

Street fight: Landscape Urbanism versus New Urbanism

In their first substantive dialog, landscape urbanist Charles Waldheim and new urbanist Andres Duany reveal that the issue is less about sprawl than what lies beyond everybody's front door: The street.

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For the better part of a year, an Internet controversy has simmered over the relative merits of New Urbanism, the most influential urban design movement for the last two decades, and Landscape Urbanism, embraced by Harvard but still the “new kid on the block.”

To many planners, developers, and public officials, the debate — if they are aware of it at all — must sound academic. Yet the outcome could shape the built environment for decades to come.

Much of the discussion has focused on whether Landscape Urbanism, which specializes in expansive open spaces that celebrate ecological features, represents a greener form of sprawl. Based on the comments by Harvard's Charles Waldheim, the biggest name in Landscape Urbanism, and a response by Andres Duany, the biggest name in New Urbanism, at the Congress for the New Urbanism June 4, the sprawl accusation seems misplaced.

The real issue is the design of what lies just beyond everybody's front door. A little history is needed to explain how much is at stake.

It was Jane Jacobs who in her 1961 classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, praised the urban street, with its regular building frontages — a form of development that had been under assault since the 1920s from automobile-oriented planning and street design. That assault nevertheless continued for nearly a half century longer — until the recent housing crash — as sprawl marched across the land, lining thoroughfares with parking lots and garage doors.

The new urbanists took up the cause in the 1980s, arguing that well-ordered streetscapes were essential for walkability. Although new urbanists, who are champions of compact communities, have not vanquished sprawl, they have had a good deal of success in popularizing their ideas about walkable streets. Waldheim, a product of the University of Pennsylvania architecture program in the 1980s, noted that “New Urbanism has emerged as the default setting for urbanism in North America” over the course of his career.

Now a professor and chair of landscape architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Waldheim addressed about 1,000 CNU attendees in Madison, Wisconsin. He joked that he was

“traveling under diplomatic papers” — an acknowledgment of new urbanist hostility toward Landscape Urbanism. He assured CNU that he fully supports “dense, low-carbon, low-emission development.” Landscape urbanists are “not apologists for sprawl,” he said, in response to characterizations in blogs.

Waldheim presented a development called Lafayette Park — a 78-acre modernist undertaking built in Detroit from the late 1950s through the mid-1960s — that clarified the real argument between Landscape Urbanism and New Urbanism.

Despite looking vastly different from any new urban development, Lafayette Park meets many of the goals of the New Urbanism, Waldheim argued. It is compact, has a mixture of housing types and uses, and is built with a connected network of streets. But Lafayette Park, designed by modernists Ludwig Hilberseimer and Mies van der Rohe along with landscape architect Alfred Caldwell, turns its buildings away from the street in favor of frontages that consists mostly of greenery. Lafayette Park shows that you “can do without that one particular tool” of buildings facing the thoroughfare, Waldheim said. He explained that this is a “substantive difference” between new urbanists and landscape urbanists.

This remarkably straightforward assessment also provided Duany with an opening. Hilberseimer provided “neither a garden in back nor street life in front,” Duany said, adding that “Density and urbanism are not the same.” Duany explained: “Unless there is tremendous density, human beings will not walk” except when there is appealing street frontage.

He criticized Landscape Urbanism renderings that show park-like settings full of pedestrians. “I really doubt that the humans that have been Photoshopped in will be there” in reality, he said.

Waldheim took a brief shot at new urbanists’ love for interconnected street networks. “To the extent that you co-opt good new ideas, that’s to your credit,” he said, “but if each one of them maps easily on the 19th century street grid,” it raises a question of shouldn’t there be friction between these ideas and the new urban vision.

Landscape urbanists’ determination to leave streams and wetlands undisturbed, regardless of location, “clips the grid,” Duany said, explaining that to landscape urbanists, “the pipe is anathema.” Manhattan has 2,700 streams in pipes, he said. If each of these streams were respected ecologically, the city would be unable to operate a taxi fleet and its residents would be scattered far and wide, he said. The refusal to move water through a pipe to be processed elsewhere negatively affects density and increases automobile use — especially in urban centers. “Is not the urban core achieving environmental performance by other means?” he asked.

The Harvard professor’s strongest charge was leveled at the retro design tendencies of many new urbanists. “Your cultural program is circa 1979,” he said. According to new urbanists, he said, “the 20th century was meant to be seen as a historical anomaly. ... There is still a latent and poor neoclassicism at the core of New Urbanism.” Waldheim argued that young architects have a right to be “engaged in architecture as culture at the highest level” but to nonetheless pursue an environmentally conscious urbanism.

Duany agreed that “our greatest deficiency is first-rate design.” He added that Waldheim “was astonishingly informed” about New Urbanism’s vulnerability on this front. Landscape Urbanism is self-indulgent at times, but it is “almost universally better designed and better presented.”

In New Urbanism, there’s very little hostility to modernism except that it displeases the market and therefore modernism is generally avoided, Duany added. Devotees of classical and traditional architecture, who gravitate towards New Urbanism, may disagree with Duany on this point.

Proponents of the two “urbanisms” can agree on measuring greenhouse gases and other aspects of environmental performance, Waldheim said. One unbuilt project that he presented, the Lower Don Lands on the Toronto waterfront, included Ken Greenberg, generally thought of as a new urbanist, acting as urban designer under project leader Michael Van Valkenburgh — a landscape urbanist. “I would put the density and carbon metrics” of that project “against any project in this room,” Waldheim said.

Waldheim also presented The High Line in New York City, which Duany said that new urbanists “adore.” But costs are an issue — The High Line “cost \$30,000 per lineal foot. A good street costs \$700 a foot,” Duany explained. “There needs to be a [Landscape Urbanism] proposition that is cost-effective.”

Landscape Urbanism, with only a handful of projects completed and these mostly parks, is untested in dealing with the problems of broad metropolitan areas — including downtowns, urban neighborhoods, and smaller cities and towns, where new urbanists have worked for decades. “We don’t have any dots on the map in the State of Florida,” Waldheim said, referring to scores of new urban projects in that state. “We have a lot of work to do to get to the position of hegemony that you enjoy.”

“As nonideological pragmatists,” Duany said, new urbanists “will absorb what works from Landscape Urbanism.” But, he told Waldheim, “if you don’t absorb [from new urbanists] the sidewalk street frontage and the ability to put a stream in a pipe. The hegemony will be unchallenged.”

The decline and then revival — the *Death and Life* if you will — of cities is one of the big trends of our time. Much of this revival has focused on the urban street, as articulated by Jacobs and the new urbanists, who have driven home, to audiences of all kinds of citizens for the better part of three decades, the importance of building frontages to lively streets. As creative as the landscape urbanists are, the presentation by Waldheim will leave many in doubt as to whether this group has received the message — and the degree to which Landscape Urbanism will promote real urbanism.