

Design Debate

Can architecture really be a means of social control?

Walkable neighborhoods, public transportation, vernacular architecture ... when Mississippi chose to rebuild its Katrina-battered coast according to the maxims of New Urbanism, many architects and planners rejoiced. But some also voiced fiery protests. In *The Washington Post*, architect Eric Owen Moss called it “right-wing developer-speak masquerading as populism.” Marlon Blackwell, an architect and professor at the University of Arkansas, told *The New York Times*, “It uses historicism as a way to validate a kind of moralistic take on architecture.”

Annals of architecture. The criticism has roots in the annals of architecture, explains Michael Sorkin, professor and director of one graduate architecture program at the City University of New York and owner of Michael Sorkin Studio. “I see this as kind of a tributary of a much larger controversy,” said Sorkin. It begins with the early 20th-century Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, who envisioned high-rise residential buildings as modern alternatives to the gritty tenement neighborhoods of 19th-century cities. Le Corbusier also foresaw spacious urban landscapes where people live and work in separate locations, united by the then-new automobile. Decades later, urban planners would come to deride crime-plagued housing projects and scorn the suburbs as environmentally and socially ruinous. Critics cried out for a return to historical forms, and Miami architect Andrés Duany responded, offering his historic-leaning ideas as an alternative to Modernism.

New Urbanists champion cities modeled after small towns of yesteryear, where people live and work in close proximity and enjoy a sense of community unavailable in alienating, auto-dependent suburbs. But critics, espe-

cially in academia, view the movement’s historic emphasis as regressive. In his interview with the *Post*, Moss characterized New Urbanism as appealing to an “anachronistic Mississippi that yearns for the good old days of the Old South.” Moss reframed the issue for *Coastal Contractor*, suggesting New Urbanism prettifies history. He compares it to a Hollywood version of Charles Dickens’ London, which might look “very intriguing to you and me, as long as we weren’t one of the characters who had to live there.”

Critics also contend that New Urbanism doesn’t live up to its environmentally friendly patina and community-conscious claims. “Despite the rhetoric, what they have produced is essentially a slightly different variation of a suburb,” Sorkin said. In his view, New Urbanist developments “tend to be gated communities for upper-middle-class white folks.”

Unflappable appeal. Still, none of these complaints have dented New Urbanism’s appeal. The movement has spawned an entire generation of planned communities nationwide, including Disney’s Celebration in Orlando. It also inspired Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour to bring Duany to Biloxi after Katrina struck to organize a week of brainstorming sessions with dozens of like-minded architects in the Congress of New Urbanism. Out of these sessions came redevelopment plans for Mississippi’s 11 coastal cities (see “Gulf Renaissance,”

Classic or regressive? The Florida community of Seaside is an early but famous example of New Urbanism. It has been celebrated for its coherent architectural patterns, but has also been depicted as a creepy, controlled community in the movie *The Truman Show*.



MARK S. WURST

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The speed of the state’s embrace of New Urbanism stunned those who had watched it from the sidelines, and the Republican Barbour’s support was just the ammunition they needed to link New Urbanism’s small-town emphasis with right-wing talking points about traditional values.

Duany has called the attacks on New Urbanism’s historicism “ridiculous” and charges that late 20th-century coastal development needs serious rethinking. “Just show me a building on the Mississippi Gulf Coast that was Modernist that wasn’t just vulgar trash,” he said. Prior to Katrina, he claims, Mississippi’s coast was deteriorating into unmitigated sprawl. After the hurricane, the state has an unprecedented chance to rethink its entire coast, and Duany feels New Urbanism is the only serious contender offering a legitimate alternative. “People are for it or against it, but that’s what they’re discussing,” he notes. — Aaron Hoover

To weigh in on the debate,
send your letters to coastal-editorial@hanleywood.com.