

CNU



# Strategic Plan

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Congress for the New Urbanism  
2020

## Introduction

For the last quarter century, CNU members have been designing, planning and building walkable urbanism. While many towns, cities, and suburbs have dramatically improved, many of America's neighborhoods are growing dangerously unequal. Some people live in walkable neighborhoods with plenty of amenities and a celebrated public realm. They may feel safe, socially connected, and experience a healthy environment. But many others live in un-walkable places with few resources and a depleted public realm. They may be experiencing an acutely degraded environment—air pollution, extreme heat, flooding.

CNU members have an essential role to play in addressing these problems: to leverage the built environment in the pursuit of a more just and sustainable world. Our conviction is that built form plays an indispensable role in equalizing access to resources, helping people feel safer and more socially connected, and redressing climate change.

In an earlier time, we might have been content to hold up newly constructed walkable places as models of our aspiration and evidence that a new pattern was taking hold. In fact, reviewing our efforts over the past several decades, we can point to many successes like code reform, highway teardowns, pedestrian-oriented street design, and designs for mixed-income communities.<sup>1</sup> We have gathered best practices, published helpful resources, and facilitated conversations. The need for walkable urbanism has become mainstream, and we should celebrate that success.

But we are far from satisfied. We need to meet the extraordinary demand for places designed for access, connection, and resilience. We need systemic change so that the achievement of high quality, resilient urbanism can be equally shared—not the province of a fortunate minority.

As we survey the lessons learned from our efforts over the past 25 years, three aspects of our collective pursuit stand out as being particularly intractable. It is to these three challenges that this Strategic Plan is addressed.

First, it has been extraordinarily difficult to promote walkable urbanism that is also inclusive—neighborhoods that are both walkable and affordable. On the one hand, demand has far exceeded supply; with the result that walkable urbanism has become unaffordable. However, places with plenty of affordability are often un-walkable—poor in services and lacking in the kind of quality public realm necessary to support walkability. We need to bring walkability and affordability in better alignment.

Second, America's regulatory culture is still actively blocking our ability to build and sustain walkable neighborhoods. We have learned a great deal over the past few decades about the kinds of codes and land use regulations walkable urbanism requires. Such regulations require flexibility in the kinds of uses allowed and a

minimum of adherence to the rules that encourage walkable and equitable urbanism. A majority of cities and towns are operating under regulations that block flexibility and ignore the fundamentals required to achieve walkable urbanism.

Third, the essential design response to addressing climate change is underdeveloped. This topic is increasingly at the forefront of any discussion about the future health of cities. In the 21st century, the gold standard of human settlement—walkable urbanism—is also essential to addressing the problems arising from extreme weather events. We also need to ensure climate-related population movement contributes to the vitality of a region/city/neighborhood and doesn't exacerbate sprawl.

With this Strategic Plan, CNU intends to develop and advance ways to address these three challenges. Our strategies can be summarized succinctly: grow the supply of neighborhoods that are both walkable and affordable; work to change the codes and regulations blocking walkable urbanism; and advance design strategies that help communities adapt to climate change and mitigate its future impact.

We believe that CNU can make a significant impact in these areas over the next several years. Our movement has a history of identifying the right problems and developing tools that have proven successful. We are guided by a Charter that makes our values clear and unambiguous. Our insistence that the problems of community building—sprawl, segregation, disinvestment, and environmental deterioration—are intertwined is a conviction that still rings true.

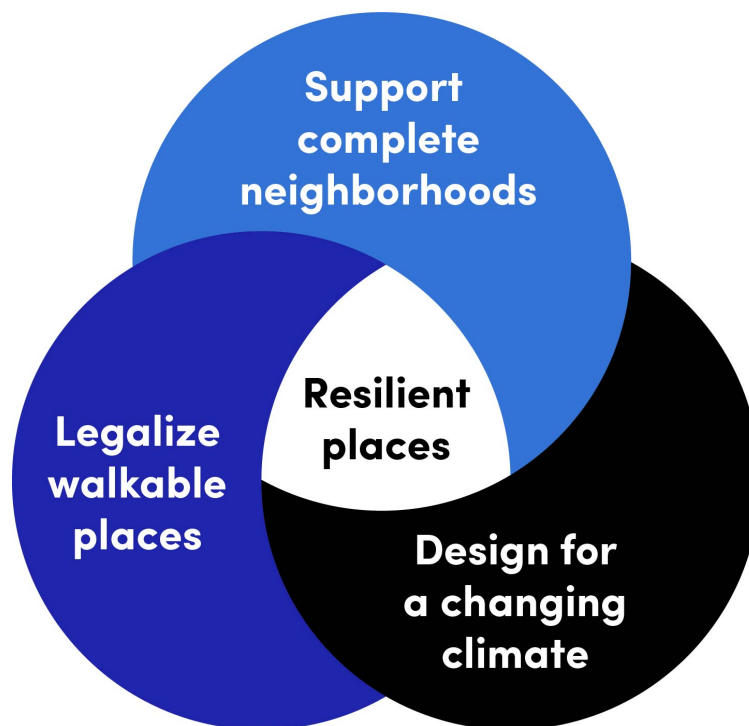
While the root cause of many of these problems is often deeply structural, e.g., racism, classism, failed government policies, and political polarization, the impact of the design and quality of human settlement is immense.

CNU is committed to bringing urban design principles and practices to the table and to convene residents, policymakers, and practitioners to accelerate joint advocacy in pursuit of inclusive and equitable walkable urbanism. Our work and advocacy continues to be paramount in addressing our problems today and into the future.

## Strategic Areas

Enduring, holistic, and people-centered places are vibrant, inclusive, and prosperous. Achieving these outcomes demands a multidisciplinary approach that focuses on the intersection of the physical design and the people who inhabit those spaces. Given the national trends impacting our cities and towns and CNU's ability to significantly advance people-centered places, our next strategic areas include:

- **Support complete neighborhoods**
- **Legalize walkable places**
- **Design for a changing climate**



These areas of work for CNU do not exist in silos; they overlap and complement each other. A well-functioning neighborhood cannot exist without a diverse population, commercial spaces, parks, and schools within walking distance, preparation for climate impacts, or a strong locally-driven economy. Resilient places exist at the intersection of walkable, diverse, and climate adaptable neighborhoods. Additionally, these strategic areas of focus will be supported continually by cross-cutting issues such as transportation and mobility.

## Strategic Area #1: Support Complete Neighborhoods

WHAT. CNU will work with partners to make Complete Neighborhoods commonplace across the range of U.S. cities and towns. Whereas the core idea of Complete Streets is to challenge auto-centric design to create streets for all users, the core idea of Complete Neighborhoods is to challenge single-use, homogeneous neighborhoods to create neighborhoods with building, mobility, and people diversity, e.g., a mix of housing options and a mix of uses within walking distance. Since this objective has the potential to exacerbate inequity and because CNU can add design assistance to organizations primarily engaged in development and services, it's essential to work with partners to ensure that Complete Neighborhoods benefit all people, regardless of social or economic standing.

WHY SHOULD CNU PRIORITIZE THIS? Urban growth and change has become a battleground: NIMBYs vs. YIMBYs, small developer vs. corporate entity, affordable housing advocate vs. preservationist. Complete Neighborhoods are challenging because they require the energies of multiple constituencies—they need the affordability that affordable housing advocates bring, the servicing that large retailers bring, the sense of ownership that small retailers bring, the density that developers bring. CNU has an essential role to play in breaking through impasses and convening conversations that work toward shared goals. There is no one organization devoted to ensuring that these constituencies find their commonality—that is CNU's strategic role.

HOW. Procuring Complete Neighborhoods as the standard setting of American walkable urbanism requires forging collaboration, expanding the knowledge base, and raising awareness. CNU's strategic goals are therefore to:

- **Promote better collaboration.** CNU will work with a range of partners, including but not limited to developers, affordable housing advocates, economic development organizations and preservationists, to support Complete Neighborhoods. We will leverage partnerships between big and small actors to harness shared interests and turn up the volume (and the heat) on the imperative of Complete Neighborhoods. We will devote ourselves to fostering a more productive exchange that unites varied groups and finds ways to grow the nation's supply of diverse and walkable neighborhoods.
- **Increase awareness and promote adoption of best practices.** We need better, data-driven intelligence about Complete Neighborhoods. CNU will work with partners to help identify and understand Complete Neighborhoods as they exist in varying contexts, tracking appropriate data sources and spotlighting the reasons behind their growth or decline. We need to use this intelligence to determine best practices, incorporate new knowledge into program and practice guidance, and disseminate relevant information and resources. With a commitment to gaining a better understanding of what sustains Complete Neighborhoods, we will be able to proactively support excellence in the methods, policies, and design characteristics known to support them.

## Strategic Area #2: Legalize Walkable Places

WHAT: Work with state and local governments to integrate New Urbanist principles into the regulatory environment that controls physical space and design outcomes, including zoning, subdivision, street, parking, stormwater, and landscape regulations, to support diverse, resilient places.

WHY SHOULD CNU PRIORITIZE THIS? Most of today's land use regulations were written to guide the post-war housing boom. Unfortunately, these regulations discouraged—and frequently made illegal—walkable places, vibrant streets, neighborhoods, and centers that are the foundation of successful villages, towns, and cities. New Urbanists have advocated for new regulations for decades, but they have been limited in their ability to affect structural change. To date, a limited number of cities have successfully revised their codes, furthering the inequities between places with resources and those without. Broadly updating these regulations is essential for creating diverse, well-functioning, and resilient places.

HOW: Together with members and partners, CNU must support and accelerate the reform of the policies and regulations for a large portion of local and state governments. Providing a pathway for regulatory reform for more municipalities will help level the playing field for building more diverse, resilient, and walkable places. Achieving this goal requires actions that are both ground-up and top-down. Practitioners and advocates continue to support this goal with ground-up strategies. CNU must leverage its status and partnerships to affect regulations from the top-down, or at the federal, state, and regional scale, in order to more fully support the movement. To do this, CNU will:

- **Expand the Project for Code Reform to address other essential regulatory barriers.** CNU will expand its offering of streamlined and essential regulatory solutions to help state leaders who are trying to create vibrant Main Streets, walkable neighborhoods, and an active public realm, but who also have limited planning staff and resources. By mitigating the broader complexities that constrain resource-strapped cities in their efforts to foster equitable development, we seek to advance an incremental reform frameworks that addresses critical regulatory barriers to creating great places.
- **Amplify results.** Greater knowledge, training, and accessibility is required, in order for both the development and implementation of regulatory reform to be significantly scaled. CNU will advance existing technology, incentives, networks, and processes to create training options for local government staff.
- **Expand knowledge base specifically on regulatory issues.** CNU will leverage the extensive coding accomplishments of the organization and its allies to create an accessible resource for code reform knowledge and evidence-based successes across all coding platforms and approaches.

## Strategic Area #3: Design for a Changing Climate

WHAT: CNU's response to challenging climate conditions is to create enduring and multi-functional communities. Where and how we build exerts a powerful force on communities' capacity to adapt and to be resilient in the face of severe weather, temperature fluctuations, drought, wildfire, sea level rise, and water intrusion. It's impossible to confront climate change without addressing the challenges of urban and suburban sprawl— in our cities, suburbs, small and mid-size towns, and rural areas.

CNU will advance practical and attainable strategies to both mitigate and adapt to climate challenges, through the planning, design, and development of places that have measurable impacts on reducing energy use and pollution, offering transportation choices beyond driving, and responding realistically to climate and surroundings.

WHY SHOULD CNU PRIORITIZE THIS? The increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related events has left communities with an undeniable need to assess their vulnerability and increase resilience. Disenfranchised populations are threatened most by the climate crisis and will continue to bear the brunt of its devastation. The affluent have more resources to adapt, while the most vulnerable will be left in harm's way and displaced as people move into areas of lesser climate threat.

HOW: CNU will continue to address the relationship between the built environment and climate impact to achieve more resilient places and regions, mitigating future climate risk and adapting to changing climate conditions. Working collaboratively with state and local governments, we will further advance existing New Urbanist strategies that not only ensures survival, but a rich quality of life. CNU is uniquely positioned to deliver New Urbanist principles as a strategy for addressing climate change vulnerabilities that will:

- **Develop and advance design solutions for adapting the built environment to withstand more severe and frequent weather events.** While many regulatory tools and policy resources have been created for regions, cities, and towns to address the impacts from a changing climate, many of these resources lack detailed design and implementation strategies. CNU will amplify existing design solutions and explore new design innovations to better protect and enhance communities facing climate challenges.
- **Guide cities and regions as they prepare for a climate-responsive future through planning, policy, and consultation.** Climate stressors, such as changing rainfall, heavy flooding, sea level rise, and increased wildfires and droughts, put pressure on people to leave their homes and livelihoods behind. It makes their homes uninhabitable. CNU will support long-term community-planning efforts to preserve community affordability, protect neighborhood diversity, and help provide equitable support in regions, cities, and towns expecting to participate in the population migration.

## Looking Ahead

For the last quarter century, CNU has been building and strengthening its implementation processes to accelerate the pace of change. Implementation of the strategic plan will be accomplished through the following mechanisms:

*Empowering local governments.* Governments at all levels are re-orienting themselves to more locally-based solutions. CNU will accelerate its work with local decision-makers to support and expand their work in implementing New Urbanist approaches and principles.

*Providing education and training.* Only since the post-World War II era did the intricate relationship of financing, highway and suburban development, and code regulations create the dispersed, low density communities that dominate much of the developed landscape in the United States today. Untangling and removing the obstacles that have been in place for almost 80 years will likely take multiple generations. To facilitate and accelerate this process, CNU will significantly expand its training and education opportunities to the wide range of stakeholders and participants in the community design and development process.

*Supporting the movement.* Our members have been the strength of the organization throughout the history of the movement. We must reignite that excitement of discovery that comes from the blend of advocacy and professional practice that inspired so many people over the first 25 years. To do that, CNU will re-engage the existing members and more broadly engage new members, allies, and partners to not only grow the voices in our tent but also leverage existing networks to influence allied and partner agendas. CNU will continue to amplify and connect the work of CNU members to expand our shared voice in working toward and demanding change in how we plan, design, and build communities nationwide.

This strategic plan reflects what was learned through [the #NUFuture process](#), where hundreds of members of the movement, stakeholders, and allied leaders gathered to determine where New Urbanism could go in the coming decades. The areas outlined above are the ones CNU determined should be led by the organization and enhanced by member engagement and efforts. Other #NUFuture areas will be led by the broader movements and amplified by CNU where and when appropriate. The benefits of good urban design reach beyond aesthetically pleasing developments. Improvements to the public realm can strengthen human connections, improve public health outcomes, provide opportunities for social interaction between people of different race or class, and increase economic resilience. These benefits should not be reserved for only a portion of the population with access to resources. CNU will embed equity and inclusion through all its programs, recognizing that very tenet of New Urbanism—from transit to open space—should be looked at through this lens.



It is the CNU National Board of Directors hope that the 2020 Strategic Plan reflects and begins to implement the Board's statement on inclusion, which was initiated by the Board to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in March 2016, and which was formally adopted in September 2018:

*We—the National Board of the Congress for the New Urbanism—challenge, encourage, and support all members of the New Urbanist movement to reaffirm the Charter's commitment to building great places for all people, regardless of background, race, income, or ability, and to create a more inclusive, engaged movement. Drawing on our movement's tradition of excellence in community design and (re) development, New Urbanists shall further develop, evolve, and implement strategies and solutions for providing attainable housing, designing and financing diverse neighborhoods, and ultimately building a just place.*

*The promise of the Charter—to build and make economically viable, stable, and environmentally healthy communities within a coherent physical framework—can only be fulfilled by identifying and confronting exclusionary policies, practices, and behaviors; empowering those who have been most affected; and committing ourselves to accelerating actions and strategies that foster more inclusive communities.*

# Acknowledgements

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*Front cover photo: Baltimore, MD, photo by Susan Henderson*

