

NEW URBANISM AND THE CULTURE OF TECHNOLOGY: REBUILDING COMMUNITY

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Bio: Thomas Sander is executive director of the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. More information on the Saguaro Seminar and their effort to discern strategies for civic re-engagement can be found at their web site at: <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro>.

The evidence shows dramatic trends in American civic disengagement over the last generation: Americans have deserted the voting booth, the church pew, the union hall, the PTA assembly, the family dinner table, and even the bowling league and coffee klatch, to mention only a few pieces of evidence. These trends matter greatly. Hard evidence demonstrates that civic engagement and social connectedness are practical preconditions for better schools, safer streets, faster economic growth, more effective government, and even healthier lives. The theory of "social capital" usefully summarizes these patterns. By analogy to physical capital and human capital, social capital refers to the social networks, and the norms of reciprocity and trust that these networks engender. Simply put, without adequate supplies of social capital, social institutions falter.

What are the concerns about New Urbanist developments?

- 1) New Urbanism, while it recently has had increased resonance with policy makers, and while it is likely to increase opportunities for social intercourse (shops within walking distance, front porches, etc.), has done little to prove that greater opportunity for civic interaction spurs greater use. Well-designed studies of the impact pre- and post-New Urbanist projects on social capital need to be conducted; even better if academics study the retrofitting of an existing town so one can measure the civic impact on people who were already residents (rather than watching civic-spirited residents be drawn to a development and labeling it a success).**
- 2) Homogeneity:** research has shown that greater social homogeneity leads to lower community involvement. [cited in forthcoming Putnam book, *Bowling Alone: Decline and Renewal of the American Community*. On shelves in late Spring, 2000] Unless New Urbanist projects are careful to build in socio-economic diversity, they may undermine the builders' desires for civic engagement.
- 3) New Urbanist developments don't operate in a vacuum; they operate in the real world. Even in well designed New Urbanist projects (that combine retail, work and residences), nothing ensures that residents won't work or shop elsewhere, undermining the designers' goal for more geographically integrated communities.**
- 4) Opportunity only goes so far. Stories exist of New Urbanist communities where residents, for example, built back porches because they didn't want to sit on front porches, or let hedges grow high to give themselves greater privacy.**

What is the promise of the New Urbanism for civic re-engagement?

First, in changing zoning ordinances, New Urbanist developers open the way to far more creativity about orchestrating our built-environment to try to increase social and civic interaction.

Second, while the early New Urbanist projects were mainly greenfield projects (like Seaside or Celebration), New Urbanist developers like Ray Gindroz (and other Hope VI builders) and Peter Calthorpe (and other brownfield/infill developers) have started to develop a more nuanced New Urbanist palette with greater relevance to a wide variety of geographic places. Some of these projects succeed at building in greater diversity of use and economic diversity of residents. While not yet the norm in New Urbanism [to the extent that one can talk about norms in New Urbanism], they are to be applauded for their innovation.

Third, Professor Putnam has uncovered interesting evidence that increased car travel time (to work, to home, and to places of retail) leads to less civic engagement. [See forthcoming Putnam book, cited above.] New Urbanist developments that succeed in integrating retail, work, and residence might dramatically reduce commuting time and help increase civic engagement. In well-bounded communities, the evidence shows that civic bonds are stronger.