage is that you’re more isolated and that’s a very strong disadvantage. That is why the neighborhood structure of the New Urbanism is so compatible because basically you have an interim point between your house and your workplace, which is the neighborhood center. You get antsy and you want to be among people or you may even haul your computer over to the café and you get a little bit of society. In a pure suburban situation there’s no other place you can be where you’re sort of welcome to tarry that’s within walking distance, which compensates for the lack of company.



Q. Are the most interesting challenges of the New Urbanism in the cities?

A. No. I think the crisis is in the suburbs now. That’s where the housing is being built and built badly, no question. The cities are in a holding pattern. They’re either getting better or they’ll hold until they get better. But we’re building 1.5 million houses a year in this country and it’s just a bunch of garbage. New Urbanists continually have to address political crises; everyone attacks us. The left attacks us; the right attacks us. The libertarians are having a field day. No one understands that we’re actually increasing choice. We’re not forcing people to walk; we’re enabling them to walk.

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Q. Do both New Urbanism and connectivity enhance the sense of community because people are centered in their houses rather than at work?

A. Can I explain one thing that I think is definitely marvelous? In Paris if I go to a café I know there are regulars there and there would be a high chance that I would meet someone I know. But I’m not regular enough in Miami. No one in America is regular enough. What I do when I’m at my weekend house in Miami is that



I go there with my cell phone that has Internet and I send a little text message saying I’m sitting around in this café and I’ll be here for the next few hours, why don’t you come? And I send it to six or seven people. In the next two hours a few of them wander in or out. I’ve actually been in situations, let’s say starting on a Saturday morning, and we basically have a running party that lasts all day in which people are rolling in and rolling out and having drinks and having lunch. And I even get up for two or three hours and come back and it’s still going without any previous arrangement. I’m basically running a social life thanks to being wired.

Q. Starbucks has managed to figure this out.

A. They open about 1,000 of them a year. They have a tape that explains the Starbucks idea. You could exchange the word Starbucks for New Urbanism.

Q. Describe the tension . . .

A. The reason that there’s any kind of tension is that the zoning codes, the way they are written, envision suburban sprawl. They are not



Left to right, DPZ designs for a development in Colorado Springs, the Aqua development on 8.5 acres at the tip of Allison Island in Miami Beach, and Craig Ranch, near an athletic complex in McKinney, Texas.



Riverside Village mixed-use project built for Post Properties in Atlanta. Office building, rear, is 226,000 sf. (Photo: Steve Hinds)

neutral. In order to build traditional towns and villages again, we must go up against the code-enforcing establishment and that's where the friction comes up. But the markets are on our side. We do market studies all the time. At the very minimum about 30 percent of the population wants to live in such places, and often it's as much as 70 percent, but it's not being provided. This is a preference that the market is not providing. As a consequence we New Urbanists are very busy and the developers who do these projects are doing very well.

Q. Out of the 1.5 million housing starts a year, how many would you consider New Urbanism?

A. A few thousand. But 500,000 families minimum each year would like to live in New Urbanist communities. The studies we do never come in with less than a third. Imagine the disparity.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about how these studies are done?

A. The studies that we use are based

on credit card information. It is well known that people who buy certain things have certain housing preferences. So we can identify the percent of the population in each zip code who would be interested in living in our communities. Zimmerman/Volk Associates actually does the studies for us. Banks require these studies before lending money to developers.

Q. The idea of a "zoning" code like your Smart Code being proscriptive rather than restrictive is important to our readers. Can you talk a little bit about that? How do you build a code that says, "here's what you should be doing" rather than "here's what you shouldn't be doing?"

A. First of all, we have to explain to people why codes exist at all. I don't think people are aware that the America they see, the urbanity they see, the suburbs they see, are actually the result of code. In Manhattan, Madison Avenue is the result of a particular code that was written in 1913. When you go to the suburbs of Los Angeles, what you see there,

down to the signage and the way the trees are planted is the result of codes. The reason we're engaged in writing codes is because there is an enormous code-enforcement bureaucracy that you cannot deflate.

Q. Just to be clear for our readers, we're not talking about life-safety codes here. We're talking about zoning codes.

A. Yes. What we've learned is, no bureaucrat is going to put himself out of a job, so what we do is simply replace his or her existing codes. Also, codes are administered by lawyers and bureaucrats; and voted into existence by elected officials. So a code is the method by which ideas spread in urban planning. You can also write textbooks. But we find that people who are already in the practice tend not to read, although they do administer codes. So that is our preference. Smart Code is the method of delivery we seek.

Q. Can you talk about your "transect" idea and relate that to the Smart Code?

A. The transect is an old method of analyzing nature. It basically says that habitats are specific places that have symbiotic combinations of soils and microclimates and flora and fauna, and these are immersive environments. In other words, you can't just take one of the pieces and move it. You can't just take a piece of desert and move it up a mountain. You can't take lichen to the waterfront; you can't take seaweed up the mountain. This is a standard method of analysis in nature. And we've discovered that cities behave the same way. Cities that have character have very specific town centers that have their rules. They also have very specific suburban centers that have their rules. Instead of just coding functions in terms of work it codes by environment, and

that takes everything into account. It talks about the kind of trees you should plant. It demands a required setback. It talks about the materials the building is being built from; the public lighting, how the storm water may be drained.

So all of the specialties that have to do with American planning — and they aren't at all well coordinated — end up in a typical code. These are people who don't talk to each other. The public works department doesn't talk to the fire official. The fire official doesn't talk to the architect. The architect doesn't talk to the landscape architect. The specialties are all undermining each other. What the transect does is to coordinate it all. It doesn't eliminate possibilities. You can build anything, but you must build it in a symbiotic environment.

Q. Explain how a code is customized for a community.

A. People these days basically mistrust planners and codes. When you see what America looks like after 50 years of planning you realize that nature has been consumed. It's hideous what we've built, it's dysfunctional, and we've eviscerated the cities. So society has decided it must oversee the planning profession. This wasn't always the case. Planners in the 1930s and 40s were trusted because they had done a very good job throughout the 19th Century. They made the cities beautiful. They made the cities healthy. They made the water work; they preserved parks, American cities at the beginning of the 19th century had been a complete mess. They were shantytowns.



Aerial photo by Thomas Delbeck of side-yard homes in Windsor, Florida, new town. Architecture by Scott Merrill and Georg Pastor.

A reform movement began in the 1870s, and by the 1920s the cities were marvelous. So there was a generation of planners that didn't have to convince anybody; they were trusted. Now, because the last 50 years, with the results being so obviously, palpably negative, planning is a profession that is ignored not only by fellow professionals in the planning department but also by elected officials, and by citizens. Everybody has a say. Now you basically invite all the people who represent the developers or represent the poor folk, or people who represent the kids or the school board. You bring them all in and you take the model code and you adjust it. You calibrate it locally for the local circumstance. It takes a great deal of effort but once they understand, they vote it in.

Q. Some of the biggest stakeholders are the people surrounding what

you want develop, Because they tend to want to want exactly what they already have. If they're living in single-family homes on large lots they're going to say, "well you're going to develop it that that way, to preserve our property values." How do you handle that and educate people as to what's in their best interests?

A. I use a very personal way. There's a collective wisdom. When you speak only to the neighbors or give them absolute say, that is not speaking to representative citizens. The neighbor is a specialist. It is someone who is as specialized as the developer. What we do is we actually get a random sample of citizens from the community as a whole and we speak for them, as well as for the neighbors. When the result is brought forth to the elected officials it becomes very clear that there is a difference between the neighbor who is a specialist and the community as a whole. Then there is true democracy. The big mistake is to consider the neighbors representative citizens when in fact they're a highly self-selected and distorted group.

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Q. But they also have the most to lose.

A. It's really a mob. The important thing about democracy is really not numbers. You can do a poll with a thousand people and it can stand for 300 million. What's important is that it must be very, very representative.

Q. Let me step back a minute. Obviously despite the fact that a lot of cities have been ill-served by their planners many cities are attracting back people from the suburbs today; but many cities aren't. Do you see any predictive pattern, what works and what doesn't?

A. The suburbs were sold as a utopian vision of living in nature. Cities were mismanaged. People were uncomfortable about race. What happened was that once enough people actually inhabited the suburbs, the model was proved to be dysfunctional. You affect nature, not live in nature. What you get is a lot of traffic, a lot of hideous highways. And so the society eventually figures

out that perhaps there's a different model. Eventually you figure out that the promises were not kept. Although my parents' generation happily moved out to the suburbs, my generation, which grew up in the suburbs, found the suburbs held no magic. My mother is still excited by malls. She came from a Cuba full of modernist furniture and silverware and so forth. Nothing worked, right? So our generation backlashed. We like traditional stuff. That's why Americans live in traditional houses.

A. There are other variables. You have to be able to invest safely and step out into the street safely. You need good government. Those cities that work have better governments than those that don't. It doesn't have to be a bad mayor. A local community leader can be simply a madman and people say, "I'm not investing there." Suburbs are very predictable. The developers really have to deliver what they promise. It may be dreadful but at least you know what it is. The second thing is that some cities really

Cities that work have better governments than those that don't

In the 50s they loved modernist houses. Many, many developers built modernist houses. Now it's very hard to sell a modernist house.

Q. But not all central cities are doing well. The urban areas are doing well in cities like Boston and spotty but fairly well in New York and Chicago. That's certainly not the case in cities like Detroit.

are charmless. There are many cities where I say, "revitalize to what? What am I bringing this city back to?"

Q. Do you want to give examples?

A. A lot of cities in the Midwest. The streets are too wide; there is very, very insensitive planning, with unimaginative buildings. So there's no restoring them to anything. They never were any good.

Q. One concept you talk about is that form comes first, rather than the functions or density or other aspects.

A. This is called the theory of typology, of type. You can say, "This unit must be a townhouse." The townhouse is a type not a function. It tends to be residential. It doesn't have to be, but that's what it does best. I mean it's convertible to other things but it's what it does best. It also tends to be urban. It makes a stronger urban fabric. It also tends to be more affordable than a single-family house. And by specifying a townhouse type you can loosely encourage a part of the city to be relatively affordable, relatively urban, and relatively dense.



Residential neighborhood in the celebrated new town of Seaside, Florida. Seaside was originally built as a resort community.



Kentlands, in Gaithersburg Maryland. DPZ photo of Old Farm Neighborhood in the 350-acre development.

It has more organic flexibility than saying “this must be residential.”

Q. How does this fit with a broadband connected community, where people are running businesses out of their home or there’s an information-age technology where it is not a factory with smokestacks, but business could be done in a townhouse?

A. Zoning was originally to prevent noxious uses from destroying quality residential areas. Industry in the 19th century polluted, smelled, made noise, made smoke. Over the years it became almost perverted so that now everything is separated from everything else. You have an exact number of offices or square feet of medical buildings. You have an exact number of apartments with two parking spaces. Planning has become so statistical . . .

Q. What’s wrong with that?

A. It implies too much precision. On the down side it actually freezes a place

at the point at which it was actually built and prevents it from evolving organically. For example, urban zoning does not acknowledge the fact that a huge number of Americans, tens of millions, are actually working at home through computers, and are technically working illegally. They can’t have clients visit; they can’t have a little sign out. Therefore, they don’t get taxed extra on their property, either, because it’s not acknowledged that they’re running a business. It’s completely out of date, because we no longer pollute.

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Q. When we work from home, the home becomes more our headquarters even if we have an

office or a business someplace else.

A. The relationship with your kids changes too. The kids have enormous space needs for their equipment.

Q. You said a lot of places in the Midwest are not so great. I suspect we’ll get letters about this. One of the things we find is that a lot of the communities in the Midwest have been trying to get back to a reasonable level by installing broadband fiber. So they know that people are working in their homes and they’re actually encouraging that. Has it impacted on any of your work yet?

A. I think it is assumed by now that these houses will be connected by the highest technology and that it’s almost like part of the plumbing. It’s happened very quickly. It used to be glamorous. Now it’s simply expected. It’s like “what do you mean we don’t have hot water?”

Q. Do you find the developers who work with you are rushing to install fiber or other broadband technologies?

A. I definitely think so. It doesn’t even show on my radar screen because it has so little physical impact. I don’t have to modify the design. The buildings are the same. I just have to put PVC tubes into the

ground. In my opinion broadband happens as automatically as water pipes.

Q. Looking into the future every home may have 100 Mbps or even a gigabit per second. Does this come up in terms of the infrastructure planning?

A. It comes up in a negative sense. The word is out in our profession that there are a variety of technologies and that the technology may be changing and that there are some providers that will simply lie to you. Perhaps they have warehouses full of copper gear or coax gear they have to get rid of. It is quite normal to get contradictory information and there's confusion and a generally negative feeling about how to decide. Whom do you depend upon for the expertise? Who am I to say when an engineer from the telephone company is qualified? I'm completely subject to what people tell me. I've been told forget about copper. Then I look at a perfectly respectable looking adult who tells me copper is the way to go. I say I don't care. Just put the pipe, the conduit, in the house and to the house.

Q. Any feel that a developer who goes with fiber will end up with a more successful development?

A. Well a feel, yes. I know people have been talking about this for a long time. It is to the point where it is very close to a checklist item. That is, you don't so much get a credit for talking about this but you get a negative if you don't.

Q. You actually depend on broadband technology to work, don't you?

A. Yes, I use the technology a great deal. If during the design and public comment process I shifted the building being designed or erased an arcade the designers literally threw a fit because they had to dismantle a huge amount of work. But lately, in



Another view of Seaside, DPZ's first big project. It was a New Urbanist prototype.

the last six months, there seem to be people who can actually keep up with it thanks to faster communications. There's a team of them; they're here with me now at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas. They're from Argentina and they upload their work to Argentina for finishing. The work is actually done in Buenos Aires, and sent back.

Q. Does working at home help on economic diversity? Does it bring in a wider range of people?

A. I think it must. I don't have the studies to show it, but I know that when I mention working at home people recognize it as something that is true, very empirically. I have the privilege of speaking to 300 people nine hours a day. Just know that I'm testing these ideas with real people. I don't just see their written survey questionnaire forms. I see their eyes, their body language. I see their excitement. It's a different method. It's a very expensive method. It takes a lot of money to do what we do.

Q. You're talking about a lot of money to talk to people, but in terms of a percent of a total project how much is it?

A. The price of one lot.

Q. What about the developers who don't want to take the time?

A. We won't work with them, because we won't get it right. We'll crash. If we don't convince people along the way they'll get you, attack you, later.

Q. What percentage of developers, when you tell them that, just say they'll go elsewhere?

A. You know, we've sort of transcended the resistance now. We tell the developer we have a slot in May. You either want it or you don't... and by the way, if someone else signs the contract before you do the next one is in December. And we don't get any grief from any of them any more.

Q. Are there any developers you would single out as doing really good stuff from your point of view?

A. Well there are some developers who understand New Urbanism very well and I can give you the name of one who is actually brilliant at it. His name is Bill Gietema.

Q. Bill is from Dallas. We gave him an award at the Broadband Properties Summit for the Community Fiber Network of the year.

A. Bill has a very great ability to conceptualize.

Q. The urban community is organic. You can't imagine what the uses will be 100 years from now. What are the things you put in that allow it to evolve easier, because easier is more successful?

A. Well you try to leave as many decisions downstream as possible. And you try to involve as many people as possible. The essence of good urbanism is that as many people make decisions as possible, as sequentially as possible. Then you get a great richness of ideas, the opposite of a monoculture. You get feedback loops that tend to get it right.

Q. Does the feedback always work?

A. No. For instance, people say they want pathways through natural settings. Not many use them. Many people are bored walking in nature. People are interested when they walk in urbanity. Although in principal they love the idea of walking in nature. They in fact do not. It's not that interesting. We're very interested in other humans. It's why we can watch TV for 18 hours a day. We can't watch a nature channel with flowers evolving and so forth for that long. So urbanism, which manifests human activity, is perennially interesting. Sidewalks and shops and things on Madison Avenue are interesting but walking past a couple berms with beautiful landscaping might be very esthetic but not very interesting.

Q. What qualities lead to a sense of community? I get the impression that's really what New Urbanism is about.

A. Well, if there's a debate it's centered on how much physical dimension can affect human behavior. We maintain that physical design is one of the more important determinants. For instance how a city is designed determines whether you walk or drive. To observe, I just look out the window and I can see why people walk some places and not others, because of physical design. You know the same human being in a place that's like Manhattan or Charleston will walk a quarter mile each way and on a suburban arterial they will not walk that quarter mile ever, unless they're indigent.

Q. New Urbanists have not been happy with gated communities, but they seem to be popular.

A. New Urbanists are categorically against gated communities. For many years gated communities have been just a marketing ploy. I'm completely certain that we do not need gated communities, although I think security will become increasingly important. But good design that gets people to be outside and to look outside, not gates, makes neighborhoods more secure.

Q. Can you discuss the negative implications?

A. Well, first of all there's a discontinuity in the network grid, for traffic. There is only one way in and one way out. Therefore it overloads certain roads that then become pedestrian-unfriendly. Secondly it's an economic monoculture. Your children can't live with you because they're in a different economic bracket. Everyone has to commute in that mows the lawn, or teaches in school. They basically secede from the public realm. They get themselves a private government; they maintain themselves at a higher standard and they willingly tax themselves to do that. These are people who are normally well heeled who should be taking care of politics

and they don't. So it takes a lot of talent away from politics and local government.

Q. What about businesses within it, restaurants and things like that?

A. Well, they hardly work. Retail doesn't work at all, and if you have clients and if you're working through fiber in your house against the rules it can be a dead giveaway at the gate, because why are these people coming?

Q. There are a lot of good New Urbanism books but they're technical, for the profession. Do you have any suggestions for our readers?

A. One of my own books, *Suburban Nation*, is a populist book. It was very carefully written to be populist. It is really for people engaged in the public process.

Q. Developers are a step above the general public. What's for them?

A. If they look up "New Urbanism" on the Web they'll find a lot of stuff. There are plenty of Urban Land Institute publications; see www.uli.org. The ULI is the developers' think tank. There is a new one on town centers called *Place Making* by Charles Bohl. There's one that's a few years old now that actually talks about the economic performance, *Valuing the New Urbanism* by Mark Eppli and Charles C. Tu.

Q. Do new New Urbanist communities increase in value faster?

A. We're designing two new towns a month. The developers are totally certain about it. In fact, we have outrageous inflation so the promise we consistently don't keep is economic diversity. ♦