

**THE AMBIGUITY OF COMMUNITY:**

**New Urbanism’s ‘sense of community’ and its relation to social research**

Laura Smit

The New Urbanism is a movement complete with a charter that seeks to revolutionize the way cities are planned and developed. An important aspect of the design of New Urbanist neighborhoods is its emphasis on community in the midst of racial and economic diversity. With a focus on public rather than private space, New Urbanist neighborhoods are pedestrian-oriented with well-designed streetscapes and houses in close proximity to each other, parks and retail areas. New Urbanists claim that such design will encourage pedestrian traffic, thereby increasing unplanned resident interaction, which should lead to social ties and a deep sense of community. In light of these claims, this review examines the New Urbanist ‘sense of community’ and how critics relate it to social research.

Most social scientists agree that one of the problems with the term community is its wide use and inadequate definition. Popular interpretation of community is generally utopian and unrealistic. Clark claims that community is an ambiguous term, “part romantic, part spiritual, part utopian, part pragmatic, and part illusory (Clark 2005).” Critics fear that New Urbanist literature and developments wrongly foster a monolithic view of community based on misguided nostalgia of small-town America (Shibley 1998, Talen 1999, Clark 2005), encourage the ambiguous, popular discourse of community, or

are simply too shallow to address and embody the deep structure of true community (Shibley 1998).

In the social sciences, sense of community is defined by elements such as shared emotional connection, neighborhood or place attachment, membership, influence, reinforcement or sense of place in the neighborhood (Talen 1999). These ideals seem to align with New Urbanist goals until social scientists claim that such community is only possible in homogeneous neighborhoods. According to Brain:

in striving for community, we have to try to assimilate or erase differences, exacerbating tendencies toward intolerance as we confront people who insist on their differences for whatever reason; hence we tend to emphasize community based on aggregation of similarity, on homogeneity (Brain 2005).

Clarke agrees with Brain and further suggests that the reason individuals yearn for a coherent image of community “is the desire to avoid confrontation, to avoid actual participation (Clarke 2005).” Social scientists agree that communal homogeneity is rarely racially or economically diverse.

According to their charter, New Urbanists use design principles to support tolerance and diversity, income mixing and the creation of public spaces in which people can meet (Ellis 2002). However, research on New Urban developments has found that, rather than fostering diversity, many neighborhoods contain predominantly white, middle-class, affluent or intellectual (‘yuppie’) inhabitants (Talen 1999, Clarke 2005).

According to Brain, Western civilization has been claiming a loss of community for the past 200 years (Brain 2005). New Urbanists, in response, market their neighborhoods for their ‘sense of community.’ This lends itself to issues of selection bias. Because ‘sense of community’ is so ambiguous outside the social sciences, people choose

to move to New Urban developments for different reasons (be they for diversity purposes, emotional connections, etc.) but every reason has some relation to ‘sense of community.’ The affluent, the middle-class and the intellectuals have the means or strong motivation to move and end up being the main inhabitants of supposedly diverse communities (Sander 2002, Talen 1999).

When social researchers study New Urbanist neighborhoods for community, their conclusions vary. New Urban neighborhoods without selection bias, such as the HOPE VI public housing projects, host diverse residents and evidence neighborly behaviors but not a ‘sense of community’ (Talen 1999, Sander 2002). Affluent neighborhoods and those that market a ‘sense of community’ evidence both neighborly behaviors and ‘sense of community’ but researchers believe this is more to do with neighborhood homogeneity and the selection bias of its residents than with the design of public space (Talen 1999).

For various reasons, the New Urbanist claim that their design principles will foster a ‘sense of community’ is problematic. Clarke and Brain think community rhetoric promotes an exclusive and dangerous misconception of the way residents and planners should think about neighborhoods. Talen and Sander remain neutral but maintain that New Urbanist principles do not align with a social science interpretation of ‘sense of community’ (although their homogeneous neighborhoods do). Shibley and Lund agree that community is an ambiguous term that needs further explication if the New Urbanist claims are to be taken seriously by academics and understood by the public. Those who criticize New Urbanist claims for lack of empirical research or theoretical and philosophical basis find easy prey in its rhetoric of community.

While social scientists are skeptical of the relationship between New Urbanist design principles and ‘sense of community’, they are more supportive of the relationship of New Urbanist design to neighborly behaviors. Compared to the shared emotional connection, attachment, membership, influence, reinforcement or sense of place related to ‘sense of community’, neighborly behaviors are those such as “knowing neighbors, borrowing from neighbors, visiting, speaking and socializing with neighbors, watching neighbor’s homes, and expressing willingness to improve the neighborhood (Sander 2002).”

Research supports the New Urbanist claim that pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods increase neighborly behaviors. Unplanned interactions and chance encounters are more likely to occur in pedestrian-friendly environments (Sander 2002, Lund 2003) and these interactions create “at least weak social ties (Talen 1999).” In her research on the relationship between local access to public parks and/or retail areas, pedestrian travel and neighboring behaviors, Hollie Lund found that “people who walk around their neighborhood are more likely to interact with and form relationships with their neighbors (Lund 2003).” Neighborly interactions are not exclusive to race, class or gender, but are chance interactions that are increased by proximity (which is convincingly enhanced by New Urbanist public spaces, amenities, etc.).

It is possible that the increase of neighborly behaviors is more conducive to New Urbanist goals than an increased ‘sense of community’. Brain maintains that “[community] is a problematic way to think about the quality and character of social relations that might enable us to build livable, sustainable cities (Brain 2005).” He claims that people have not lost community (due to the persistence of social networks, interest

groups, etc.) but rather, have lost the ability to interact with strangers in a common world—a trait he calls civility. Clarke recognizes:

mild anxiety to public space as strangers encounter each other in uneventful interactions, strangers of whom one may disapprove, with whom one may disagree, toward whom one might be socialized to feel an unsubstantiated antipathy or whom one fears (Clarke 2005).

He considers it the role of planners, however, to facilitate these interactions through their design of public space and meeting areas. Interestingly, the idea of neighborly behaviors and civility in public space lends itself to more diverse neighborhoods, consistent with the Charter of New Urbanism.

If community is the ideal New Urbanism is working toward, social scientists encourage further conversation about what this means. An important understanding of community some critics want to expand upon is community as an ongoing dialogue. Clarke emphasizes that “there is no proper, universalizing ideal of a single public, but rather constellations of distinct and overlapping public discourse, public spheres, public realms that are negotiated interaction, ongoing change, and evolution” (Clarke 2005). Built into New Urbanist ideals is a trend to include residents in the design process, though Shibley claims that this trend needs to be more explicit in their literature (Shibley 1998). Ellis and Brain applaud this trend and claim that such resident interaction can be used as a tool to overcome monolithic, nostalgic ideals of community and implement dynamic, place-based design strategy (Ellis 2002, Brain 2005). One could only hope that resident involvement extends beyond design implementation.

When New Urbanists implement a rhetoric of community, they need to be aware of the popular assumptions and the current status of social science research. Neither the

‘sense of community’ defined by social science, nor its popular interpretation do justice to their ideal. New Urbanist literature would do well to analyze those social interactions offered as alternatives to ‘sense of community’, such as neighborly behaviors, civility, interdependency and ongoing dialogue (Shibley 1998, Lund 2003, Clark 2005, Brain 2005). In any case, New Urbanists should better articulate their understanding of community and how it relates to design.

#### **WORKS CITED**

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