The Secret Tools of New Urbanism

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Ask a New Urbanist, “Why do you waste your time?” A movement takes time and energy. Most designers don’t worry so much about their social legacy and their environmental impact. And most people who do care about such issues become political activists, NIMBYs, and even, on occasion, terrorists. What does it take for someone to convert a political and social sensibility into the design and development of real estate?

I recently asked three prominent New Urbanist practitioners what formed their sensibility, and how others would do the same. Their replies were, in most ways, quite different. Yet the same tools kept popping up: Travel agent. Measuring tape. Patience. Hope. Anger.

Travel Agent

The single item that comes up time and again for urbanists is travel. Travel reveals how to build, and how not to build. Sometimes, the travel doesn’t have to go far to take a big step. The urbanist aesthetic “is hard-wired,” states Andres Duany, of Duany-Plater Zyberk and Company. “I have taken students who grew up in sprawl. I have taken them to see street life. ‘Ah-hah!’ they say.” Such a revelation can happen in any real city, and even some small towns.

For the advanced development of urbanist tastes, Robert Davis, developer of Seaside, Florida, recommends Europe above all. “We are in much the same pickle as our forebears were in 100-odd years ago, when industrial cities had grown at an astounding rate. It was a mess of inadequate infrastructure and ugliness, inhospitable for habitation. City beautiful was posited and acted upon for 40 years, transforming the cities.”

Duany recommends travel for the doubters of urbanism. “Go to China, to Pompeii, you’ll see hamlets, villages, towns, and cities. These forms appear across time and across cultures,” he says. But for Americans, he recommends visits only to the paradigm towns for the continent, all old settlements on the East Coast. “If you are developing a hamlet, go see Waterford, Virginia. To see a village, go to Nantucket. The best town is Alexandria. The best American city is Washington, or Boston’s Back Bay. These places give you the appropriate distances, scales, building setbacks, tree spacings.”

Measuring Tape

For travel to work, Duany recommends careful study of places. He maintains that exact imitation allow for certainty. “When a doctor looks in a chest, he can say, ‘That is an aorta. It
Visiting places where urbanism has flourished, and observing them and measuring them, can inform a New Urbanist sensibility and practice. These sketches record traditional spaces and housing types in New Mexico.

Courtesy Stefanos Polyzoides
seemed to agree. “The last 30 years have seen the total destruction of nature through arbitrary acts of destruction,” he says. He credits his own urbanism with his childhood in a dense, livable neighborhood of Athens—including summers spent 30 miles away, in a rural retreat. “Both are gone,” he says. The neighborhood was “blown up to increase profit. No more gardens, dogs, cats, or sunshine in the streets. It is now four times the density.”

At Princeton, he saw McDonald’s open in New Brunswick, New Jersey. “No one was defending either the city or the countryside,” he says.

cnu Environment Task Force chair Dan Williams’ entire explanation of his new urbanist tendency is “Describing Salinas, California, Polyzoides sums up his frustration with placeless places, “If the world doesn’t value where you live, you have no hope. I think living there would make me homicidal.”

Memory and hope
Fortunately, 2500 people have joined the proactive cnu, while few funnel their frustration into arson or murder. The difference is hope for the future, and an assumption that most people will do the right thing with the right information. “I have children,” says Polyzoides. “I want to leave them a future with clean air and food, not spending all their money on driving. They should have a sense of place, and institutions that they respect.”

So far as the big public, he says, “Change comes from understanding, not fear. We must have ideas that people find acceptable and palatable.”

Hope also translates into motivation for change, rather than acceptance of the world as it is. Duany separates architects into “reformers of the world as it is, and recorders of the world as it is. Decons record with their buildings and say ‘look how well they fit in.’ But reform—new urbanism—is the true inheritor of modernism.”