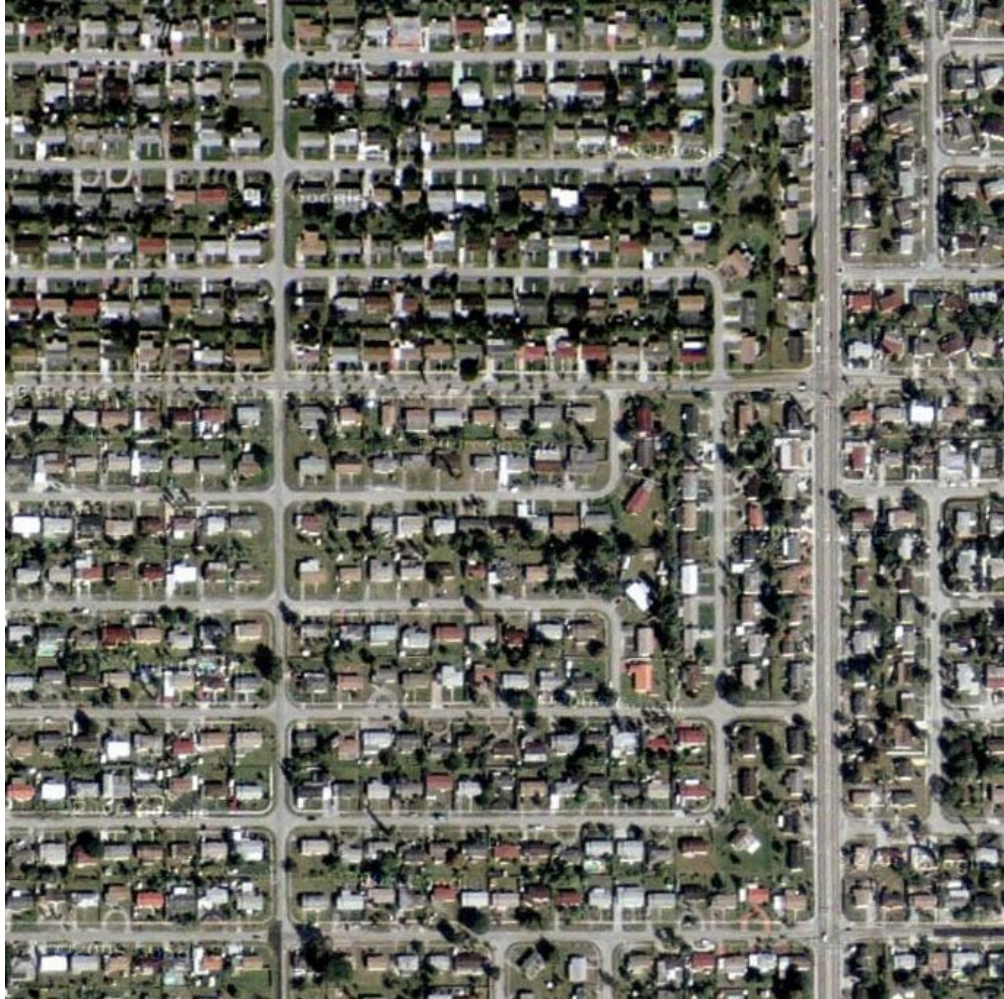


Recapitulating the suburb

Tom Bosschaert - 902b paper



Miami, Florida, USA, long street suburb

My grandmother is a riot. She always finds the most fun way of looking at a situation, and is then capable of placing a well crafted joke in an uncomfortable silence to crack everybody up. She is a smart woman, although never formally educated, she taught herself accounting and business practices to stand by her husband who ran a construction company by himself. They survived a world war together with a child and now her husband passed away, she remained strong and independent and travels all over the world, visiting Asia, South Africa, and many parts in Europe, but in the last ten years she has started to feel lost. Globalization has become tangible and she feels alienated by this world of fiber optics and curtain walls. For her, all the things that had any value are replaced by the new, and the new has not yet established value by sustained memory. The new is empty and devoid of smells, touch and signs of life. It is not that she is against new development, or the invention and construction of new things, but she feels sorry that things which had more value in its previous state were demolished to make way for things that sometimes can be perceived as deliberately sterile. New Urbanism seems to want to cater for these perceptions exactly, and so does Everyday Urbanism.

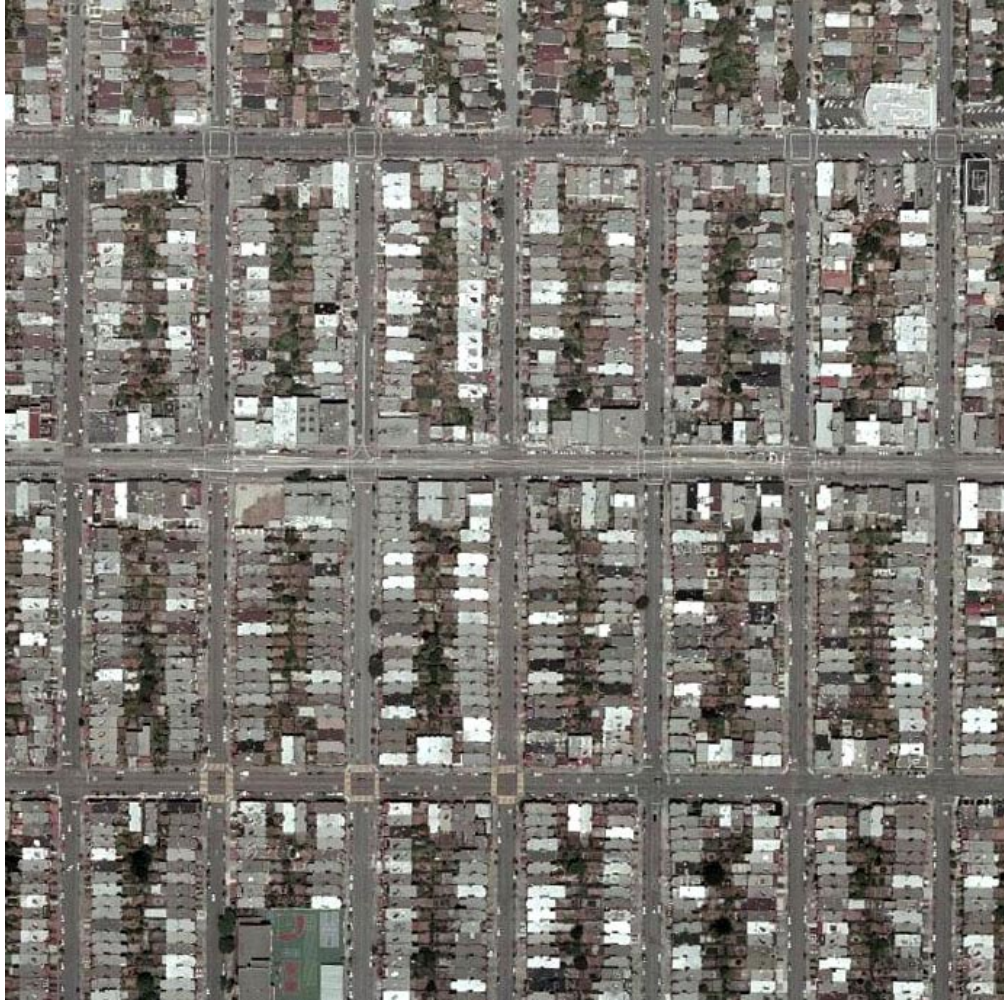
The new urbanists have acknowledged the need and importance of a sense of home, a sense of place and the delicacy with which to approach the existing urban fabric. At the same time, there is a split in the arguments and results of the New Urbanists, where an extreme result such as the Disney suburb in Florida, Celebration, can hardly be seen as



Duncraig, Perth, Australia, snake suburb

part of the same theoretical intent. On the other hand there are the arguments for redevelopment and preservation, backed up by the arguments for a re-greening of the city and sustainable design, for instance as voiced by Timothy Beatley. All of this is hovering in the fuzzy cloud that is called New Urbanism, and leaking into Everyday Urbanism, but I wish to distill a more direct and stronger argument resulting from these various stand points in a personal vision to the city and suburb. By looking at pivotal issues of New or Everyday Urbanism, by adjusting and augmenting them with new ones, as well as examples of these issues in the built environment, we may arrive at a coherent direction to test and built upon further in the future. I wish to develop this through a set of constants, and then looking at two relevant examples of developments that come very close to this vision.

When we look at recent developer built suburbs, it is hard to not feel like my grandmother does. The rows of endlessly repeated houses on a millimetered curb, with the same type of tree repeating itself over and over. We have the variation of the block, long street, concentric, snake street suburb, and a handful of other ones. Getting lost in the forest of houses when visiting friends in the suburb is a common exercise, and rarely do we expect to be surprised by anything if we do. The reality of our existence is that there's so many humans on the face of the earth, and so little initiative between us to change it. After so many years of looking at the layout of suburbs, isn't it time to look further, through the



San Francisco, USA, block grid suburb

geometry, and see the planter on the sidewalk, and the kid's tricycle on the lawn? New Urbanism proposes that by looking back at old European cities we can eliminate the largest problem that planning has to cater for, which is the car. By creating a community where housing, commercial and business ventures are mixed, we can walk to work, or take a bicycle, and thereby eliminate the need to use the car. This would free us from a lot of infrastructural demands concerning town planning. The New Urbanist Charter (1993), by Peter Katz, tells us:

“We stand for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy.”

Unfortunately, the charter goes further than that. Through sentences like “urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history”, a conservative picture is drawn. There is often little place for expressions of our time, rather than those of the past, and is felt by some to be elitist, wasteful and in denial of the achievements of recent times. Also, the majority of New Urbanist developments have resulted in areas where highly restrictive local policies forbid the leisurely and personal living experience a house can offer. There can be rules for how many flags one can hang

out their window, how often the grass must be mowed, and for seasonal decoration. In a sense, this over regulation has turned some suburbs into a place framed by rules, if not literally by walls and gates, negating the positive values that were attempted to be reached.

Everyday Urbanism builds upon New Urbanism but places high importance on scale, human interaction, and, most important, an emphasis on non-restricted organization. This means that the city or suburb would allow for spontaneity, local initiative and a more personal experience by all users. This progressive and unrestricted philosophy can be seen in many new urban developments in the Netherlands especially. It builds on poetry, literature and sensory experience rather than rule, diagram and plan. Everyday Urbanism does not express itself in a larger scale, and only offers solutions for local effect. Hence, it does not offer solutions for comprehensive implementation of sustainability theories or larger cultural issues.

New and Everyday Urbanism have a lot to offer, and Everyday Urbanism seems keen on solving some of the issues that have crept up on New Urbanism over the years. However some parts are mutually exclusive, and instead of building upon and revising old foundations, I propose restating the purpose and goals of our achievements, and create a new, holistic entity from the fragments.

Let's start with identifying the constants that make up our new vision of urbanism, by looking at scale, micro and macro, economics and their power structures, global psychology of living in places and buying houses, social interaction and current developments in society and traffic and environmental concerns. Let's get rid of some old counter-arguments and establish some new perspectives on these aspects.



1_ SCALE

We are all the same scale, and we're not that big. While this sounds trivial, it is often forgotten in approaching the city. Looking from Camillo Sitte to Le Corbusier one can detect an almost diagonal opposition of statements, but one of the most striking is that Sitte acknowledges the scale of the human being whereas Le Corbusier does not. One of the most obvious flaws of the modernist urban plan is the lack of human scale. The vast repetitive landscape with large living towers and its separation of transportation routes and pedestrian life creates an almost eerie wide landscape that does not acknowledge the scale of humans, and only considers the enormity of the plan. Although critiquing the modernists, the situationists never recovered that scale, and only in the post-post modern era was this problem addressed, for instance by Christopher Alexander in 'A Pattern Language'. But even there scale is not specifically mentioned although it affects the whole human perception. The split between the profession of architecture and urban design have caused a scale gap to appear. The urban designer thinks large, and develops a plan that scale, to be interpreted and executed for a large part by the architect. The architect thinks either too small, and creates a disconnect between the actual built work and the general idea of the urban plan, or gets swept along by the urban plan and ignores the human scale. In order to reestablish our physical connection to the city, we have to examine the idea of scale, and direct human perception, but not be limited to it. We have to allow scale to establish itself and create feedback systems that counterbalance extremes.



2_ INDIVIDUALITY AND MARKET

In discussions about sprawl and the clone-stamp nature of new suburbs there always arises the discussion of economic viability and the end-user's choice. There's always someone in the discussion claiming that the populace wants to buy a house that is identical to that of the rest of the neighborhood. The justification for this reasoning is invariably that the newly built suburbs are being sold, so therefore there must be a demand for it, and the developers will cater to what the most demand is for. However, when studying consumer behavior, which is the study of the buying and decision making process of the consumers of mass products, this behavior is explained differently. When a consumer is in want of a certain product, he or she will gage the scope of choices available to him or her, and make a decision based on this scope. This means that if the scope is very limited, the choice will obviously fall in that limited range. It also means that if there is a very small offering of something outside of the scope, it will not easily be detected and taken up in this scope. In essence, the consumer will buy things that a) have an apparent quality and value for money, b) are available to them and c) solve their individual needs. If developers start building completely different houses that conform to those three rules, they will be sold just as much as the unvaried ones, and there is no reason to believe that they won't. This leaves room for innovation, experimentation and a wide variety of plans, that will assist in creating a sense of place in the United States, where this variety mostly seems to lack.



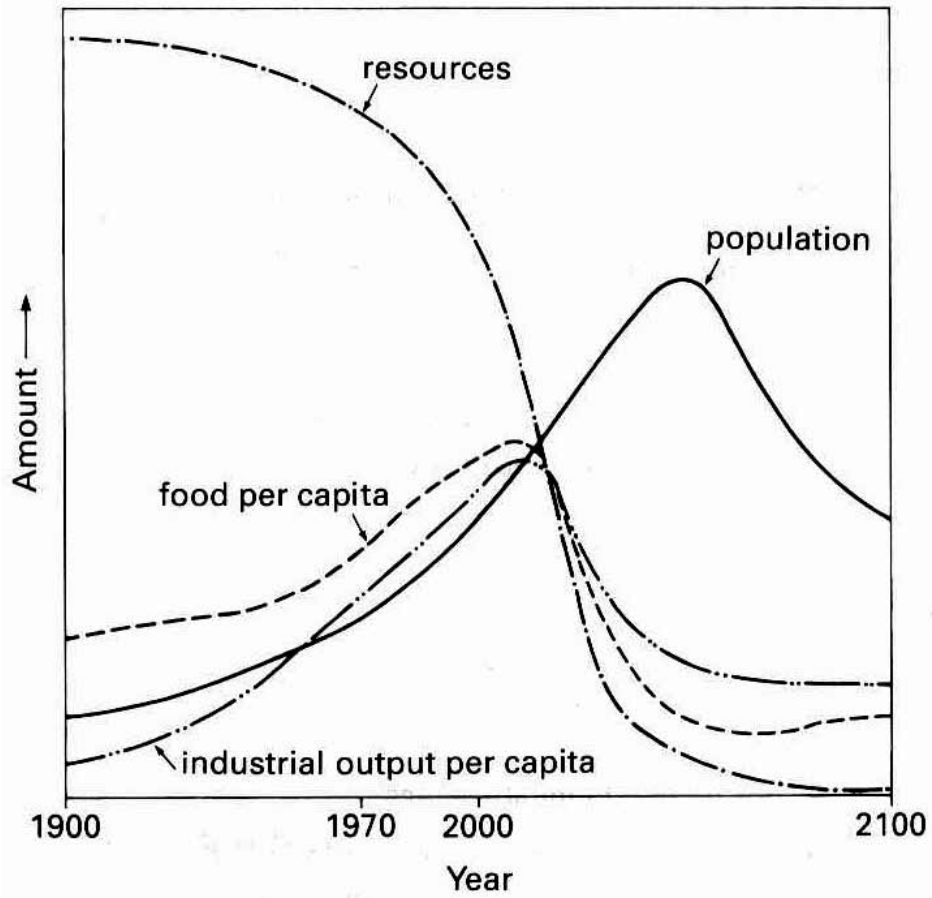
3_ MIXED LIVING

We live in an era where mixed use is preferred to single use. Every hip architect creates mixed use complexes with intricate relations between the various functions. Indeed, it is one of the main ideas of New Urbanism. Living, shopping, working and entertainment are rolled into one entity, all in walking distance from one another. What we have not yet done is provide for mixed living. Not a new theory but certainly a rare occurrence in the built environment is where economic, demographic, religious and cultural opposites live side by side. The only places where we find this is in the centers of old European cities, where the results of this cohabitation can be studied well. There are several reasons for wanting to try to merge all these different walks of life. When we look at Jane Jacobs' descriptions of the living conditions in cities and the way a community can form, and the safety and functional uses it can bring, we can say that a varied demographic creates a more uniform occupation during the day. While some elderly stay at home most of the day, in the morning the school children leave right after the fathers. A little later the students, who will return at random moments during the day, as well as traverse the street late at night. Imagining a plethora of scenarios, no one better than Jacobs to describe these events herself. However a mixed demographic is necessary to sustain such activity, besides a certain level of density. In addition, the incircumventable phenomenon of rich neighborhoods being better maintained than poor ones would vanish, and a greater understanding and interac-

tion between various layers of society would be a result, as even Engels described in his observations of the misery of the working classes in England at the end of the nineteenth century.

Single target communities have the nature of growing in on themselves. Whole collectives alienate from their society, producing gated communities and a frightened populace. It also is largely responsible for the endless repetition of suburbs. A narrow demographic and economic target results in the same type of house over and over, losing its sense of place and fueling the despair of a globalized world.

THE LIMITS TO GROWTH



Graph from 'Limits to Growth', Rome Group, 1972

4_ THE ENVIRONMENT

“Limits to Growth” was published in 1972, and thirty five years after the publication of the report commissioned by the Rome Group led by Aurelio Peccei, and we still haven’t got our act together. By now it’s quite a bit too late, there are many things that cannot be reversed. One of, if not the, largest threats to our continued existence on this ball of shiny water is overpopulation. We have not been able to control our population growth resulting in increased consumption, occupation of land and an ecological footprint that exceeds the total area of habitable land of our planet. What is urban design’s answer to such a predicament, even though it could not possibly hope to solve it? It must be possible for all professions to examine their influence on these matters and change their immediate directions to counteract some of these effects. For urban design it means three clear changes in direction. First, since growth cannot be stopped immediately, at least limit the consumption of new land, and increase density to save energy. Redevelop old suburbs and increase their density rather than build new low density ones. Second, preserve and redevelop existing structures. While perhaps economically less attractive than razing and rebuilding, from a global sustainability standpoint the redevelopment of existing structures is a logical action. Third, the application of thoroughly sustainable developments and research to newly built structures and created suburbs, or rather, the retrofitting of existing suburbs with these methods and technologies, as outlined by for instance Timothy Beatley.



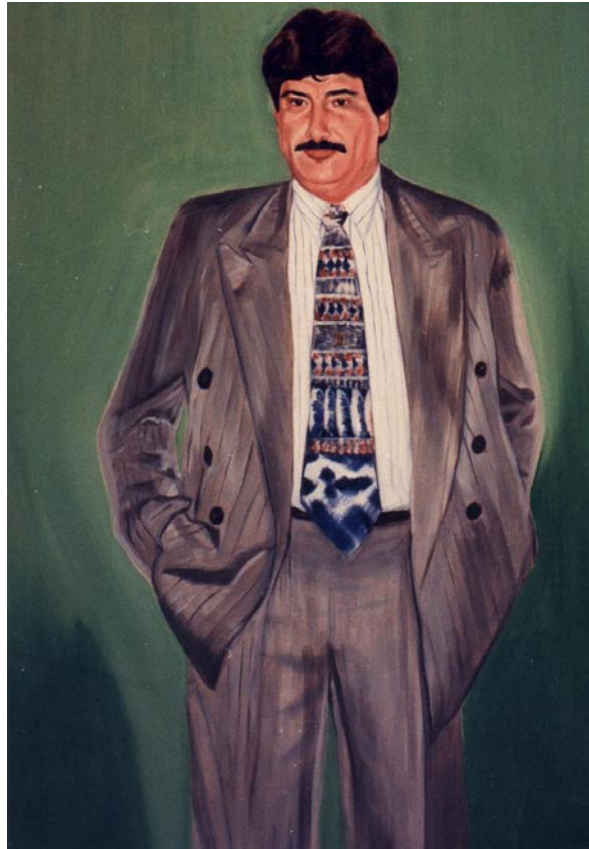
5_ SENSE OF PLACE AND HOME

With the increasing disillusionment of the younger generations, resulting in harder and more violent behavior and increasing demise of any kind of value or self control, a new question arises how we, as designers, can assist in this troubling development. Although primarily caused by the effects of globalization, the destruction of the American dream and the disillusionment of the government, there can also be appointed an urban side of the problem. The United States in its entirety has decreased its local differences in favor for a national toned down tv-created locale. Fueled by the noble but badly interpreted post-modernism era, and more specifically the theories of Venturi & Scott-Brown, advertisement, corporate culture, homogenization and the loss of local idiosyncrasies have prevailed throughout the United States. With a young population increasingly unable to identify with their immediate locale, and more and more with the culture as shown on tv, which has gained momentum as a messenger of fear and violence, the hometown becomes more and more a-place-where-one-happens-to-be rather than a-place-worth-preserving-and-developing.

Not only is there a continuous oscillation between what Slavoj Zizek in his essay 'Welcome to the Desert of the Real' calls the want of the real and the fantasy, there is also the confusion of it. Because of the increasing globalization and growth of those factors that



control the world, a notion of changing them is as fantastical as thinking you can swim to the moon. Still, it is the real and tangible that has direct effect on us, but not the other way around. We are only subjects, only by a stretch of terminology and imagination active participants. Hence the increasing disillusionment by the younger generation, who has lost all hope, belief and prospect of change. The breakdown of the childhood dream results in a loss of faith in everything, and an ever violent younger population arises. This is only strengthened by governments who more and more often fail to cover their criminal and corruptive tracks, giving an example of terror and deceit. The cinema, that's us, our lives strapped to the chair, with long boring incapacitated moments while we stand by and watch the hero's of today's reality butcher our fellow movie watchers. We hide behind materialism, righteous beliefs in environmentalism, chicken breeding or architectural theory, realizing too well that it is a game to pass the time rather than to solicit change to secure our future generations an inhabitable world. We see the real, and are forced to live in it, but large parts of that real are so fantastical that we couldn't imagine it.



6_ CLIENT, DEVELOPER AND ARCHITECT

Whatever the right thing is, developers are not inclined to do it. The reality of a free market, and of greedy and lazy people, makes the marketplace a benefit for the seller rather than the buyer of a product. The result is that, as mentioned before, even though something other than what is currently on the market might sell just as good, the path traveled is mostly the one with the certified money stamp, hence, the conservative one. If we are to change our environment, so must our development. Just as the split between city builder and architect creates scale gaps, the divide between designer, seller and buyer creates a gap. In this case between the buyer and the designer, and between the global interest of the population and the specific interest of the developer. The problem with a completely free market is that quality will suffer from the notion that a lot of money is better than some money, and that, especially in a low competition environment such as city development, ethical and quality standards are up to the personal interpretation of the developer. The only tools the public has to actually control and safeguard quality in building and design is through law, in the form of zoning, building codes and economic incentives. If we wish to pursue a vastly better future, with better city planning and improved building quality, we will need to either enforce it through law, which may take a very long time, be opposed by a conservative public, and is always too late to respond, or establish it by doing it ourselves. If more architects and planners would take the helm and develop properties



Seaside, Florida

themselves, the circle becomes one step smaller. The circle would be closed if the client, builder and designer were one and the same. There is no substitute for first hand experience of one's own design and the necessity of dealing with it, either positive or negative. Many of the suburbs which have entered the history books have an unusual command structure at their base. Seaside, the well known and arguably first New Urbanist town, was owned by Robert Davis' grandfather before the land was developed by him, and designed by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. Sea Ranch came from the mind of a potential buyer of the house, Al Boeke, as an environmentally sound way of inhabiting the land, and he convinced a developer, Castle and Cooke, to execute his plans, which were given more solid form in a later stage by sympathizing architect Charles Moore.



Vincent Scully, middle

Having defined these constants, we can combine these in a coherent whole, and extract an approach for new urban development. Looking at current examples can teach us about the effects of some of these constants. In the discussions that currently line the horizon of the urban debate, we see a number of these constants surface, mostly in the aforementioned New Urbanists. However, the New Urbanists is a large and scattered group, with many different faces. For instance, one of the famous progenitors of New Urbanism, Vincent Scully, is mostly concerned with the preservation of the historic idea, promoting the application of types and styles of previous eras that turned out to be successful to new developments. Scully skillfully weaves the New Urbanist program as an extension of his own theories, which has been a resistance of a modern expression throughout the years, and resistance of the car. The lack of further engagement with the more profoundly restructuring arguments of the New Urbanists causes the perception that Scully is partially the theoretical creator of the new high class enclaves such as Celebration by Disney, which in all fairness has nothing to do, but rather goes straight against all of the constants as identified above. Although suburbs such as Celebration apply the historic styles as promoted by Scully, their gated nature, elitist and exclusive admission requirements, low density and low demographic variation is rather an escapist reaction to the changes in the world than an attempt to find a sustainable solution. Although proclaimed as a heterotopia, it is surprisingly unilateral in its intent, to place well heeled people in their fantasy land of the past.

The destination your soul
has been searching for.

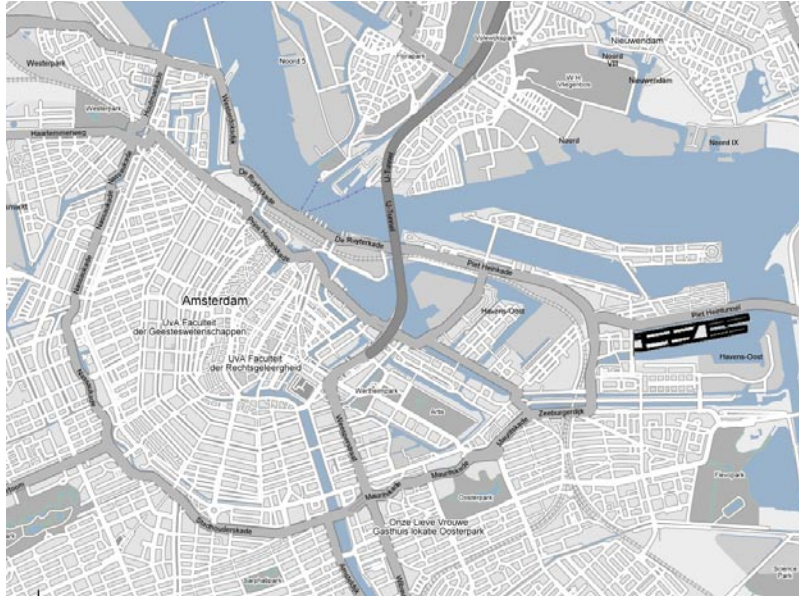


Celebration, FL



The inclusion of high tech equipment and possibilities does not make a heterotopia, just provides for the increasing need for comfort and luxury of its elite population.

Discarding therefore new developments proclaimed as New Urbanist such as Celebration, and to some extent the theories of Vincent Scully, we need to look at some other examples of New Urbanist developments.



BORNEO SPORENBURG

Certainly developments overseas, such as Borneo Sporenburg in Amsterdam as orchestrated by landscape design firm West 8, and in particular Adriaan Geuze, cannot be imagined as having sprung from the fingers of Scully. Still, it is perceived as a result of New Urbanism. Struggling with several shortcomings and restrictions, such as the inability of the plan to include small scale commerce due to a contract with a nearby mall, and insufficient green space, Borneo Sporenburg can best be seen as an example of a conceptual development model. Although in this case there was no reduction in the number of chief roles in the project (developer, designer, client), but even an expansion (government, developer, planner, architect, client), there are several key issues that make Borneo Sporenburg an exciting example. First, there is the reversal of roles. West 8 was commissioned by the city to make the plan. Therefore, although the developers had a say in the design, West 8 was not subject to their veto. This created a more ideal circumstance for the design to be developed in, which is one of the reasons of the emergence of the variety and progressive nature of many new Dutch suburbs. Mixed living is covered by the Dutch requirement of having at least 30% social housing in any new development. Since social housing does not create much revenue, and is most often an obligatory expense rather than a profit, the more expensive houses end up paying partly for the social housing, resulting in the rich and poor living among each other. Another important factor about Borneo Sporenburg can



be identified. West 8 did something many architects and planners find hard to do. They orchestrated rather than design for and restrict the architects that were to materialize the plan. In order to do justice to, and follow the example of the variation of the inner city of Amsterdam, no less than one hundred architects contributed designs for the plan. A part was developed by designs brought forth by the architect of each buyer individually. This resulted in a highly varied streetscape, successful in addressing a modern suburb near the old city center of Amsterdam, a proper, human scale and the ability for the inhabitants to choose both by the numerous different types offered by the developers, or, if budget permitted, design one of their own. This created, in a limited way, a mixture of demographic as well, as is familiar in the old parts of Amsterdam the new development aspires to. So far, Borneo Sporenburg complies to five of the seven constants as defined above. What we still miss here is a more thorough regulation of the environmental principles as set out above, and a lack of mixed use, a result from the contract with the local business. There are also some other, more basic problems with Borneo Sporenburg, that are unrelated to the conceptual ideal but circumstance of location and bad planning, such as a lack of public space (because the water was defined as public space, 'blue for green', and each house has an internal courtyard), but these problems could be easily remedied when this design system would be applied in other places.

What would Borneo Sporenburg, as a close example of what we want to achieve, look like

Facades housing on water side, photographs by West 8/Jeroen Musch



when it was larger, had more ecological fundamentals and was based on mixed use? I don't think it is hard to imagine. A place as foreseen by the New Urbanists, where walking takes over as the main method of transportation, but without all the rules of habitation. With the sense of scale that Everyday Urbanism brought to the table, as well as freedom of movement and programming of public and private space. A more varied, colorful neighborhood, where Jane Jacobs would feel at home as well as my grandmother. Where there is room for various types of social housing in between a multitude of more expensive expressions of architecture. A place where one is aware of their surroundings and has a connection to it, where lack of variation and quality of the built environment does not stand in the way of a healthy development of a neighborhood. Where a cleaner and more natural way of living replaces the use of fossil fuels that releases from us the guilt of the destruction of next generation's future.





masterplan nieuw crooswijk

NIEUW CROOSWIJK

If we could find ways to apply this frame of mind to existing suburbs, increase their density, recognise the useful and the wasteful, and deal with them accordingly, give them a rightful place that is their own rather than a copy of another place, we could be actively restructuring our existing world based on these models rather than just attempt to build them anew. Existing suburbs have an enormous advantage when restructured rather than new suburbs, and that is that it already has a population and its natural resources are matured. Trees are large and beautiful, and the new suburb that emerges from the old will from day one be able to enjoy these to full extent. But it will not be easy. Where Borneo Sporenburg was a new development, another design by West 8, Nieuw Crooswijk in Rotterdam, is experiencing difficulty with the existing population. Several factors come into play, among which the destruction of recently renovated older buildings, the necessity of a large part of the existing inhabitants having to relocate permanently, and the gentrification of the area by building more expensive houses in place of cheaper ones. Although having been met with a lot of resistance, the plan is being executed as we speak, and once completed, only a few will keep looking back. The large suburb of Rotterdam is an improvement on a multitude of levels, a welcome addition to a city with so many urban difficulties. Nieuw Crooswijk will consist of five completely distinct neighborhoods, usually on the scale of just a few long streets. Mixed use is ensured by house types that will allow



for private businesses within the houses themselves (like in Borneo Sporenburg), ateliers, some office buildings along the larger residential streets and some non commercial service buildings and institutions. Parking lots are reclaimed as parkland, and replaced by a number of parking methods such as underground parking under parks and souterrain parking. Existing streets are strengthened within the city fabric and their character extended, existing monuments and landmarks, of which several normal houses will be retained (about 20%), a highrise tower will stand along the main through road, amidst two and three level housing introducing a variation in scale. Vision lines have been considered, as well as increased traffic flow around the suburb, and local restaurants and bars. Mixed living is realised through a variation between social housing (again, 30%) and several levels of upmarket housing, among which small one-parent houses to large freestanding full family houses, all of which a part for sale and part rental. Apartments, rowhousing and free standing houses will be intermixed in the same neighborhoods, and variation in style and expression is once more achieved by the choice of a multitude of architects and the freedom of selection of their own architect by the buyer on some parcels.

Rectifying part of the criticism as Borneo Sporenburg, except for the environmental bit, Nieuw Crooswijk will at the very least be a new example of mixed living and a tribute to mixing designers and ideas, with scrupulous attention to detail at several scales. It will be



nieuw crooswijk entrances

another example to the world of how one can deal with suburbs in our globalized world without losing our humanity. The question is if the persistence of will of the Dutch government and resilience to simpler market driven solutions can exist in countries that have not been subjected to these ideas and still believe that the market defines all, and the developer decides what gets built. Borneo Sporenburg and Nieuw Crooswijk prove that in order to achieve these highly aimed humanitarian goals one needs government intervention, even in a progressive country such as the Netherlands, which might be unavailable in countries which have by nature a policy of deregularisation. In this case progress of society goes hand in hand with government intervention, and I predict that in several decades the difference between these high quality suburbs and the low quality cloned and ill scaled suburban sprawl will be so high that the developers will see the market value in these more laborious, but in the end higher quality, living environments. If we do not reclaim the act of building the environment from the developer, we will end up with a truncated version of this type of modernism, which will again prove problematic. We should inhabit the places we build, and understand them in order to do the right thing. Globalisation might be occurring on an economic level, if we do not understand and are willing to live in our own creations, we will continue to fail. We should build these future environments ourselves to make not just our clients but also ourselves and our grandmothers live in a more human and sustainable environment. •

_ BIBLIOGRAPHY

Christopher Alexander, A Pattern Language, 1977

Timothy Beatley, Native to Nowhere: Sustaining Home and Community in a Global Age, 2004

Timothy Beatley, Green Urbanism, 2000

John Chase, Margaret Crawford, John Kalinski, Everyday Urbanism, 1999

-> John Kalinski, The Present City

Slavoj Zizek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real

Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, 1961

Masterplan Nieuw Crooswijk, Gemeente Rotterdam, 2004

J. S. Russel, A new new urbanism renews Dutch docklands, Arch. Rec. V. 189 N4, P 94-98

Lotus International, Borneo Sporenburg, Amsterdam, 1993-97, n. 109, p. 64-69

Jane Holtz Kay, How the Dutch Do It, Housing in the Netherlands, Planning Mag., Feb 2003

Websites:

<http://www.visionarythurrock.org.uk/docs/examples/borneosp/index.html>

<http://www.newurbannews.com/EnergySavingsInsideJul05.html>

<http://www.newurbanism.org/pages/532096/>