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A Common Language of Urban Design  Andres Duany

The Congress for the New Urbanism is organized around nine task forces. One of them, chaired by Andres Duany and Stefanos Polyzoides, was chartered to establish a common nomenclature. This group originally proposed to complete a lexicon, conceived as an alphabetized list of useful terms accompanied by their definitions.

This straightforward conception was founded, however, as it became apparent that most of the elements to be defined could only be understood properly in relationship to others. It seems that with authentic urbanism, no less than with true environmentalism, a tug on anything ruffles something elsewhere. Rather than alphabetical order, urbanism calls for its terminology to be grouped within taxonomies of related terms.

This established, it seemed natural to classify these elements according to their most common attributes. For example, it is possible to range open spaces according to size or by environmental performance; thoroughfares could be grouped by relative traffic capacity and building types classified by function or arrayed according to the frontage that each occupies.

Such disparate taxonomies however, do not support the integrated conception that authentic urbanism requires. They tend instead, to confuse the nomenclature of the specialists—that label of planners, traffic engineers, environmentalists, urban designers, landscapers, architects, preservationists, land use attorneys, developers, bankers and marketing experts—that is the current language of suburbia.

This characteristic of suburbia is the origin of its failure. Despite being designed through a process that engages all these specialists, the product is rarely blended properly.

Each profession is permitted to impose its perquisites, with the result usually being a collection of urban elements rather than urbanism itself. The streets are designed exclusively for traffic flow; the natural environment is circumscribed and disruptive to pedestrian connectivity; shopping centers, office parks and residential areas are conceived in isolation; self-referential buildings ignore streets while fantastical landscaping ignores buildings.

Such collections may well demonstrate all the elements of towns and cities statistically, but they are really just cartoon versions of the real thing.

The search for a unified taxonomy yielded the chance discovery of the Transect. This term is defined as a system of classification deploying the conceptual range of "more rural" to "more urban" to arrange in useful order the typical elements of urbanism. The transect quickly proved to be a natural ordering system, as every important element easily finds a place within its continuum. For example, a street is more urban than a road, a curb more urban than a scale, a brick wall more urban than a cinder block, an alley of trees more urban than a cluster. Even the character of streetlights can vary from metropolitan to rustic, depending on whether they are fabricated from cast iron, extruded pipe or wood posts.

Beyond being a system of classification, the Transect has the potential to become an instrument of design. The correlation of the various elements by a common rural-to-urban continuum can be the basis for a system of zoning. No more than five sections are necessary to calibrate the transect to the neighborhood structure (which is the precondition of authentic urbanism at any density). These are the Edge, General, Center, Core and District Zones.
Illustration of the Transect

This diagram gives a generalized outline of the techniques which are discussed in the context above and embedded in the zoning categories below.

Shared Zoning Categories

An easy contribution of the zoning system is to overcome the confusion of community structure which are sometimes created from insular practices. The O.D. allows them to retain their particularism while sharing a common zoning language.

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The first three zoning categories follow the natural internal structure of the neighborhood. The Core is assigned to the intensification that occurs where several neighborhoods conjoin. The District accommodates those specialized places that are necessary to a complete community, but must be zoned away as they would be disruptv within the neighborhood fabric.

There are two benefits to an integrated system of zoning like this one. First, it would make impossible the isolated prescriptions of specialists. Second, each zone would be an immersive environment, a place where all the component elements reinforce each other to create and intensify a specific character. Several such immersive environments within a single neighborhood would provide a certain variation of lifestyle, this in contrast to the vast, homogenous tracts of suburbia.

The evolution of this document into a proactive instrument has made the original title obsolete. "Lexicon" is too static a term to describe this extension of capability. The more representative "Operating System" is now provisionally applied to describe it.

The most important contribution of the Operating System may be its implementation. Experience shows that new urbanist projects are technically difficult to permit. The codes and manuals now in place, despite the appearance of objectivity, recognize only conventional suburban programs. To introduce a new urbanist project into such a system is akin to running a computer application on an incompatible operating system, a condition requiring great effort to create an interface which is destined never to run optimally anyway.

The current North American standard is a suburban-based operating system that does not process authentic urbanism. To succeed in its mission, the Congress for the New Urbanism must create and propagate an alternate standard. The proposed transect-based operating system will be neither imposed nor protected, but confirmed in this role through empirical success. It is as comprehensive as the current standard, it is easier to use and it results in better places to live.

— Andres Duany is a board member of the Congress for the New Urbanism and principal of Duany/Plater-Zyberk, Architects and Town Planners.