

New Urbanism and Politics: A Conservative Case for Urbanism

The question has been posed for discussion among New Urbanists: Is “urbanism” a partisan concept? I will argue here that urbanism *is* a partisan concept, and that urbanism as a good way of life needs to be vigorously defended and advanced in the modern world; but also that such a commitment to urbanism need not, should not, and does not break down along either political party or geo-demographic lines. So herewith my own brief conservative defense of urbanism.

Political conservatism as a morally and intellectually serious idea refers to a temperament or disposition to value, preserve and transmit what is good. This is to be distinguished immediately from valuing things simply because they are old, and from the notion that to be a conservative means to oppose change. The conservative disposition inherently entails not opposition to change, but rather caution about and a *suspicion* of change---usually because political conservatives (having by nature an interest in history) recognize that political action always carries with it unanticipated consequences, and that these are usually for the worse. This does not mean however that conservatives don’t act; it just means that we have to be really riled up before we do (which of course is arguably the story of American politics over the last 40 years).

My conservative argument for urbanism is the same argument I have shared in many public and academic settings over the past twenty years. It goes like this: The best life for human beings is the life of moral and intellectual excellence lived in community with others. All communities exist for the sake of some particular purpose which is held to be good. The singular and defining good of the city is that it is a community of communities the purpose of which is to promote the very best life possible for its inhabitants; and good cities do precisely that. Thus cities are in themselves a valuable and objective human good; and in this view politics--and even the most devoutly held political beliefs--are subservient to the good for which cities exist. This is true both historically and etymologically: “politics” both presumes and serves the good of the *polis*, the city.

That said, cities---though arguably in a certain sense natural to human beings---are nevertheless cooperative human artifacts; and the order of good cities is complex. Every city is at any moment in time a complex interaction between natural environmental conditions, economic activities, moral intentions and a created formal order. New Urbanists acknowledge with more or less clarity the reality of the first three of these conditions; but the essential New Urbanist argument is simply that *the physical form of cities matters* to human well-being, that there are observable and repeatable physical patterns of traditional human settlement making that have served human beings well over long periods of time, and that therefore these physical patterns of human settlement ought to be studied, extended and improved rather than abandoned to the current legal and cultural regime of sprawl that often prohibits and almost always discourages good urban design.

It is odd to me that more political conservatives don’t get this, though in fact a great many cultural conservatives do. In my experience, the ones that don’t get the New Urbanist argument--or at least aren’t buying it--tend to be the ones on the Libertarian side of today’s conservative activists; and here conservative sympathy for New Urbanism may simply be perched on one of those seismic fault lines always threatening to slip and divide the cultural conservatives from the Libertarian / free-market conservatives.

Modern day political liberals---of whom, let it be said, the Congress for the New Urbanism is full---aren’t big on articulated creeds; but cultural conservatives tend to be. So were I to be

so presumptuous as to propose an unofficial New Urbanist creed for cultural conservatives, it would go something like this:

We believe that individuals have both rights and obligations, that individual well-being requires good communities, and that liberty is not license.

We believe that individuals should have as much freedom as justice allows.

We affirm the political principle of subsidiarity, which holds that political decisions for the common good should be made at and through the smallest and most local institutional levels possible.¹

We believe that the Urban Transect as a principle both promotes and accounts for the widest possible variety of free, just and environmentally sustainable human settlements.

We contend that traditional towns and urban neighborhoods demonstrate historically that they both support and are supported by the free exchange of material goods and ideas, including private property.

We profess traditional urbanism in all its manifestations through the Urban Transect as the best way for human beings to organize and make human settlements.

We fight for those who desire to live in compact, diverse, walkable communities, in the proximity of open landscape and a public realm of plazas, squares, and pedestrian-friendly streets.

We fight for the legal right to build traditional towns and neighborhoods.

We hope and believe that the merits of traditional towns and neighborhoods, manifest in various specific local forms, will cause traditional urbanism to once again someday prevail as a cultural norm.

We work for the common good now, and for the common good of future generations.

Let me close with the observation that there is also a good liberal defense of urbanism, insofar as liberalism may be defined in terms of valuing human freedom. Traditional urban life is good because it is *freeing* for human beings to be able to live our daily lives without the necessity of having to drive, particularly if you are old or young or poor or disabled. (Note to Libertarian critics of New Urbanism: the urbanist opposition to sprawl--*not*, n.b., typical suburban density, which would be characteristic of Transect zone T-3---is not based upon trying to deny consumer "choice," but rather upon sprawl's inherent injustice.) It is likewise freeing for human beings to have access to the kinds of material and cultural goods that are customarily created by the densities of use and population and scale that characterize traditional towns and city neighborhoods. But this is a different argument, so I'll stop.

This essay is adapted from remarks delivered to a June 2005 Congress for the New Urbanism symposium in Pasadena, California.

¹ Note well that *sometimes*, on carefully considered occasions, this might mean institutions at a regional if not federal level.