

Civic Meaning: The Role of Place, Typology and Design Values in Urbanism

Linda N. Groat

What is civic meaning? How might such meaning be expressed and conveyed through urban design? Are some urban design strategies better than others in conveying civic meaning? These are the questions I was asked to address as part of the University of North Carolina's spring 1999 symposium on "Traditional Urbanism Reconsidered."

I approach these questions from the perspective of an academic researcher who has been investigating the topic of 'environmental meaning' for more than two decades, through empirical studies and theoretical analyses. Environmental meaning, as I and other researchers have framed it, highlights the importance and complexity of the processes by which people apprehend and construct meaning in their physical environments, from small to large scale, including both built and natural environments. Within this larger framework, the notion of civic meaning raises the question of how the urban or town scale environment might convey a sense of citizenship, civic engagement, and community cohesion.

Given the theme of the symposium, the implicit question being posed is whether traditional urbanism and/or New Urbanism are likely to be more successful than Modernist and typical suburban developments in engendering civic meaning. This of course is a complex question, one that defies a simple answer. None of the urban design strategies – traditional,

Modernist, suburban, or New Urbanist – is by any means monolithic. The range of examples is endless, the quality of execution completely variable. Nevertheless, it is vitally important to address the question because the quality of our experiences in neighborhoods and cities depends on it.

In this article, I begin from the premise that 'civic meaning' is a critical, but often missing, ingredient in our lives as citizens in our communities. Achieving authentic civic meaning requires that it be embedded in our social practices – especially the processes enacted for making and sustaining communities, in the actual physical form of our communities, and even in our fundamental values. As a prelude to the discussion of the extent to which various forms of urban design (e.g. typical suburban development or New Urbanist) are capable of engendering civic meaning, three underlying principles will be examined:

- 1) the model of place experience,
- 2) the notion of typology as means by which people interpret physical form, and
- 3) the concept of the designer-as-cultivator, based on an understanding of organizational and environmental values.

Three Underlying Principles

A Model of Place:

The Role of Physical Form

The concept of place is one that is common to design practice and academic research in environmental meaning; its great strength as a concept is that ubiquity. But with this advantage comes a cost. Different segments of the literature on place tend to rely on different understandings of the concept, and this of course can lead to significant ambiguities and confusion.

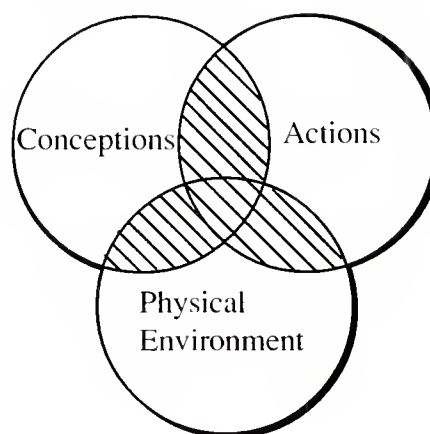
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A major distinction within the place literature is between those who would use the term 'place' to suggest a very positively-experienced setting versus those who would use the term more analytically (Groat 1995; Sime 1995). The former are often practitioners who might describe the positive quality of a particular environment as conveying a 'sense of place.' Similarly, many design theorists (e.g. Norberg Schulz 1980), as well as humanistic geographers (e.g. Relph 1976; Tuan 1977) who identify themselves with a phenomenological perspective, ascribe a positive valence to 'place,' frequently contrasting it to 'placelessness.' The latter term commonly describes the sort of strip commercial developments and suburban residential subdivisions that can be found from coast to coast, and often around the globe. Sime (1995) among others, critiques the work of these authors for their largely idiosyncratic and subjective analyses of what constitutes place, with virtually no evidence drawn from the people who live in or experience those places.

On the other hand, some researchers – more often from the empirical traditions of the social sciences – have tended to use 'place' in more analytical terms, such that any place may be construed in positive and/or negative terms. Within this subset of the literature, the environmental psychologist David Canter has offered the most developed and theoretically refined analysis of place. Initially presented in his book, *The Psychology of Place* (Canter 1977), he has written extensively on the place model in a variety of academic papers and articles since (e.g. Canter 1986; 1988; 1991).

Canter (1977) draws on a broad array of empirically based research to propose a three-part definition of place. In his view, place can be represented as the intersection, and/or association, of three constituent elements: actions, conceptions (or meaning), and the physical environment (see Fig. 1). In subsequent elaborations of this model, Canter argues that place can be defined in terms of the "shared aspects of experience" (Canter 1986:218), much of which is socially defined and constructed in the social roles and rules of a setting. Sime, in his review of the place literature (1995), recognizes

Figure 1. Model of Place



the value of Canter's emphasis on the shared aspect of the experience of place from the users' perspective, but he nevertheless criticizes Canter for neglecting a detailed analysis of the physical attributes of a setting which designers must manipulate.

Despite the vastly different orientations of Canter's analytical perspective on 'place' and Relph's more value-laden approach, both of these authors propose three-part models of place that are described in similar terms. Relph (1976) labels these three components as "physical features or appearance, observable activities and functions, and meanings or symbols," as compared to Canter's "actions, conceptions, and the physical environment." The remarkable correspondence is significant because the concept of place as outlined by these two authors may serve to integrate the phenomenological approach with more empirically based research. Even more to the point, this three-part model can also elucidate the 'sense of place' that many design and planning practitioners seek to understand and strive to create in built form.

What, then, is the particular contribution of the place model to our discussion of civic meaning in urbanism? One implication is that, despite the tendency of many architects and urban designers to focus *primarily* on the physical attributes of urban sites, people's own activities and their habits of mind (conceptions) will necessarily play a major role in the "shared

aspects of experience" that constitute place. Similarly, despite the tendency of many planners and social scientists to focus *primarily* on the social processes of urbanism, the physical properties of the particular urban settings will inevitably either foster or constrain these social processes. In other words, the physical setting does not determine the nature of a place, nor is the physical setting simply determined by the other components of the place model. The particular physical features which characterize various urban design strategies (traditional, modernist, New Urbanist, etc.) can best be understood as 'enablers' of, not 'drivers' for, particular qualities of place.

Typology and Context: Understanding Designer and Lay Interpretations of Place

What then are the physical features that might be critical in people's experience of place? This has been the focus of much of the empirical research on environmental meaning. And while there are certainly a number of specific, detail-level features that have been identified in particular research studies – such as hierarchical ordering of facade features (e.g. Groat 1994) or centered entries and framed windows (e.g. Nasar and Devlin 1995) – two more complex features (typology and contextualism) seem particularly useful for understanding people's reactions to the urban environment.

The term typology in architectural design generally refers to the combination of functional and formal properties associated with common building types such as houses, schools, stores, museums, etc. Research on the general public's interpretations of meaning in architecture suggests that identification of building type is a fundamental reaction to unfamiliar buildings. For example, in research I conducted a number of years ago on people's reactions to various architectural styles across several building types, I found that the respondents' first reaction was almost invariably to try to categorize each building example into the most likely building type category (Groat and Canter 1979; Groat 1982). At face value, one might simply conclude that it would be preferable to design buildings to ensure that 'type' is easily identifiable, but more

fine-grained analyses of the respondents' interpretations of particular buildings suggest otherwise. Rather, laypeople's reactions seem to suggest that if a building is interpreted as appropriate to its apparent purpose, then it has a good chance of being considered successful and appealing. In other words, absolute or correct identification of a building's type category may not be essential as long as the building *appears suitable* for one or more particular purposes. And this, of course, depends on the foundation of people's past experience of buildings of a given type.

Other researchers (e.g. Purcell 1986; Purcell and Nasar 1995) have tackled the question of people's response to a variety of buildings *within* a specific building type category, in this case housing. As an outcome of a decade or more of research, Purcell has refined a model of aesthetic evaluation based on the notion of 'prototypicality.' In this model, the most preferred buildings are those that represent either a small or negligible deviation from 'good' (the most typical) examples of single-family houses. Architects, on the other hand, tend to prefer houses they consider interesting, and the less typical of houses in general. In other words, laypeople (unlike designers and architects) tend to prefer houses that represent a relatively narrow range of design choices that can be seen as relatively typical of houses available to them.

In a similar vein, research I conducted on laypeople's preferences for designs of new buildings in older settings yielded results that seem consistent with the findings about prototypicality. In general, respondents preferred designs that were highly replicative – especially in the quality of facade details – of the older context (Groat 1988; Groat 1994). Building designs in which the architects replicated the site organization and massing of nearby buildings – but not the facade details – were generally not preferred. On the other hand, designs that substantially replicated facade details, though deviating somewhat from nearby site organization and massing, nevertheless were seen very positively. In addition, some Post-Modernist style designs in which facade details were highly articulated were often disliked. These anomalies

revealed the public's inclination to prefer pre-Modern compositional principles in which hierarchical ordering prevailed.¹

What are the implications of these findings for civic meaning in urban settings? In general, there seems to be a preference among the lay public for buildings and districts that have an observable relationship to precedent (through the mechanism of typologies) and context (through visual similarity to valued building ensembles nearby). These research findings are consistent with other evidence that laypeople tend *not* to find positive meaning in Modernist-inspired buildings, as they intentionally eschew both precedent and contextual considerations. On the other hand, traditional urbanism, typical suburban development, and New Urbanist philosophy all, to varying degrees, make use of both precedent and context in their physical design. The similarities and differences in the use of precedent and context among specific urban design strategies will be addressed in greater detail in the second portion of this article.

Design Values in Practice: The Designer-as-Cultivator

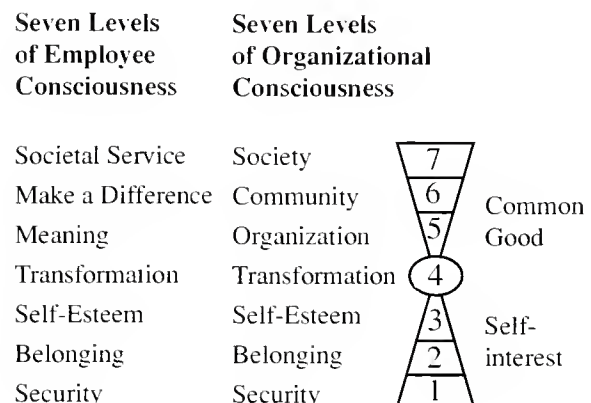
In a series of articles and book chapters over the last several years I have argued that designing 'places' that foster people's sense of well-being (in the most robust sense of the term) requires that environmental planners understand their professional role to be that of a 'cultivator' (Groat 1992; 1993; in press). In defining this concept, I contrast it with two models that have been prevalent in the design literature over the last century or longer: the technician and the artist. Although various researchers have tended to use slightly different terminology to describe these two models (e.g. Gutman 1987; Crawford 1991; Cuff 1991), the authors' discussions of these models are essentially comparable. The designer-as-technician model has tended to emphasize the technical competence of the designer and his or her responsiveness to basic client needs, but also implicitly a more reactive mode of practice. On the other hand, the designer-as-artist model has tended to emphasize a more inspirational mode of practice and a persuasive orientation to client needs, but also a more isolationist mode of

practice. Unfortunately, neither the technician nor the artist model sufficiently acknowledges the role of the designed environment as a cultural artifact. Instead, I would argue, what is needed is a model of the "designer-as-cultivator," a model more robust by virtue of its recognition of the socio-physical culture in which designed environments are inevitably embedded. Rather than taking the reactive stance of the technician, the cultivator is motivated to express both a personal and interpersonal understanding – both in his or her design process and the designed product. And instead of the isolationism of the artist, the cultivator is fully engaged in the broader perspective of community life.

One way to clarify the underlying values expressed through these models of design practice is to use a recently developed set of assessment tools for identifying individual and organizational values. In a recent book, organizational consultant Richard Barrett (1998) posits a seven-level framework for assessing the alignment of individual and organizational values. Briefly, Barrett builds on psychologist Abraham Maslow's well-known model of human needs (Maslow 1954) by compressing Maslow's hierarchy into the first four levels of his proposed model and by augmenting these with three additional levels.

In Barrett's model (Fig. 2), the first column describes these seven levels in terms of an individual's consciousness. The first level

Figure 2. Barrett's Seven Levels of Employee Consciousness and Organizational Consciousness²



represents security in terms of physical needs; next is the need for belonging, a need that is satisfied by meaningful attachments to people; and third, the need for self-esteem is fulfilled when we feel respected by people we care about. These first three levels have in common a basis in self-interest. The fourth level is transformation, realized through the achievement of personal growth, whereby the person begins to move beyond the self-interest of the first three levels. The next three levels of the model describe a focus on the common good. At the fifth level life becomes infused with meaning and we find a mission in our immediate family or organization; next, we seek to make a difference in our larger community; and finally, at the seventh level, there is a sense of connection with the whole of society.

The second column of Barrett's model shows the corresponding levels of consciousness for an organization, business or institution. At the lower levels, the organization is concerned first and foremost with financial and physical survival; secondly, with fostering the sense of belonging that comes with interpersonal relations that facilitate individuals' organizational roles; and thirdly, at the level of self-esteem, the organization is concerned primarily with being the most competitive, productive, cost-effective, etc. Next, at the transformational level, an organization would begin to shift from the perspective of self-interest to the common good. At this stage, the organization embarks on renewal and self-knowledge through the participation of all members. In the final levels of development, an organization would focus on internal connectedness by developing a positive culture that supports the fulfillment of its members; next, the focus would be on external relations with other people and organizations, as well as the immediate community; and finally, the seventh level represents a consciousness in service to society and the planet.

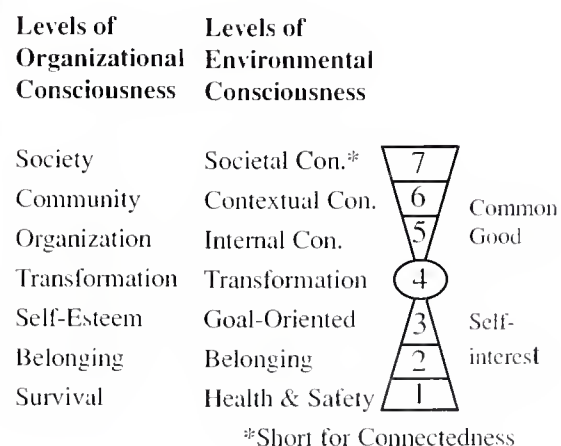
One of the most important features of Barrett's model is that the levels are conceived of as cumulative. Ideally, an individual or organization that truly achieves a level of societal consciousness can be expected to maintain values well distributed across all levels of the model. On the other hand, some individuals or groups may

be almost entirely focused on the self-maintenance values of the first three levels, not having worked through the transformative stage to incorporate values of the common good. In some instances, a individual or group might espouse community and societal connections without having addressed sufficiently the values of transformation and internal connectedness, a situation which is likely to be fraught with inconsistencies and mixed messages.

For the purposes of this discussion of 'civic meaning' in urban environments, Barrett's model provides a compelling device for assessing the extent to which proposed urban design projects can support the collective values of citizens. For example, a well-intentioned park project for a local neighborhood might not be successful because the physical features represent recreational values that do not match those of the local residents. Or similarly, a development scheme proposed by a city planning department might embody values of a commercial/ industrial economic model not shared by major segments of the community.

In Fig. 3, I have added to Barrett's seven-level model to show the relationship between organizational values and both design values and physical design elements. Its purpose is to demonstrate how elements of the built and natural urban environment, can support the values of a community as it moves from a self-interested perspective towards a more holistic one. As we

Figure 3. Relationship of Seven Levels of Organizational Consciousness to Environmental Consciousness



will see, different environmental design goals are most relevant at different levels of the hierarchy. In other words, a successful outcome of an urban design project is unlikely to occur without a fundamental understanding of the neighborhood or town context of which it will play a vital part.

1. Health and safety. At the most basic level, a designed environment provides shelter and insures health and safety. This is the rationale for the licensing of architects, who are expected to be responsible for building designs that are structurally sound and satisfy applicable building codes. At the neighborhood, city, or regional scale, comparable health and safety issues include: water supply and sewage treatment, provisions for utility lines and hook-ups, restrictions on flood plain development, and the like.

2. Belonging. Any designed environment must foster smooth interpersonal relationships that support the basic functioning of families, organizations, neighborhoods, and communities. In urban and suburban settings, most residential and commercial developments satisfy these basic needs. A well-known residential example to illustrate this point would be the post-World War II Levittown developments. This basic box single-family housing enabled many young post-war families to get on their feet; and similar housing developments across the US served as building blocks for emerging suburban communities.

3. Goal-oriented quality. This third level of environmental design values represents the focus of much professional activity by architects, urban designers and planners. A neighborhood or community operating at this level seeks a physical environment that fosters its own fitness and that conveys an image of being competitive and respected in some way. A specially designated historic neighborhood and a downtown district of special commercial or visual significance (e.g. Chicago's Gold Coast and Magnificent Mile) are examples of this level of values.

Although there is likely to be substantial alignment between the community and the underlying values of an urban design project in many instances, differences among various community groups may still be significant. For

example, some community groups may feel that too much emphasis is given to the commercial or visual value of the downtown skyline while the upgrading of residential quality in various neighborhoods is neglected.

4. Transformation. In the most basic terms, a transformative environment would be one that fosters or enables an individual or group to move from self-interest to a concern for the common good. Although any number of built or natural environments might operate at this level, it is useful to identify at least a couple of likely examples. A city park or nature trail might be likely to serve in this capacity. People not only visit parks for recreational purposes, but they may also benefit from the restorative capacities of nature (Kaplan 1995), including perhaps a sense of purpose and mission for the common good. From the prospect of a park, one may be able to view the city or neighborhood as a whole and begin to feel a sense of relationship to the larger whole. Similarly, a view of the city or mountains from one's office in a high-rise might trigger a spiritual awakening of self and sense of purpose for the greater good.

5. Meaning and internal connectedness. The goal at this level is to create environments that support the internal connections of a neighborhood or community through the sense of fulfillment and meaning for its members. Physical designs that provide places for gathering, ease of access within and between neighborhoods (whether through pedestrian paths or public transportation), and ready availability of public amenities are likely to support the values of this level of consciousness. The proclaimed design goals of much New Urbanist development are consistent with these notions of meaning and internal connectedness. The question of whether there is evidence of such New Urbanist goals actually being *achieved* will be addressed in the second portion of this article.

6. Community connectedness. At this level of design there is a clear focus on fostering relationships with neighboring towns and communities, and creating physical environments that complement existing neighborhoods or towns. Physical features which might support such values include: visual linkages between

neighborhoods, perhaps including contextually sensitive building designs, physical linkages of street layout and transportation networks between neighborhoods and between towns, and perhaps intentional densification of housing and commercial development. Again, many of the intended goals of New Urbanism are consistent with this level of community-connectedness. Indeed, Doug Kelbaugh, in his new book *Common Place*, suggests that New Urbanist developments are intended to bring "a greater sense of community and coherence to neighborhood and region" (Kelbaugh 1997:3).

7. Societal and global connectedness. At this level of environmental design the aim is to support the recognition of the interconnectedness of all life. Sustainability and ecological integrity of both communities and the environment are central goals. In this regard, New Urbanist developments are also intended to address this level of design values; by minimizing residents' need to drive cars, traffic congestion and air pollution may well be substantially reduced. And by increasing housing densities, while simultaneously providing for more public parks and amenities, the overall ecology of the community site is likely to be improved. Again, the extent to which these goals have actually been achieved will be addressed later in this article.

If we return now to the models of design practice (technician, artist, and cultivator) described earlier in this section, they can be

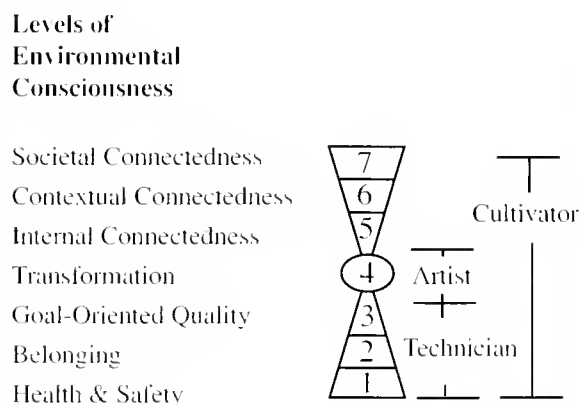
further elucidated by matching them against the expanded framework of Barrett's model (see Fig. 4). For example, the "designer-as-technician" model tends to address the environmental values expressed at the first two or three levels of the hierarchy. The strength of the technician model is that the basic requirements of health, safety, welfare, and competence in solving basic client needs are fully addressed; however, this reactive mode of practice tends not to challenge clients/users to go beyond what is and imagine what might be. In contrast, the 'designer-as-artist' model seems to focus to some degree at level 3, but most particularly at the transformational level. Many architects and urban designers conceive of their work in terms of how the individual might rediscover him- or herself through focused attention on a particularly well-designed and/or unusual physical artifact – whether it be a unique centerpiece building, public sculpture, or grand boulevard.

Once we move up the hierarchy to foster environmental values that focus on the common good and reinforce the connections of people within a group, organization, neighborhood, or community, we are then confronting the essence of cultural life. It is at these levels (5, 6 and 7) that the model of "designer-as-cultivator" comes into its own. Just as organizations which seek to operate at these levels must also satisfy the foundational values at the lower levels of the hierarchy, so too the technician and artist roles must be subsumed within the designer-as-cultivator model.

Place, Typology, and Design Values in Urbanism

In sum, the three principles which have been just been reviewed can play an important role in helping us to assess the manner and extent to which a given urban design project might engender civic meaning. Through the model of place, we can begin to appreciate the way in which people's actions, conceptions, and the physical setting form a web of shared experiences that constitute 'place.' Any analysis of any urban design project that focuses primarily on just one or two of the components of the place model is likely to yield an inadequate assessment of the

Figure 4. Relationship of Seven Levels of Environmental Consciousness to Designer Roles



project as a whole, and of civic meaning in particular. Secondly, in analyzing the physical properties of an urban design project, the principles of typology and context are likely to play an important role in people's interpretation of meaning. And finally, any urban design project would ideally represent and foster environmental and community values across the full range of the Barrett model. The particular physical features, as well as the values they represent, may be quite distinctly different between one project and another; but the full range of values would nevertheless be expressed and fostered.

Cultivating Civic Meaning

In this segment of the article, I intend to consider the potential for cultivating 'civic meaning' in suburban versus New Urbanist settings. First I will examine the underlying premises of these contemporary models in relation to the principles of place, typology and context, and design values. And second, I will review the findings of recent empirical research that begin to answer the question of the extent to which the promise of New Urbanism is being fulfilled.

Place, Typology and Design Values in Suburban and New Urbanist Neighborhoods

Over the last thirty years or more, urban designers and researchers have leveled a wide variety of criticisms, much of them well deserved, against the premises and outcomes of Modernist architecture and urban design. Of course, Modernism is not a unitary phenomenon, but it is possible to identify a number of common characteristics of Modernist urban strategies. These characteristics include extensive high-rise development for both commercial and residential purposes, the provision of healthy environments with light and air for all, the accommodation of technically-advanced building and transportation processes, and an 'urban renewal' philosophy whereby much of the existing urban fabric was bulldozed to provide clean, open building sites and districts.

Since the inherent weaknesses of Modernist urban design principles have been well documented by a variety of authors over the

years, I will not examine them in any detail here. Suffice it to say that from the late 1960's onwards, critics of Modernist principles began to reexamine the lessons of pre-Modernist architecture and 'traditional' practices of urban design. Certainly the great interest in preservation or adaptive reuse of older buildings, historic district designations, design review mechanisms and the like during the 1970's and onwards is evidence of a disenchantment with Modernist principles and a corresponding interest in the lessons of traditional or pre-Modern urban principles.

Concomitant with Modernist urban design in the cities, significant suburbanization occurred in the post-war period in the United States and, of course, continues to this day. While suburban development is hardly monolithic, it is typified by the ideal of the single family house and neighborhood. Environmental psychologist Karen Franck (1994) has identified four characteristics of this model: 1) privacy and self-sufficiency of each house; 2) intended use by a nuclear family; 3) a neighborhood composed of freestanding houses; and 4) the provision of commercial, service and civic activities *outside* the neighborhood unit.

The suburban model has been such a dominant force in post-war development that few alternatives have been imagined or offered. However, in the last 10 to 15 years, work by a variety of urban and community designers has gradually come to be recognized and labeled as the "New Urbanism." Although there are several variants of this approach, author Todd Bressi (1994) offers a general definition of this trend. According to him, an underlying premise of New Urbanism is that "community planning and design must assert the importance of public over private values." Within this overarching perspective, he identifies several common characteristics, including: a focus on public space, civic amenities, and commercial facilities within each neighborhood; a mix of household types and land uses; a relative de-emphasis on cars as compared to typical suburban planning; and architectural design that responds to local context and traditions.

One way to evaluate the potential of either the

suburban or the New Urbanist model to engender 'civic' meaning is to match the *premises* of the two models against the three principles outlined earlier in this article (see Fig. 5). If we turn first to the concept of place, I contend that we would be doing a disservice to the suburban experience to simply label it 'placeless' as some architects, designers, and the phenomenologically oriented theorists would do (e.g. Relph 1976). If, on the other hand, we take a more analytical approach, we must conclude that its very popularity over the last 50 years attests to its ability to represent a confluence of people's activities and conceptions with its physical properties. One important criticism of the suburban model is, however, that it is relatively less hospitable a setting for people who do not fit the nuclear family profile: teenagers, the elderly, single parents, etc. As Franck has pointed out, the suburban model represents a "powerful desire to accommodate and to *appear* to accommodate (emphasis hers) the 'good times' only" (Franck 1994:228). In contrast, the New Urbanist position argues that the changing character of the family structure, the role of women, and overall population demographics simply requires the provision of a greater mixture of housing and building types. New Urbanists also argue for a realistic attitude toward cars. Unlike urbanists who eschew even

minimal provisions for cars, most New Urbanists seek not to eliminate their use but to provide realistic options for walking and public transportation as desirable alternatives.

Moving now to the issues of typology and context, the suburban and New Urbanist models represent slightly different emphases. Both perspectives appear to be comfortable with the typological representations of 'house' form well understood by laypeople. (This is of course in direct contrast with the attitude of many or most professional architects, who are disinclined to design in the more vernacular or vernacularly derived styles.) But in addition, the New Urbanists' goal to include a mix of housing types means that they are also willing to make use of other typologies besides that of the single-family house. On the related issue of context, the New Urbanist position has been clearly articulated in favor of knitting new neighborhoods into the immediate local context and the temporal context of housing traditions within the region. In contrast, suburban models have tended to be much more variable in their attitude towards context. While some suburban neighborhoods are almost hermetically sealed and inward-focused enclaves, others are relatively more connected to and embedded in their local context.

Finally, with respect to the hierarchy of

Figure 5. A Comparison of the Underlying Principles of Typical Suburban and New Urbanist Urban Design Strategies

Underlying Principles	Urban Design Strategies	
	<i>Typical Suburban</i>	<i>New Urbanist</i>
Model of Place	Integration of 3 components BUT for good times only and primarily for nuclear families	Apparently successful integration of 3 components
Typology & Context	Employs single family house typology Variable relation to context	Employs wider range of typologies Explicit reference to physical and temporal context
Values	More emphasis on individual needs values	Explicit concern for common good values, while satisfying individual needs
Civic Meaning?	Theoretically less likely	Theoretically more likely

consciousness and design values, the two neighborhood models take distinctly different stands. As already stated, the New Urbanist position is to emphasize explicitly "public values" through the provision of community amenities within the neighborhood. Simultaneously, their goal is to provide housing for a variety of individual and family needs, rather than exclusively for nuclear families. On the other hand, as Franck has suggested, the suburban model is premised on a greater level of self-sufficiency for each individual household, thus reinforcing an apparent emphasis on values that privilege individual needs over the common good.

Taken together, these analyses of place, typology/context, and design values would suggest that the New Urbanist model might indeed engender a higher level of "civic meaning." At least on the level of its theoretical premises, New Urbanism would seem to: 1) enable a shared experience of place among a greater range of potential residents; 2) offer physical design elements that satisfy most laypeople's understanding of meaning through typology and contextualism; and 3) embody environmental values that include concern for the common good. The question remains, however, whether this can be demonstrated in the lived experience of a New Urbanist community.

The Potential for Civic Meaning in New Urbanism

In addressing the question of whether New Urbanism actually fulfills its promise for a higher level of "civic meaning," the ongoing dissertation work of one of my doctoral students, Joongsub Kim, begins to provide such an answer (Kim 1999, 2000). Framed in the format of a comparative case study, Kim sought to compare residents' sense of community in Kentlands (a New Urbanist development in Gaithersburg, MD) and a typical suburban development in the same town. In an effort to develop the most robust analysis possible, Kim circulated a lengthy survey questionnaire to every household in each development (achieving a 43 percent response rate in Kentlands and a 37 percent rate in the suburban development). In addition, he conducted

in-depth, open-ended interviews with 130 residents and received weeklong activity logs from approximately 70 people.

Although Kim's use of the concept "sense of community" is not fully equivalent to the concept of "civic meaning," there is enough overlap between the concepts that Kim's work provides a good measure of the potential of New Urbanism for engendering "civic meaning." Kim's use of the term "sense of community" derives from an extensive literature review of the New Urbanist discourse, as well as from empirical research on neighborhood and community life. From this, Kim posited four elements that seem to contribute to residents' sense of community: "pedestrianism," community attachment, social interaction, and community identity. Pedestrianism, of course, implies that a community is designed for walking and other street-oriented activities. Community attachment refers to residents' emotional bond to their community. Next, social interaction consists of a variety of activities such as neighboring, casual encounters, community participation, and social support. And finally, community identity is defined as personal and public identification with a specific physically bounded community with its own character.

These four components of sense of community were used as a framework for structuring the questionnaire. Residents were asked to rate on a five-point scale the importance of a variety of physical features to their decision to take walks, their feelings of attachment, their social interaction with other residents, and the distinctive character of their community. The survey also contained a battery of demographic questions and some additional global and open-ended questions. The open-ended interviews explored these same four components of community in greater depth, and the activity logs documented both pedestrianism and social interaction.

Earlier in this article, I defined "civic meaning" as a sense of citizenship, civic engagement, and community cohesion. Although not directly equivalent to the four components of community in Kim's work, this definition of civic meaning certainly seems to encompass the notions of social interaction and community

attachment, and perhaps some aspects of community identity. Only Kim's component of pedestrianism seems outside the definition of civic meaning provided here. Yet clearly, pedestrianism has been included because of the assumption that this activity is likely to lead directly to social interaction and potentially engender a sense of attachment and identity.

The results of Kim's research indicate that Kentlands' residents consistently rate their community as promoting higher degrees of all four measures of sense of community. In other words, Kentlands residents are more likely to walk in the neighborhood, interact socially, and express higher levels of community attachment and identity. Within Kentlands, there is a relatively higher rating of these four components of community among the single family house and townhome households than among the condominium and apartment households. But even the Kentlands apartment dwellers express a slightly greater sense of community than the suburban group's single-family house residents. To date, Kim has only analyzed the survey responses using descriptive statistics; eventual use of inferential statistics will enable him to assess whether these patterns of differences are found to hold at credible levels of statistical significance.

Equally as important to this research are activity logs and a preliminary review of the interview transcripts that confirm the patterns of differences reported in the survey findings. For example, many Kentlands residents spoke with great enthusiasm of walking for shopping or going to the movies, whereas some of the suburban residents complained about the lack of sidewalks on many of their streets. Moreover, the activity logs also document a much higher level of pedestrianism than in the suburban neighborhood. Similarly, one of the most frequently cited strengths of Kentlands is the social interaction among residents. Indeed, as one resident put it: "I moved here because I love friendliness, neighborliness, and interaction among residents." On the other hand, some Kentlands residents acknowledged that the housing density and proximity of the sidewalks to the houses almost "force" social interaction to

happen, even when it is sometimes not desired. In contrast, one of the most frequently cited weaknesses of the suburban development is that it is not conducive to social interaction.

Many Kentlands residents expressed their sense of attachment and connection to their community, as well as an appreciation for familiar visual qualities that remind them of favorite childhood environments. In contrast, interviews with the suburban residents yielded relatively few comments of attachment and belonging. Several residents commented on the neighborhood being quite transient. For instance, one resident expressed appreciation for the amenities of the house and neighborhood, but felt it was not her permanent home.

Probably the most frequently mentioned strength of Kentlands is its unique physical character, which the residents view as distinct from other communities. For example, one resident commented: "Kentlands looks very different from others and yet looks familiar. This unique place gives me a feeling of being different. This is my kind of community. I felt a sense of pride when I gave visiting friends a tour of the community." Although the suburban development residents do not necessarily care for the density of Kentlands, some nevertheless express admiration for Kentland's unique character. A number of suburban residents mentioned the positive and distinct qualities of their neighborhood, but with considerably less frequency compared to Kentlands residents.

Finally, the residents' responses to a question regarding the reasons for their move to their neighborhood are particularly relevant to the issue of civic meaning. To be specific, respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point scale the importance of 12 different factors in their decision to move into either Kentlands or the suburban development. Overall, Kentlands residents' top five factors were, in this order: sense of community, traditional town concept, amenities, better housing, and investment. Of these, the first four factors all had ratings substantially above a score of 4. In contrast, the suburban residents' top five factors were, in this order: better housing, amenities, proximity to place of work, sense of community, and needed

larger home. Of these, only the first, better housing, had a rating of over 4. In the context of our discussion of civic meaning, it seems particularly notable that the Kentlands residents' top two factors speak directly to the importance of community or civic values. In contrast, sense of community is ranked fourth among the suburban residents, while the other top factors reveal values that emphasize the fulfillment of individual or family needs.

On the face of it, then, it appears that New Urbanism, as evidenced in the experience of Kentlands residents, can indeed fulfill its promise as a community that does foster civic meaning. However, great caution must be exercised in drawing such a conclusion. One alternative explanation that cannot be discounted is that Kentlands residents may constitute a self-selected sample. In other words, it is possible that people who value a sense of community chose to move to Kentlands, as indeed the analysis of the 'factors for moving' question seems to indicate. On the other hand, the in-depth interviews also revealed that a number of Kentlands residents chose to move there while being relatively unaware of the civic values embedded in the New Urbanist concept. Some of these people commented that their daily habits (e.g. walking or social interactions) began to change significantly after they had moved to Kentlands. To resolve this ambiguity, the usual caveat must be invoked: more research on other New Urbanist projects is needed.

But even without these additional and necessary studies, I would urge urban designers and planners to consider New Urbanism to be a credible alternative to typical suburban development patterns. To those who seek to promote residential developments that foster a sense of community or civic meaning, New Urbanism may well fulfill this promise. **CP**

Notes

¹ In his essay, "Modern Architecture and Historicity," theorist Alan Colquhoun (1981) asserts that in traditional art (and by implication architecture), "Figurative and hierarchically organized form... creates

a sense of cultural centering and gives the impression that the problems of life can be resolved on a transcendental level."

²This diagram has been adapted from Barrett's model and includes some minor changes in terminology. Subsequent to Barrett's publication of it, he as well has modified some of the terminology within his model.

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