The Metropolis versus the City:
The Landscape Urbanism’s challenge to New Urbanism and the tenets of Smart Growth

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In the past half-decade a new “ism,” has come to populate the planning discourse. Under the guise of a seemingly pro-landscape, pro-environmental agenda, it aims to supplant the “Smart Growth,” vision articulated by the Congress of the New Urbanism and this organization. It calls for Metropolitan scale thinking, i.e., for “radically decentralized, urbanization, especially in the context of complex natural environments.” It is called, “Landscape Urbanism.”

Like New Urbanism, Landscape Urbanism represents a critique of contemporary suburban development. Both “isms” acknowledge the environmental and cultural destruction wrought by sixty-years of planning that treats urban land as a commodity. However, each of these movements views the origin and legacy of post-war suburban planning from differing perspectives and thus they argue for different responses.

While wrapping itself in an envelope of green infrastructure, Landscape Urbanism prioritizes the spatial ambiguity and speed of experience that results from a merging of city and country, what others might refer to as an intellectual and seductive apology for sprawl. By contrast, as this audience knows, advocates of Smart Growth and their colleagues in the Congress for the New Urbanism, prioritize the most traditional of urban types, the street, where a slower pace of movement is dominant. The Landscape Urbanists view such concern with street types, and “place-making” as hopelessly naïve and passé.

Urbanisms at Differing at Speeds of Habitation

Proponents of Landscape Urbanism view planning after World War II as a product of the forces of technological and economic modernity -- characterized by mass communication, personalized transport and decentralized manufacturing, which necessitates vast logistical networks for warehousing, distribution and sales. In their eyes, the evolution of post-war planning parallels a timeline in which the corner store is supplanted by the supermarket, and the latter by the warehouse club. As a result, Landscape Urbanists propose new, and more open-ended urban paradigms, including those that “challenge architectural conventions of [en]closure.” In other words, they tend to promote urban or metropolitan forms that, among other characteristics, lack spatial definition.

Ironically, its champions make the case for a “Landscape Urbanism” that is vehicular in scale yet guided by a commitment to environmental restoration. In homage to the decentralizing forces of natural systems, as well as recognition of over a century of industrial production, and contemporary transport modalities and sixty years of post-war sprawl, Landscape Urbanism is intent on diluting the fundamental distinction between city and country. In other words, from a human settlement point of view, it embraces the Metropolis with its boundlessness and corresponding speed of movement, rather than the City with its spatial limits and diversity of pace.

New Urbanists consider the past two generations of planning as an aberration, representing something of a self-imposed collective amnesia rather a permanent change to the cultural episteme. Rather than representing the forces of modernity, they view the past half-century of planning in terms of the dominating influence of Euclidean zoning and traffic engineering, nothing more culturally significant than that. In fact, they would argue, traditional, pre-war urbanism has proven to be far more resilient in the marketplace than any other model precisely because of its continued cultural relevance. In contrast to Landscape Urbanism, they
and other Smart Growth advocates argue for an urbanism that is spatially and temporally defined. Both New Urbanism and Smart Growth aim to restore the fundamental distinction between city and country. This translates to an explicit embrace of a distinct typology that recognizes the neighborhood, the town, and most significantly, the City.

Viewed according to this dichotomy, the ‘metropolis’ and the ‘city’ represent different speeds of habitation, necessitated by different sizes and scales of the building blocks of urbanism. While the city is composed of neighborhoods defined in size by the pace of a pedestrian, bound together by corridors – e.g., vehicular thoroughfares, rivers, rail-lines and the like – the metropolis is characterized as much by the corridors themselves, i.e., the green, grey or brown swaths of land, that connect neighborhoods and districts to one another defined more by the pace of the automobile.

At the scale of the City, the highway may have a role only in linking city to city, but not in linking neighborhoods to one another. A highway-less city is slower and more navigable by modes other than cars. The ligaments connecting neighborhood to neighborhood will be experienced at a greater diversity of speeds. In such a context urban form can be described in terms of its ‘walkability.’

On the other hand, at the scale of the Metropolis, the highway becomes as much a place to “inhabit” as any other physical component of the urban milieu. Geographic scale is important, but mostly for the miles and miles of in-between landscapes that are mediated by the frame of a car windshield. The Metropolis’ form can be described in terms of its ‘automobility’.

**Fast Urbanism: Spatial Experience at the Scale of the Metropolis and the Highway**

Like the New Urbanists, proponents of Landscape Urbanism bring their own historical references to bear, but there examples are not typological, but grand and visions. For example, Frank Lloyd Wright’s *Broadacre City* and Ludwig Hilberseimer’s *New Regional Pattern* are held up as “uniquely American typologies. In both theoretical examples, the fundamental distinctions between city and countryside, village and farmland, ‘urbanism’ and ‘landscape’ are dissolved in favor of a third term: a ‘landscape urbanism,’ for industrialized American modernity.” While unrealized, *Broadacre City*’s legacy is most apparent in today’s generic suburban pattern (absent the flying cars, and farming plots). Hilberseimer’s influence can be seen most clearly in the rows and rows of public housing that, prior to their demolition under the Hope VI program dotted virtually every American city (and to be fair, a few successful exceptions like Lafayette Park in Detroit).

Landscape Urbanism is more compelling when it relies less on historical anomalies and more on its argument that the analysis of landscape should play at least as fundamental a role in the making of urbanism as the analysis of blocks and street types. However, its theorists and practitioners seem to analyze their terrain with a considerably more jaundiced and even cynical eye than their 19th century predecessors of the regional survey such as Scottish planner, Patrick Geddes. Unlike Geddes, however practitioners of Landscape Urbanism show no interest in a systemic and culturally understood application of analytical tools, methods, techniques or even strategies. Instead, their analysis of the landscape tends to reveal idiosyncratic bits that pique their muse. For the most part the analysis is highly personal, with the caveat, that there is a shared sensibility toward prioritizing both the post-industrial landscape, and the suburban miasma of the metropolis, embodied in such iconic American locales as Houston.

Emphasizing their break from tradition, Landscape Urbanists are fond of celebrating the infrastructural systems necessary for modern life (whether currently in use or a relic of a site’s industrial past) and “the public landscapes” that result. At the same time they reject the
picturesque. They view the idea of attempting to frame a set of experiences, or of ‘place-making’ as invalid. Instead, theirs is a concern for the spaces in between the places, what they might call the "black holes," or what the New Urbanist might call the background. Cognizant of the camera’s ability to frame, record, and focus one’s perception on the leftover spaces of the metropolis, it is not “place” that is prioritized, but the experience of riding in a car.

While Smart Growth designers tend to focus their analytic efforts from ground floor vantage point, at the speed of the pedestrian, the Landscape Urbanists seem to prefer the “windshield survey” and a detached, birds-eye perspective that only a high-rise tower or aerial photograph can provide. The resulting differences in strategy are profound.

For example, bewildered by the Houston landscape that he observes from an office building on the 28th Floor, former Rice University, School of Architecture dean, Lars Lerup, finds that he must rename such conventional concepts as foreground and background, which suppose a compositional strategy, into “Stim and Dross,” i.e., areas of Stimulation (shopping malls, high rise building, iconic landscapes) and areas of, well, everything else, seemingly more arbitrary, and less the product of will (dross). Lerup is not bothered by the dross-scape, more intrigued by it, accepting of it as the inevitable consequence of contemporary settlement patterns. It just is.

**Slow Urbanism: Spatial Experience at the Scale of the City and the Street**

Others however, have come to different conclusions about Houston. Writing about the city a decade earlier, former University of Virginia, School of Architecture dean, Jaquelin Robertson, is not so much in bewilderment, but in dismay, viewing the same iconic, figural structures and vast swaths of urban wasteland, Robertson argues for a relearning of urban ordering systems that had been normative only forty years earlier. “What we need today is a reasonably simply language of city building that is free of malignancy, is easy to use and has symbolic and ethical value”. It is a call for a normative design language that can be coded and institutionalized to create a predictable result.

These two observations by Lerup and Robertson, serve as prologues for the narratives of Landscape Urbanism and New Urbanism respectively. While Lerup concludes that we must “close the book on the city and open the book on the metropolis,” Robertson sees the promise for an “American order of things,” an urbanism that is not at odds with its continent, but is somehow inextricably tied to its landscape, an urbanism that embraces virtue and beauty. Both arguments posit a new way of looking at the city. One views traditional urbanism as a social and ecological anachronism, a longing for the return of the “bourgeois pedestrian,” in some misguided hope that he/she will bring us a sense of community, while the other sees the city as an essential tool in reformulating human kind’s relationship with the planet, arguing for an experience that is both abstract and representational; at rest, yet dynamic, both old and new.

Indeed, it is at the scale of the street where the most profound difference between the “isms” makes itself felt. In Houston, it is its lack of spatial definition that Robertson finds so distressing, what he refers to as the “Nagasaki Syndrome.” To the New Urbanist, street design is not a simple matter. It begins with not only with an analysis of its intended capacity, but also its character, including: the height to width ratio of building face to building-face, the relationship of street trees to those proportions and whether trees are necessary to further re-proportion the space or the street, and the completion of this ensemble with private frontages that mediate between the public realm and the building façade. This composition of the street-space must also be considered systematically as part of a larger typology of streets that is be applied to an entire neighborhood or city.
The Metropolis Rebuts the City: Fast Beats Slow

The Landscape Urbanist would argue against such a typological methodology. Controlling the heights of buildings and maintaining the continuity of the street wall are viewed as anachronistic. Such compositional strategies about urbanism overstate the social and environmental benefits of density and spatial definition. Landscape Urbanism contends that urban form in North America has been and will continue to be driven by mass automobility, decentralized industrial networks, and private land ownership rights. To consider reconstituting a “Great Street” would be to ponder the irrelevant.

It follows that the Landscape Urbanists’ dismissal of New Urbanism and by inference Smart Growth as “nostalgic” derives because of the latter’s faith in traditional urban spatial ordering devices such as the street and the square, which it uses as conveyors of cultural meaning and as the containers within which community structures form. Because Smart Growth fails to acknowledge the inevitability of “dross,” it is hopelessly sentimental, ignoring vast swaths of the urban landscape while attempting to impose a “dead spatiality…to rule over history and process.” Lacking this engagement, New Urbanists and Smart Growth practitioners are also naively, at the mercy of the processes “imposed by finance capital.”

Landscape Urbanists view the decentralized metropolis epitomized by Houston and reproduced across the continent as “natural,” as the inevitable result of industrialization and contemporary real estate development norms. In this context, Landscape Urbanism aims to mediate complex natural and man-made environments and celebrate public infrastructure (highways) in a search for meaningful order in the metropolitan miasma. Their work is meant to find meaning within an existing template of suburban/urban form, devoid of any call for the transformation of regulatory regimes. Freed from the urgency for technical and regulatory reform, the proposed order comes from a reading of place—its history, its ecology, its culture—but it is highly personalized. The city and the metropolis are scenic stage sets upon which dramatic action takes place. Landscape can thus be viewed as a tool to “reproduce urban effects traditionally achieved through the construction of buildings simply through the organization of low and roughly horizontal surfaces.” This creates a significant, if rhetorical, advantage: it is a cheaper, quicker and more flexible way of making a human environment than filling in land with buildings.

This is not to say that large-scale, individual projects cannot have a transformational or restorative effect on a given place. The High Line in New York for example catalyzed an estimated $2-billion in economic development along its path. But in the end, it exists within the frame provided by over a century and a half of city-making. As an urban pleasure park, built literally within the frame of historic artifact on which it is built, it is, quintessentially, a civic space that sits comfortably within the transect of urbanism that New Urbanism uses as its yardstick. In other words, it does not supplant the basic urban typologies of parks and streets. Rather it fills in the details.

The City Rebuts the Metropolis: Slow Beats Fast

The New Urbanists and other Smart Growth advocates believe that the urban form still possesses the capacity to provide the framework within which communities can evolve. Therefore, they seem less interested in the metropolitan-scale systems that prioritize automobility, focusing instead on the tactics of city making, including an understanding and deployment of desired typologies that prioritize walkability. Their goal is to reconstitute a formal order because, they believe, formal orders are not arbitrary, nor are they the exclusive domain of
a bourgeois social order, as the landscape urbanists have alleged, but are recurrent across cultures, across continents and across economic milieu. The argument in support of civic space -- including the need for a hierarchy of articulated street spaces -- stems from this recognition. These formal, culturally relevant orders are derived from fundamental principles about human scale and time-honored requirements for building civic capacity, defined by sociologist, Robert Bellah, as the willingness and ability of a populace to utilize the shared resource of cooperation to affect the common good. Civic capacity, he argues, blends civic habits and networks of trust, a recipe in which public space is an essential ingredient.13

In such a context, cities like Houston are viewed as aberrations, the result of control via financing, covenants and deed restrictions (in the case of Houston), or zoning and sub-division ordinances (in other cities), while simultaneously abdicating control of the city’s physical form. New Urbanists aim to upend the existing regulatory structures that have codified suburban sprawl and established the primacy of the automobile. They aim to transform the suburban environment through a context sensitive urbanism of streets, squares, and public transportation, and to repair the urban landscape by filling-in under-utilized and abandoned sites, inverting suburban-style back-front relationships, while reprogramming streets and neighborhoods from mono-cultural to diverse environments. To accomplish these tasks, proponents of the New Urbanism have formed working relationships with those in power who share similar points of view, the Smart Growth community, i.e., the regulators, developers and other participants in the capital markets. This renders New Urbanism not only compositional, but technical and political.

Their concern for walkability and urban scale notwithstanding, the New Urbanists have not ignored the larger regional planning issues that contemporary settlement patterns require. Indeed one might argue, that New Urbanists’ work at the regional scale has helped lay the groundwork for Smart Growth. Calthorpe and Fulton’s The Regional City elegantly connects the dots between the “emerging region, the maturing suburb, and the renewed city,” as interrelated phenomenon.14 “Designing the region IS designing the neighborhood [emphasis mine].”15

Irreconcilable Differences

The emerging difference between Landscape Urbanism and New Urbanism point to a struggle to define an urban ethos and ecological strategy for the 21st century. For example, it is telling that Landscape Urbanists eschew direct empirical observation of, for example, the day-to-day interactions of people within urban spaces, which they dismiss as “leading to a false understanding of the whole.” Ignoring empirically-based social effects, their answer to the ecological ramifications of sprawl is to rely on technological solutions. As its leading proponent, Charles Waldheim suggests, hopefully, “There may be a form of automobility that is carbon-neutral or in which the consequential effects of automobility are mitigated.”16

On the other hand New Urbanism and the principles of Smart Growth that result from it, argue for the study and appraisal of traditional urban typologies, not for the sake of nostalgia, but for the contemporary lessons about human settlement they embody. As pragmatists, New Urbanists and other Smart Growth advocates are destined to catalogue through experience and pedestrian-level analysis, what works and what doesn’t – at every scale and every context of human settlement, placing that acquired catalogue of experience at the service of city making.

Most significantly, Landscape Urbanism argues that the Metropolis is our destiny, because we are driven to it by the inevitable advance of human culture. By contrast, New Urbanism argues that the City is fundamental to society because it is where civic capacity is created. In other words, cities continue to be relevant if we want human culture to advance.
3 Charles Waldheim, “Urban design after oil: Charles Waldheim on automobility,”
8 Jacqueline Tatom, “Urban Highways and the Reluctant Public Realm,” The Landscape Urbanism Reader (New York, 2006), page 183. Tatom argues that “Allan Jacobs’s documentation, Great Streets, fuels the prevailing narrative of lost urbanity that permeates the public discourse by proposing these historic urban forms as models to solve contemporary needs for circulation and public space.”
10 Waldheim, “Introduction,” The Landscape Urbanism Reader, page 15. My characterization derives from Waldheim’s assertion, “In place of traditional dense urban form, most North Americans spend their time in built environments characterized by decreased density, easy accommodation of the automobile, and public realms characterized by extensive vegetation. In this horizontal field of urbanization, landscape has a newfound relevance, offering a multivalent and manifold medium for the making of urban form, and in particular, in the context of complex natural environments, post-industrial sites, and public-infrastructure.”
15 Ibid. page 49.
16 Waldheim, “Urban design after oil: Charles Waldheim on automobility”