

Planning “isms”

Scott Page

Urban planning has often fallen subject to matters of style of one kind or another. Competing theories and ideas have helped to shape parts of our cities and broadened our perspective of what they could be. Much as in architecture, competing ideologies are also the source of some great conflicts, where finger pointing and name calling are commonplace in the desire to claim the high ground in how our cities evolve.

This leads us to the latest row between competing schools of thought – New Urbanism vs. Landscape Urbanism. Maybe not quite the death match you were expecting but the back and forth between supporters of each have recently lit up the pages of *Planetizen*, *Metropolis* and other publications. Perhaps one of the better summaries of the scuffle was penned by Leon Neyfakh on January 30 in the *Boston Globe*. I'm sure you've been following this with bated breath but allow me to crassly summarize (thereby doing both sides a disservice).

One of the first overt punches thrown was by Michael Mehaffy, executive director of the Sustasis Foundation who glibly referred to Landscape Urbanism as “sprawl in a pretty green dress.” Mehaffy is an ardent supporter of New Urbanism which for decades has promoted its brand of urbanism, focused on balanced streets, transit, increased density, mixed use development and traditional architecture. The famous examples of New Urbanism include Seaside and Celebration in Florida, and Glenwood Park in Atlanta is a more recent example. The crux of the New Urbanists' beef is that Landscape Urbanists seemingly accept sprawl as a viable form of urbanism and treat the planning of large urban areas as simply a work of art. The underlying ideologies, design process and resulting forms of Landscape Urbanism are all sources of ridicule for the New Urbanists.

On the flip side, Landscape Urbanists believe retrofitting the landscape is the key to building better cities and regions. It's a systems thinking approach that places added value on the ecology and the flows of food, water and habitat to name a few. Their growing influence has been rewarded recently by the appointment of Charles Waldheim, one of the movement's vocal leaders, to the dean of Harvard's landscape architecture department, which has sparked much of the mocking between the two camps. As a part of the feud, Landscape Urbanists (and I should say others as well) accuse the New Urbanists of promoting a brand of planning that is too rooted in a nostalgic concept of cities, which includes everything from their functioning to their built form.

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For those of you coming to this fight late, you may be wondering, why should I care? This is a debate rooted in academia with little application to the day to day decisions I make as an architect, landscape architect or planner. The debates in academia, however, can influence a generation of design students. They will graduate, eventually find jobs, and seek to establish a design voice in line with the ideas with which they align themselves in school. The influence of any “ism” will ultimately emerge in the work of professionals in the years to come.

Broad generalizations aside, there are certainly sharp differences in approach, but there are also more overlaps than either camp gives the other credit for. Here are just a few.

On Sprawl

Lobbing insults aside, both of these movements are fundamentally looking to create more sustainable cities and regions, and, further, both promote density as a way to do this. Landscape Urbanist plans feature green space, but many also include areas for dense development. These developments are often represented through vague massing, which means they could be designed in multiple ways, including those of the New Urbanists. I don't accept the charge that the Landscape Urbanists tacitly accept sprawl; they just imagine different ways of transitioning sprawl to different, more productive and environmentally friendly uses. I believe that our existing policies are biased toward promoting sprawl and that many people make choices about where to live based on the economic results of these policies. In a better world, these policies would change, to level the economic playing field, which is currently tilted toward suburban living. The New Urbanists can, and should, continue to take on these policies. At the same time, we face the question of what do we do now with existing suburban areas. The Landscape Urbanists hope to find a solution by retrofitting these areas to be ecologically responsible.

On Language

If you read the back and forth carefully, you'll see that some of the miscommunication stems from each movement's competing graphic expression and language. It may sound benign, but the graphics and language we use are essential in selling an idea. On these fronts, the movements couldn't be more different. The New Urbanists combine hand drawings with a grab bag of feel good planning concepts like “walkability” and “social interaction.” By contrast, the Landscape Urbanists utilize computer renderings and often avoid the standard urban design terminology that is now fairly commonplace. The back and forth gets ugly when charges of “elitism” are levied toward Landscape Urbanists, bringing a Fox News approach to discussions of city planning. We often forget that many non-planners, the people for whom we are planning, are as confused by terms like “placemaking” as they are “ecological flows.”

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On Design

Particular criticism has focused on the Landscape Urbanists' apparent focus on city making as an art. The forms employed and, yes, the graphic representation, take on an air of what Michael Mehaffy calls "art uber alles." But New Urbanist plans deserves a similar critique. The visual language is completely different, but the location of streets, schools, open space, etc., stem from aesthetic decisions. One of my professors at Penn once referred to a New Urbanist master plan as "a work of art." Landscape Urbanists use landscape and ecology to help them make decisions. The New Urbanists use their ideas of traditional communities to make theirs. Both implore an aesthetic lens such that the end result expresses their underlying goals.

The debate has been fascinating and frustrating. But after temporarily immersing myself in the back and forth, I find myself asking the same question expressed by one commenter to the *Boston Globe* article, "BOTH arguments are GOOD. Both are worthy...Build up the urban core?... YES, of course. "Moss over" suburbia? (i.e. retrofit for a greener, energy conscious sprawl?)... of course!"

Every region needs varied forms to offer choices to an extremely diverse population with diverse needs. We need in-town historic districts, high-rise rentals and condos, traditional mixed-use villages, and, yes, suburbs. Even if the economics and policies are changed in the coming decade, for the foreseeable future there will still be people who choose to live in the suburbs. Landscape Urbanism and New Urbanism are two choices among many planning approaches.

The invention and testing of isms have their value as a conceptual exercise. They can help expand the discussion of city building and challenge us to think differently about our work. Good ideas often emerge from these larger movements and find a place in day to day practice.

That said, I've never been much for isms. If that line sounds familiar, it means you know your movies well. In Ferris Bueller's Day Off, Ferris claims "Isms in my opinion are not good. A person should not believe in an -ism, he should believe in himself." A little hokie, but it was the 1980s. In thinking about cities, isms tend to promote a view that is often too rigid and cannot account for the complexity of urban life, despite claims that some approaches allow adaptability and flexibility.

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This leads to the only ism that doesn't get enough academic attention – pragmatism. Pragmatism is not an excuse to do nothing nor is it an excuse to avoid big ideas. Our regions will not be wholly transformed by any one movement or approach. By drawing battle lines we downplay the urban designer's role in understanding the city creatively and responding to the unique qualities of each place. When I'm doing work in North Philadelphia, the question of Landscape Urbanism vs. New Urbanism is not even on my mind. We have old urbanism, and in some neighborhoods, it's not working the way it used to. We can certainly appropriate ideas from different philosophies, but it's important to look beyond the movements and make designs that elevate places incrementally as better versions of themselves.

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