**A Philosophic Ecology : Peter Calthorpe and New Urbanist Design**

According to urban planning scholar Cliff Ellis, “the foundations of the New Urbanism in political theory remain to be fully articulated” (2002, 273). While this paper in no way purports to offer such a “full articulation,” it does investigate one new urbanist practitioner’s attempt to provide a philosophical ground for the movement. I am referring to what Peter Calthorpe calls “philosophic ecology,” a theoretical framework that he suggests provides a vantage point from which to simultaneously critique the built environment and the body politic and also a set of principles that point the way toward urban and political revitalization. Though I am sympathetic to Calthorpe’s project, the linkages between his critique of modernist urban design, on the one hand, and his critique of contemporary politics, on the other, are not clearly explained. I intend to flesh out and elucidate these connections. Moreover, though he implies that his philosophic ecology can supply the remedy to our spatial and political ills, I will demonstrate that much work remains before we can confidently proclaim new urbanism as a successful model.

**A Philosophic Ecology: An Attempt at Definition and the Targets of its Critique**

In launching his critique, Calthorpe argues that modernism possesses its own aesthetic of place, its own unique features, which include “segregation, specialization, centralization and dedication to technology” (1993, 11). Segregation or meticulous partitioning, he notes, is an obsession of modernism. As a professional architect and planner, Calthorpe is acutely aware of this tendency; in regard to zoning, most city ordinances carefully separate industrial, commercial and residential uses of land. And within each separate zone there is further differentiation. For instance, within residential areas, there is often separation of developments based on income and class (16). Segregation, we could say, is the concrete manifestation of specialization[[1]](#footnote-1)--one of modernism’s sacred idols. Centralization, at least insofar as it refers to planning, implies a kind of boiler plate, one-size-fits-all approach; zoning codes and street design tend to be the same from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Centralization implies a lack of attention to the uniqueness of place—differences in geography and tradition are elided in favor of a uniform code. Finally, Clathorpe observes that the built environment is shaped to accommodate dominant technologies, especially the automobile, at the expense of human scale and human needs. Unfortunately, says Calthorpe, our “current aesthetic of place” has generated human spaces that, in addition to being expensive, are destructive of nature and the social fabric: “The costs of sprawl cannot be met by the average new home buyer, by local governments, or by the environment” (28).

There is, however, an alternative to these modernist values and their corresponding problems. According to Calthorpe, the basic principles of this alternative can be gleaned from the field of ecology: “Not the literal ecology which deals with natural systems and seems to stop just short of the human habitat—but a broader, more philosophic ‘ecology’ which teaches that diversity, interdependence, and whole systems are fundamental to health” (11-12). How does Calthorpe apply his philosophic ecology to the challenge of designing built spaces? Two planning strategies—regional planning and mixed-use planning—demonstrate the purchase of this line of ecological thinking. “Communites,” Calthorpe observes, “historically were embedded in nature—it helped to set both the unique identity of each place and the physical limits of the community” (25). Instead of consciously allowing local flora or a natural amenity like a harbor to lend a place its unique flavor, now human settlements are marked by a common set of eyesores and environmental pathologies, namely, “smog, pavement, toxic soil, receding ecologies, and polluted water…” (25). Owing philosophical debts to thinkers like Elisee Reclus, Patrick Geddes and to members of the Regional Planning Association of America (Clarence Stein, Benton MacKaye, Henry Wright, and Lewis Mumford), Calthorpe insists that nature should, once again, “provide the order and underlying structure of the metropolis”:

Ridgelands, bays, rivers, ocean, agriculture, and mountains form the inherent boundaries of our regions. They set the natural edge and can become the internal connectors, the larger common ground of place. They should provide the identity and character that unifies the multiplicity of neighborhoods, communities, towns and cities which now make up metropolitan regions. Preservation and care for a region’s natural ecologies is the fundamental prerequisite of a sustainable and humane urbanism (25).

It is this re-embedding of human communities in nature, allowing their contours and scale to be determined by natural features, their economies and resource use to be carefully integrated with natural systems like watersheds—that is suggested by a philosophic ecology (26).

Beyond advocating for regional planning, Calthorpe’s philosophic ecology also led him to re-think the design of neighborhoods. Urbanists like Jane Jacobs and architects and planners like Calthorpe drew people’s attention to the benefits of mixed use developments. A careful search for a healthy neighborhood metabolism led Jacobs to one “ubiquitous principle”: “…the need of cities for a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially” (1993, 19). Jacobs discovered this healthy metabolism in many traditional urban neighborhoods, just as Calthorpe found his inspiration for pedestrian pockets of transit oriented development in the “traditional town,” where “neighborhoods of housing, parks and schools [were] placed within walking distance of shops, civic services, jobs and transit” (1993, 16). Thus the ecological principles of diversity and interdependence undergird and inform Calthorpe’s new urbanism while, sadly, they continue to be ignored by many other planners and developers.

Concomitant with Calthorpe’s critique of the built environment is a critique of public life. “Our faith in government,” Calthorpe laments, and “the fundamental sense of commonality at the center of any vital democracy is seeping away in suburbs designed more for cars than people, more for market segments than communities” (16). In a social milieu where communal attachments are attenuated, where common interests and purposes remain unexpressed, there is, Calthorpe suggests, a need to architecturally reconstitute the commons, to design a built environment that can remind people of the importance of public life and provide a center point around which energy can be recaptured for and refocused on the common good: “Rather than isolated and residual spaces, the Commons should be brought back to the center of our communities and re-integrated into our daily commercial life. Public spaces should provide the fundamental order of our communities and set the limits to our private domain” (23).

**The Relationship Between Suburban Sprawl and an Anemic Public Life**

Not only does Calthorpe *identify* problems in the realms of urban planning and politics—to wit, suburban sprawl and a flagging civic life—he intimates that the two problems are *related*. Specifically, he implies that this relationship is one of “causation,” though it is unclear which phenomenon is cause, which is effect. If the relationship is indeed one of causation—that is, if Calthorp is not mistaking causation for correlation--does sprawl sap civic life or does democratic fatigue engender decentralized spaces?

In one of the quotations I read earlier—where he claims that “…vital democracy is seeping away in suburbs…”—Calthorpe implies that suburbs are the villain, that a misshapen built environment has sapped democratic life. Though Calthorpe supplies no evidence for this claim, there are, in fact, studies that would seem to bolster his assertion. Whereas the early post-war suburban settlements were marked by high levels of civic participation--pace the writings of Herbert Gans (1967) and William Whyte (1956)--Putnam explains that as “suburbanization continued…the suburbs themselves fragmented into a sociological mosaic, collectively heterogeneous but individually homogeneous, as people…sorted themselves into more finely distinguished ‘lifestyle enclaves,’ segregated by race, class, education, life stage, and so on” (2001, 209). The proliferation of CIDs (common interest developments) and gated communities, starting in the 1980s, only accelerated this trend. As Putnam explains, one might expect these homogeneous settlements to produce greater amounts of social capital, at least of the bonding type, which describes the forging of stronger ties between demographically similar people. Eric Oliver, however, discovered an inverse relationship between social homogeneity and political participation in the suburbs he studied. Oliver’s data led him to conclude that homogeneity *lessens* social conflict and thus *creates fewer incentives* for people to work collaboratively (Putnam 2001, 210). Furthermore, Putnam was able to quantify a “civic sprawl penalty” of roughly twenty percent on civic involvement, due largely to lengthy commute times (215). This evidence suggests that there is, indeed, a nexus between settlement type and the health of civic life; specifically, suburban life appears to diminish social capital.

Calthorpe also makes the opposite claim, namely that “the rise of the modern suburb is in part a *manifestation* of a deep cultural and political shift away from public life” (emphasis mine, 37). Here the argument is turned on its head. What was earlier the cause has now become the effect: an anemic civic life breeds suburbs. In Calthorpe’s book this remains an assertion only. As it turns out, however, there is *also* evidence to support this proposition. For instance, one indicator of community or civic health is its openness to “difference”—ethnic, religious or racial. Lizabeth Cohen, in her book on postwar America, *A Consumers’ Republic*, observes that race was a leading factor in postwar suburbanization. According to Cohen, a “steady influx of African-Americans to northern and western cities during the war, and the Second Great Migration out of the South that followed it, helped to motivate urban whites to leave” (2003, 212). Cohen notes that, nationally, for every two non-whites who moved to an area, three whites exited; between 1950 and 1960, nine of the ten largest cities lost residents, while their metropolitan areas grew (212). In 1962, the director of Newark’s civil rights agency mused that “the free enterprise system lurking in many American hearts has provided more moves to all-white suburbs” than decisions to remain rooted in community—notwithstanding a “billion words of love” that vainly tried to promote “the spiritual advantages of economic and integrated city living” (213). The phenomenon of white flight, in short, is one piece of evidence for a narrowing of social interests to the economic and for the repudiation of an integrated, democratic community.

What can we conclude, then, about the relationship between sprawl and an emaciated public life? Significant regional differences probably render *a general question* about origins—of which came first, sprawl or civic enfeeblement—unanswerable. Overall, however, one can say that the relationship appears to be symbiotic: suburbs may already be a sign or symptom of a turning away from public life but their growth and influence on society further erodes civic community. In short, Calthorpe’s diagnoses is that Americans face a vicious cycle: people abandon community for “house fortress[es],” resulting in isolation; and “the more isolated people become”—that is, the “less they share with others unlike themselves,”--the more fearful and suspicious they become (1993, 37). And--we can close the circle for Calthorpe--the more fearful they become, the more they abandon community.

By intentionally designing housing that is not “fortress-like” but instead seeks to facilitate community interaction (for example, by significantly reducing setbacks and making houses address the street and sidewalk, adding front porches, mixing uses and housing types, ramping up densities etc.) Calthorpe’s and other new urbanist projects will, in theory, minimize isolation and fear. “Building,” we can say, is at the very core of his theory of social transformation. That is, Calthorpe designs and builds spaces that he hopes will interrupt the vicious cycle of sprawl (with its environmental costs) and civic decline and serve as models that can positively “leaven” the landscape, generating virtuous cycles in which the built environment preserves ecosystems and nurtures, rather than inhibits, civic commitment.

**Does a Philosophic Ecology make a Democratic Difference?**

Having fleshed out a bit more how poor urban design and a diminished public spirit are related, we turn our attention to the next question—how Calthorpe’s philosophic ecology might fortify democratic life. While it was not difficult to understand how his philosophic ecology informs urban planning—focusing greater attention on regional-level (i.e. system level) planning and on natural structures that can support and orient human communities—it is less obvious how his philosophic ecology nourishes democracy. It is to this part of Calthorpe’s theory that we now turn.

The first (and I believe the least persuasive) option would be to attempt to anchor democratic politics in an explicitly natural ecology. Various green and non-green theorists have drawn political and ethical principles from observations of natural ecosystems. As John Dryzek has pointed out, however, the last century has witnessed the “ascription” of nearly every conceivable political and social model to nature:

Social Darwinists saw in nature a reflection of naked capitalism. Marx and Engels saw evolutionary justification for dialectical materialism. In 1915 the U.S. political scientist Henry Jones Ford saw collectivist justification for the organic state. Nazis saw justification for genocide. Microeconomists see something like market transactions in the maximization of inclusive fitness. Eco-anarchists from Kropotkin to Murray Bookchin see in nature models only of cooperation and mutualism. Roger Masters has recently suggested that liberal democracy is “natural” in its flexibility in responding to changing environments. Ecofeminists see caring and nurturing, at least in female nature. And so forth. In short, just about every human political ideology and political-economic system has at one time or another been justified as consistent with nature, especially nature as represented by Darwinism (1998, 588).

As Dryzek makes clear, nature is like a mirror: to those who gaze into it, nature reflects back their own political preferences. It is important to keep in mind that Calthorpe tries to shield himself from the criticism that he, too, embraces a naïve “ecologism.” Though he does state that “ecology has come to represent the real counterpoint” to modern and post-modern planning and politics, he insists that his is a “philosophic” ecology—presumably, though this needs further elaboration, one step removed from simply equating natural processes and human politics (1993, 11-12).

How then *should* we interpret Calthorp’s philosophic ecology, in regard to its political implications? Stated succinctly, I believe we ought to view his philosophic ecology as a *declaration of design assumptions*. Every urban planner—just like every political theorist and constitution drafter—makes assumptions about their target audience, their clients or citizens. In social contract theory, to take a familiar example, the so-called state of nature is a heuristic device with which political theorists reveal, at least in a rudimentary way, the values they seek to protect and their philosophical anthropology, both of which will determine, to a large extent, the type of government they prescribe. These presuppositions, of course, are not immune from contestation. One thinks for instance of Rousseau’s accusation that the miserable inhabitants of Hobbes’ state of nature cut a distorted human figure, are not the true, aboriginals—the good, compassionate creatures Rousseau describes in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*--but rather the tragic progeny of an increasingly competitive and acquisitive modern society (1988, 27). In short, there is and will always be philosophical sparring over premises that seek to describe the quality of human agency and the relative importance of certain social goods and values. Calthorp’s philosophic ecology can be understood, then, as a set of premises that act simultaneously as a critique of and corrective to modernism’s individualistic bias.

If we want to appreciate how Calthorpe’s theory promotes public spirit, we first need to see its “negative” or critical aim—what Nietzsche might call its serviceability as a hammer. There are a number of ways to attack assumptions: one way is to demonstrate that those assumptions, and the policies they support, lead to unacceptable consequences; this is the main thrust of Calthorpe’s work. The folly of methodological individualism (though he does not use this exact phraseology)—championed by a neoliberal or libertarian ideology—is, Calthorpe complains, palpable. Suburban sprawl, a landscape congenial to and defended by many libertarians (e.g. Conte 2000 and Cox 1999), continues to destroy habitat and dissipate precious energy resources. Indeed, a libertarian-leaning political ideology has privileged human development over the natural environment and private wealth and property over the public weal. As a result, cooperative efforts to articulate and promote the common good have been stymied, he insists. These social, political and environmental consequences cast doubt, therefore, on the logic of a “sprawling” landscape’s underlying assumptions.

For methodological individualism, Calthorpe substitutes his philosophic ecology—specifically, his view that humans are *interdependent* and that they are best understood as being ensconced in *whole systems* (11). Calthorpe’s position is a shot across the bow at thinkers like Robert Nozick, whose work is emblematic of a philosophy that eschews notions of interdependence and holistic thinking. According to Nozick, individuals are entitled to possess anything they have acquired justly (via a Lockean-inspired labor theory of value) or anything that has been transferred to them justly, as a result of a contract or gift (1971, 151). Society, in short, has no valid claim on or right to—through the mechanism of re-distribution or regulation--any part of the individual’s wealth and property “justly” acquired. The underlying premises of Nozick’s theory diverge profoundly from those found in Calthorpe’s philosophic ecology. In Nozick’s model, individuals are self-made men and women, who owe nothing to society as a whole; taxation is often characterized as forced labor (169). In the rare event that gains are ill-gotten—through stealing or enslavement—Nozick argues that a principle of “rectification” would compensate victims, though he spends all of one page in his classic *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, discussing the theory of rectification, the vast majority of which is a litany of objections to and implementation problems with said principle (152-53). For someone who espouses a philosophic ecology, by contrast, the notion that individuals are so “entitled”—that they own themselves or are somehow self-constituted--is nonsensical. Like most communitarians and civic republicans (see, for instance, Pettit [1997], Sandel [1998]), the proponent of philosophic ecology would likely point out that individuals are speakers of a language (or languages), participants in a cultural tradition (or traditions), members of a family unit, and the beneficiaries of an education and other institutional assistance. Individuals are, in the idiom of Calthorpe’s philosophic ecology, part of a web of interdependence which sustain them and to which they owe some obligations. To put it bluntly, Nozick’s and related political theories are predicated on flawed sociology *and* historical amnesia. This critique, I maintain, is only implicit in Calthorpe’s philosophic ecology. Calthorpe’s primary rebuttal is perhaps best construed as “architectural”—pointing out how our modern, individualistic ethic has resulted in built spaces that are destructive of both place and community.

**Philosophic Ecology and New Urbanism: Promises still to Keep**

In practice, however, how successful has new urbanism been in ameliorating the problems produced by modernism? That is, are new urbanist developments really more public-spirited? Do they really pay environmental dividends? In regard to the civic question, the answer, at first glance, would be affirmative. Recall the evidence we considered earlier that pointed to a decrease in social capital in suburban enclaves. It stands to reason that the new urbanist goal of reducing social homogeneity—the culprit, according to Oliver’s study-- by including a mixture of housing types and costs within each development would stop the civic hemoraging. Furthermore, Putnam was able to quantify a “civic sprawl penalty” of roughly twenty percent on civic involvement, due largely to lengthy commute times. New urbanism attempts to reduce commute times by combining residential and work activities, shopping and entertainment. Thus, the design of new urbanism would appear to diminish the civic sprawl penalty and promote civic involvement.

Nevertheless, studies of the attitudes and experiences of residents in several new urbanist settlements have yielded very mixed results. A very brief sample will serve to illustrate the ambiguity. Barbara Brown and Vivian Cooper, for example, studied a new urbanist development about ten miles outside Salt Lake City and compared it to a more traditional suburb nearby. On the one hand, the new urbanist residents showed a statistically higher level of “neighborliness”—defined as “knowing neighbors, borrowing from neighbors, visiting, speaking and socializing with neighbors, watching neighbors’ homes and expressing a willingness to improve the neighborhood”—but, on the other hand, these same residents demonstrated *no* statistically significantly higher “sense of community,” as “measured on a twelve item scale,” including such indicators as “shared emotional connection” or “needs fulfillment” (Sander 2002, 220). Another study, conducted by Looney Ricks Kiss, compared Harbor Town, a new urbanist-inspired development close to downtown Memphis with Riverwood Farms, a development of “similar vintage” located approximately thirty miles away. In this head-to-head comparison, Harbor Town (the new urbanist development) was the decisive winner: “Slightly over a quarter of Riverwood residents reported a lack of neighborhood feeling (26 percent) versus fewer than 5 percent of Harbor Town respondents. One quarter of Riverwood respondents felt ‘isolated from others in their community,’ significantly higher than the 15 percent who felt isolated in Harbor Town. Harbor Town residents [also] had larger social networks among neighbors…” (221). According to Thomas Sander, however, Kiss’s results could easily be explained by successful marketing campaigns that attracted *already* civic-minded people to Harbor Town. Indeed, Sander contends that evidence for a positive civic impact of new urbanist developments are not yet compelling, largely because of such “selection effects” (224).

If the jury is out on the civic benefits of new urbanism, what can we say about its environmental impact? To begin, it is important to observe that new urbanism is often ridiculed for its nostalgic, moderate density projects nestled in suburban areas—pace the Kentlands or Laguna West (Ellis 2002, 269). This ignores new urbanism’s very explicit commitment to urban infill and a vast array of projects in urban cores. Still, according to Sander, the early new urbanist sites “tended to be exclusively ‘greenfield’ developments” and the “vast majority are still greenfield” (2002, 215). If this is true, then the new urbanist design principle of establishing sharper edges for communities (or UGBs [urban growth boundaries]) is undermined, and so is its goal of protecting natural resources (Calthorpe 1993, 73). Moreover, new urbanist “use mixing”—of commercial, residential, and recreational types—was intended to reduce dependence on automobiles. The reality, however, is that new urbanism advocates are rarely in total control of a region’s or city’s plan—making it difficult for new urbanist planners to guarantee adequate mass transit alternatives for residents or to deliver on promises that adequate retail and employment opportunities will be close at hand. Without the serious curtailment of auto use, not only are the civic dividends left unpaid but also, significantly, the resource conservation and carbon emission reduction dimensions are left unredeemed.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to highlight some of the empirical evidence for Calthorpe’s claims about the civic deficits of traditional suburban developments and to elaborate on and to clarify the relationship between his critiques of modernist planning and contemporary politics. Though I have expressed sympathy with Calthorpe’s new urbanism, I have also tried to point out the project’s weaknesses—its need to adduce further evidence that its designs are actually having a positive impact on the natural environment and civic life. I contend, however, that, despite its tendency to oversell its designs and its need to improve implementation, new urbanism is still a better alternative than the status quo. To their credit, Calthorpe and other new urbanists approach planning with a set of explicit commitments to protect the environment, conserve natural resources and improve civic health. Those who care about the impact of the built environment on our social and bio-physical worlds, then, should continue to offer support and constructive criticism, with the hope that new urbanists can achieve their worthy goals.

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1. Weber (1958), of course, was one of the first social critics to observe that specialization logically flows from the collapse or disenchantment of a premodern world in which the cultural spheres of science, ethics and aesthetics were believed to be nourished by a single source, were mutually and harmoniously reinforcing. In the modern world, by contrast, people replenish and re-create their material conditions through increasingly complex processes and supply-chains that are highly specialized. Consequently, the discourses of science, law and art have become esoteric and barely accessible to the non-specialist (Habermas, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)