

New Urbanism advocate doesn't understand core issues

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5153>

I find it amusing when I discover there are people out there that are writing about New Urbanism that know so little about it. Such is the case with New Urban Mom, who took me to task about an article I wrote in January of last year concerning a paper written by an Urban Planner Ruth Durack.

First of all, I don't know who New Urban Mom is; she apparently does not share her name with her readers, so for brevity I'll simply call her NUM, with no disrespect intended.

NUM posted an article on her website on May 2 entitled, "New Urbanism and the Inflexibility Myth," and in so doing completely misinterpreted the article I had written and in fact misstated my position on New Urbanism.

For example, she claimed that I argued that New Urbanism was "too suburban for its own good." Not only did I not say that, I did not even imply it.

NUM also stated in her article that "Randy bases most of his argument on observations shared in a 1998 paper written by planner Ruth Durack," implying that I based my views on New Urbanism on little else than Durack's opinion.

The truth is, I have studied the Smart Code and other codes extensively, I have read hundreds of articles and many books about urban planning, and I have been writing about my views on New Urbanism and related subjects for the last six years. Implying that I came to my conclusions on one article is simply wrong.

Having said all that, perhaps NUM would be interested in what I really believe about New Urbanism. It is a multi-faceted topic, and I can't cover it all in one article, but here are some basics.

As I have written before, I am not against New Urbanism per se. My interest in NU peaked when I realized new zoning codes were being generated that would lead to land shortages, or more specifically, to shortages of land of sufficient size on which to build a church. After all, that is what I do, I design churches.

That discovery opened my eyes to other issues that were disturbing. It was apparent that NU, if it was to become the guiding principle for an entire city, would need to have the force of law to make it work.

That is why you see comprehensive plans and zoning codes being written all across the country. The problem is that when a city can legally tell a person what they can or can't do with their property, it raises all kinds of property rights issues.

Don't get me wrong on this; I have absolutely no problem if a developer wants to build a NU community, writing all kinds of rules about the architecture, the arrangement of the community, or even what color everyone must paint their house. The reason is simple: anyone who wants to live there and is willing to accept the rules is free to do so.

However, when local government begins to tell its residents that they are not free to determine the best use of the land or property they already own, then that raises serious Constitutional issues. Or even worse, when government can seize property (such as in *Kelo v. New London*) from one individual and give it to another - all in the name of "economic development" - or to force a certain "desired urban form," then Constitutional rights are being violated.

NUM stated in her article that NU "is definitely not interested only in suburban development..." NUM, NU is about creating density and the suburbs are routinely vilified by proponents of NU. Their idea of developing the suburbs is to only allow new suburban developments when they are only absolutely necessary, and then only according to NU principles. What if I prefer not to live there, but no other options are available?

I've seen NU developments; yes, they are quite attractive and to an extent they even remind me of the neighborhood that I grew up in.

But in studying the whole movement, of which New Urbanism is just a part, I began asking myself who were having their rights taken from them in order to create this sense of "community." The fact is, we can construct buildings, communities, or even entire cities necessarily by force, but if you are violating basic Constitutional rights to do so, it is not worth the cost to freedom. Furthermore, the happiness this movement promises through the built environment is superficial at best; it simply can't be handed out or imposed by force of government. Happiness comes from a much deeper place.

So NUM, God bless you, I bet you're a very nice person, but you need to step back and take a look at the whole issue. Freedom is too precious, and it has come at a high cost to those who came before us to allow it to be taken from us, for any reason.

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