# New Urbanism and the Culture of Technology: Rebuilding Community

## David Brain

### Presented at CNU VII: The Wealth of Cities

### June 4, 1999, 2:00 PM

**Bio:** David Brain is a professor of sociology at the University of South Florida's New School.

At first glance, one might wonder how these three panelists' presentations fit together, and what implications they might have for the New Urbanism. Let me start by suggesting that the three panelists approach the problem of rebuilding community at three different levels of abstraction, and three different levels of scale. Furthermore, these three approaches are complementary in significant and illuminating ways, which may not be immediately evident. In my comments, I'd like to highlight a couple of aspects of each, and then suggest some questions they raise for the New Urbanism.

Professor Borgman has developed a broad critique of the social and cultural logic of technology, a logic characterized by a profound disengagement from the material world as the practical context in which we might realize a common sense of the good life and human excellence. In Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, Borgman writes:

In a device, the relatedness of the world is replaced by a machinery, but the machinery is concealed, and the commodities which are made available by a device are enjoyed without the encumbrance of the engagement with a context (Borgman, p. 47).

The world of things is reduced to a collection of devices for delivering an "unencumbered" enjoyment of commodities. He calls this "commoditization," referring not to the production of goods for their exchange value (usually called 'commodification') but to the abstraction of the "commodiousness" of things from the context in which those things are produced and consumed. In other words, the ends that we pursue (and the enjoyments that we derive from things) are both abstracted from the means and also abstracted from a larger context (of communal ties and social relationships) so that they appear as discrete and disconnected enjoyments. The "machinery," as he calls it, is rendered meaningless—frictionless, transparent, unencumbering, and, ideally, relegated to a "backstage" where it is unseen. It is this cultural pattern that makes "consumption" the enemy of "community."

This is as good an account of the techno-logic of conventional suburban development as any I've seen. Conventional suburban development, characterized by functional segregation and the engineering of traffic flows, is a "machine for living," if we can take the liberty of re-interpreting Le Corbusier's phrase in the light of Borgman's explication of the notion of a 'machine.' The means of consumption, including all the components of individual lives, are laid out serially on the landscape , in distinct locations and forms. Places are reduced to collections of "devices," in Professor Borgman's sense. The individual is able to move as required between them in assembling the pieces of a lifestyle. The built landscape becomes "mere technology," engineered to maximize mobility and choice, and minimize friction in the delivery of commodities.

In his account of "third places," Ray Oldenburg gives us a vivid and insightful description of places that represent the polar opposite of this kind of abstraction, disintegration, and commoditization. In the bars, coffee shops, beauty salons, and other public gatherings spots that he has investigated, we can see forms of place-based engagement that bring the delight of the means into the foreground. 'Third places' aren't just machines for the delivery of goods and services, like (for example) a fast food restaurant. The delivery of goods and services becomes on opportunity for engagement in a certain kind of urban sociability, with its own pleasures and benefits aside from its instrumental value. The delight associated with these significant social contexts has to do precisely with the sense of engagement in a specific, concretely realized, place-based community. This kind of practical and unmediated engagement in a social setting, experienced in the course of walking and talking, is exactly the opposite of the abstraction and disengagement from context that Borgman associates with the device paradigm.

Tom Sander presented some results of the work of Robert Putnam and his colleagues in the Saguaro Seminar. Putnam and his associates have assembled an impressive range and quantity of data demonstrating a worrisome decline in the patterns of association and social interaction that sustain relations and norms of reciprocity and trust—in other words, a decline in what Putnam refers to as civic engagement. With respect to both the level of analysis and the level of abstraction, the discussion of civic engagement is located squarely between Borgman's analysis of commoditization and disengagement from the world of things in contemporary culture, and Oldenburg's "third places" and places characterized by a tangible, practical, and durable form of social engagement. Putnam's work points to a middle level of social organization associated with the concept of "social capital," a concept that refers to features of social life (networks of social ties and association in civil society, norms, and relations of trust) that sustain the capacity to work together for common objectives. I would like to suggest two lessons for the New Urbanism from this discussion, lessons suggested by the way these three presentations seem to be related. All three have to do with the issue of engagement in the social world (in which I include the built environment as well as democratic politics).

The first lesson is derived from Borgman's analysis of the deep logic of modern technology. Borgman's discussion points up both the profound potential of the New Urbanism, as an effort to re-articulate our engagement with what he calls "focal things and practices," as an effort to overcome the alienated condition he associates with a culture of technology. At the same time, however, it also points to the danger that the New Urbanism might be reduced to a technology of community, very much in Borgman's sense. The effort to justify New Urbanist principles as the means to the end of community, as the technical tools to produce specific social outcomes, could easily slip into the logic of the machine and the commoditization of community: that is, the reduction of 'community' to disconnected commodities, available for unencumbered enjoyment, produced by a machinery that is operated by designers, planners, developers, and government.

As New Urbanists look for technical legitimacy in the context of debates over social reform and public policy, there is a real danger of slipping back into an older model of public administration, which has been top-down, technocratic, and oriented toward mitigating the encumbrances that result from living in communities. This tendency is also pushed by the demands of operating in the context of the market, which means that the realization of New Urbanist principles has to be translated into discrete commodities simply for the purpose of organizing production and marketing.

The power and promise of the New Urbanism has been quite different, moving against the grain of both traditional public administration and planning approaches, and the reductive tendencies of the market. In this context, I encourage people to consider what we mean by 'urbanism.' In my discipline, Louis Wirth described 'urbanism as a way of life' by focusing on what he thought were the consequences of size, density, and heterogeneity of urban agglomerations. These conditions were thought to produce certain 'modern' social and cultural outcomes, which then had to be re-engineered in order to mitigate negative consequences. Both social science and modern planning have reflected the logic of regarding the city as a kind of technology for mitigating the externalities that result from large, densely settled areas with heterogeneous populations. Technical

planning becomes a reactionary exercise: the best one can do is respond to processes outside of our control and mitigate the consequences. It's the opposite of "Build it and they will come." The logic is more along the lines of the following: "They're coming, so we'd better get some people with orange vests to tell them where to park."

Philip Bess has noted that traditional urbanism is not just a matter of city as a market, an entertainment zone, or a machine for living, but both a manifestation of values and a means to their achievement, a means that can be valued in its own right, as a life engaged in common. Traditional urbanism is a form of visible cooperation, and the forging of intentional connections between a common past, the maneuvering of the present, and the hopes of the future. It is visible indication that as we pursue our individual projects, we have a sense of responsibility and an interest in contributing to something outside of our individual interests. It is in the context of 'urbanism,' in this sense, that the spaces, places, and artifacts of the built environment become, in Borgman's sense, "focal things and practices" capable of re-connecting us with both the material and social world, with place and community.

As a reconstruction of architectural representation and design practice, the New Urbanism is at the core of a broad process of social change and institutional re-orientation in which one can see a re-definition of 'community' as a practical ideal, a re-working of the way that social order and significance are registered visually in spatial arrangements and architectural form, and a re-configuration of our ability to recognize moral order in our visual and practical experience of the built environment.

The second lesson has to do with the relationship between Ray Oldenburg's presentation of the sociability of the 'third place,' and the conception of civic engagement suggested by Robert Putnam and his colleagues. Both the New Urbanism, and discussions of civic engagement, are plagued by individualistic assumptions that underlie the ideal of community and the idea of a connection between urban spaces that encourage social interaction and 'civic engagement' as engagement in process of collective deliberation and decision making. Theda Skocpol has pointed out, in response to Robert Putnam, that "organized civil society in the US has never flourished apart from active government and inclusive democratic politics…"

There is a certain romantic reading of Tocqueville at work in some of our thinking. It seems to be assumed that increased face-to-face interaction will result not only in the formation of bonds of community, but the formation of a community of engaged citizens, capable of efficacious collective action. It is important to see, however, that there are two distinct sets of issues here. One set of issues has to do with creating public places where one can see the patterns of urban sociability described so vividly by Ray Oldenburg. The notion of 'civic engagement' raises an entirely distinct (although related) set of issues having to do with the forms of engagement and not just the fact of association. How do we get from urban sociability to forms of engagement that amount to real capacities for collective deliberation, decision making, and action?

This second set of issues points to a middle level of analysis that has been missing in this discussion: the analysis of the institutional order that sustains the practical patterns and 'habits of the heart' of civic engagement. To the extent that 'civic engagement' refers to engagement in a public realm, it is important to see that the pleasurable sociability of 'third places' is only part of a vital public realm. What is missing is discussion of the institutions and practices that link the kinds of 'community' one finds in third places to the larger setting, institutions and practices that articulate the spaces between first, second, and third places frequented by individuals-the way a well-designed and well-inhabited street articulates the space between the private spaces of homes and businesses.

Sander's discussion of the problem of civic engagement raises questions about the way the "public realm" (as well as the social life of urban places) is organized and realized. This level of social connection is generally not discussed and tends to be systematically devalued in discussions of the problem of "re-building community"—partly as a result of the fact that the apparently simple and direct reality of a face-to-face community appears as the only option that we tend to imagine in

opposition to the abstraction and alienation of the device paradigm. Although it is important to understand the social life of urban places such as the ones that Ray Oldenburg describes, it is also important not to romanticize or overstate their significance as part of the broader issue of civic engagement.

I propose that we try not to lose sight of important connections between Professor Borgman's ideas concerning the need to move from an abstracted and alienated relation with the world of things to an engagement in and through 'focal things,' and the idea of civic engagement as the capacity to work together toward common goals. We can see physical design and place-making as a process informed by professional expertise but engaging a broad public interest. The New Urbanism has the potential to be not just the cause of increasing civic engagement, or a technical means for stimulating the development of community, but in itself a form of civic engagement. Urbanism—defined as a form of place-making—can generate a sense of community and civic engagement not because it causes us to interact in certain ways, but because it is—in itself—a form of interaction and collaboration.