

New Urbanists don't like my View

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I occasionally get e-mails from people who don't like what I write. Today I got one from someone who I think may be local, but alas, he was unwilling to say. I am willing to talk or correspond with anyone who wants to have an open and honest debate, but this guy accused me of being dishonest and an ideologue because, in his opinion, I was unwilling to look at both sides of the issue.

The truth is, I have. I cannot impart to you the amount of reading and study I have done on this issue of New Urbanism, zoning, and planning. I've even gone back to my old college textbooks to see what people thought about the subject thirty years ago.

The problem is, no one else is giving the other side of the story. There is more to this issue than developing cute streetscapes. That part is just the movie set, the facade. And the kind of planning that is being implemented around the country cannot be validated just because everyone else is doing it. After all, one of the things that New Urbanists are vehement about is sprawl – but didn't we do that because everyone thought it was the right thing to do for the last fifty years? Perhaps fifty years from our ancestors will be saying what a stupid thing New Urbanism was, what were they thinking back then?

There has to be room for debate on this issue. If it is a foregone conclusion that we must become a New Urbanist city, if there is not room for people like me who truly do want to see both sides of this issue, why are we bothering to go through the PlaniTulsa process? Case in point, I heard an interview on a local talk show recently, in which I heard the same thing that New Urbanists always say, that is, we have to change the zoning code because the kinds of development we need to do are illegal under our current code. That's true, but it's not the whole truth. The whole truth is that if someone wants to do a mixed-use development, it is possible by using the variance process and / or a PUD (Planned Unit Development). The real problem is not the code, but the enforcers and the administrators of the code. If they do or don't want to grant a variance to a particular project, then that is their prerogative.

To reinforce my point, if it were illegal to build a mixed use development under the current zoning code (Tulsa uses the same Euclidean code that virtually every other city in America has used for decades), why are the building codes written to allow them? Both the BOCA Building Code (pre-2000) and the International Building Code (since 2000) include provisions for mixed use buildings, and have for as long as I have been in the architecture business. In fact, churches are a perfect example of a mixed use building.

I drew my e-mailer's ire because he did not like my criticism of light rail, and though he touted the widespread success of light rail, he failed to quote a single source. He especially hated my source, Randal O'Toole, who had used published reports from the Federal Transit Administration and the American Public Transportation Association to form his opinions. The radical New Urbanists just hate Randal O'Toole because they don't like the other side of the story getting out.

My e-mailer also stated how much construction has happened because of light rail, but I'd like to know how many people lost their homes, businesses and churches through eminent domain to build them. I'd like to know how many neighborhoods suffered because the rail

bypassed them. After all, how many small towns in America went into decline after the interstate highway system bypassed them?

On the other hand, while he whined about how much we spend on roads, he failed to state something that is an indisputable fact – development follows roads.

He said that in every city where rail was built, ridership exceeded expectations. Whose expectations? And what were they? From what I have read, when roads are built, they get a lot of traffic. Light rail does not even come close to the numbers that street traffic carries. Another myth is that the Religious Land Use Act will protect churches from zoning abuses, but it was written to prevent open and blatant discrimination against churches. It is not written to protect churches from the consequences of a form-based code, more specifically, land shortages.

So again, I am more than happy to have a debate with anyone, but don't expect me to make the case for the other side. There are plenty of people who are more than willing to do that, and many who are more reasonable and informed than this fellow was. And if I may be so bold as to imitate Rush Limbaugh, I don't have to give equal time to the other side - I am equal time.

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