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# Public Spaces Evolution As Per The Ideologies And Origin Of New Urbanism

## Abstract

This article discusses the evolution of public space as it relates to the principles and history of New Urbanism. Utilizing source material, a narrative will be created that shows the function of public space in New Urbanist communities throughout the four decade history of the movement. The effectiveness of the space will be then be judged, using the elements defined in seminal works on public space, by authors such as Habermas and Kohn. This is intended to further my knowledge of both public space, as well as the principles of New Urbanism.

## Introduction

The path that led to New Urbanism is deeply rooted in the history of our cities. For the past two centuries people have been working to escape the city, and the lifestyle it engenders in its citizens. Wealthy Victorians sought to free themselves from crowded dirty cities and set up homes in the countryside. The Great Depression drove many to rural areas to work on large New Deal projects. The generation following that one, though, defined the true climax of suburbanization, returning from World War II to build new communities outside major cities where they could commute to work in the increasingly cheap automobile.

Since the 1980's, however, a group of architects and urban planners have fought against this trend with a number of strategies that are trying to restore the best features of the city, but in a way that suites the modern age. New Urbanism, as it appropriately named, seeks to restore the living and working spaces in which we live, as well as the public space that connects it all. Successful public space is critical to the mission of New Urbanists as indicated in their Charter and practices. How effective are these plans, though, at creating the ideal urban public space? New Urbanism has been criticized as exclusionary to various economic and cultural classes due to its price and general form. Despite this, New Urbanists have created a formula that has succeeded in creating high quality public space in many places.

## Defining New Urbanism

Started in the early 1980's, New Urbanism was seen as a solution to the issue of sprawling growth of suburban development. New Urbanists saw that this pattern of development had many effects both intentionally and unintentionally, such as:

- Automobile Dependence
- Passive Discrimination
- Overconsumption of Land & Resources
- Lack of Quality Public Space

These key qualities, among several others, led to the creation of the Congress of New Urbanism

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(CNU) and its founding Charter document. The CNU has now grown into an organization with dozens of chapters across the country that hold conferences, training sessions, and competitions to teach others in urban design and urban planning about the goals and methods of their organization.

As mentioned, public space plays a key role in purpose and methodology of New Urbanism. The Charter of New Urbanism outlines many of these points in its Canons of Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism:

- “Concentrations of civic, institutional, and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes...”
- “A range of parks, from tot-lots and village greens to ballfields and community gardens, should be distributed within neighborhoods. Conservation areas and open lands should be used to define and connect different neighborhoods and districts.”
- “Many activities of daily living should occur within walking distance, allowing independence to those who do not drive, especially the elderly and the young. Interconnected networks of streets should be designed to encourage walking, reduce the number and length of automobile trips, and conserve energy.”

## Review of Past Analyses

In her seminal piece on the discussion of the effectiveness of public space with New Urbanist developments, Hollie Lund examined with great detail the comparison of various public space venues in New Urbanist and suburban communities. This included a visual and statistical analysis of the frequency of walking trips and unplanned social interactions, as well as a survey examining property values and overall satisfaction with the parks and retail opportunities in the community.

\*Lit Review\*, further readings will be explained. These are referenced below although now currently in this section.

## Analysis of New Urbanist Public Space

New Urbanism has clear effects on the nature and use of Public Space. The Canons and further guidelines of New Urbanism have worked in creating a unique form and function to the public space, both privately and publicly owned. The literature examined how well-designed sidewalks can improve on the frequency of unplanned social interactions and the decrease in automobile traffic in the community, both important to the mission of New Urbanism. However, have these successes and other come at the cost of other social and cultural issues within New Urbanist developments?

## Alternatives

Obviously, with these criticisms, an examination of the alternatives to New Urbanism would be justified. Building communities in the same form that they have been designed since World War II for example, continuing the pattern of sprawling suburbia that New Urbanism seeks to cure, is an option and is still the favored development pattern today. Focusing on the creation of cleaner, more sustainable automobiles instead of their overall elimination is a strong driving

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force today also. How do ideas like these compare to the implementation of New Urbanism, though, and what are the long term effects of these compared with Smart Growth or Traditional Neighborhood Development?

## **Conclusion**

The implementation of New Urbanist principles may come with unintended consequences, but the benefits to the public space are apparent. The studies presented show the effects that the principles of the Congress of New Urbanism have on public spaces around the country. One goal of New Urbanists is to create public space that is used by more people, is more accessible, and helps create a sustainable future. By these metrics, the success of the movement to create quality public space has been successful.

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