SUBURBAN DECENTRALIZATION AND THE NEW URBANISM:
A PRAGMATIC INQUIRY INTO VALUE-BASED CLAIMS

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Whether cities and regions will continue to decentralize — or whether they will adopt strategies to grow differently, such as the New Urbanism — is a key decision for localities in the United States during the current era of development. One of the difficulties in discussing potential futures is that in order to decide which course of action should be taken, a value claim must be made. Contemporary society’s troubled relationship with values often prevents planners, designers, and writers from elucidating the value positions that undergird their plans and designs. Pragmatist philosophy offers a method for inquiry into values. This type of consideration is generally missing from contemporary discourses around built space. This paper examines and compares the value orientations of two prominent schools of thought on urban/suburban development: suburban decentralization and the New Urbanism. Can the approach to inquiry advocated by pragmatist philosophy clarify debate on current issues in urban design and development?
All criticism worthy of the title is but another name for that revealing discovery of conditions and consequences which enables liking, bias, interest to express themselves in responsible and informed ways instead of ignorantly and fatalistically.

(Dewey, 1926:431)

INTRODUCTION

Today’s dominant development pattern, suburban decentralization, is one way of developing the physical environment for human purposes — and there are others. How can current and potential future realities in our designs for place be intelligently examined and compared? On which grounds is it possible to state that one is better, another worse? Is a neighborhood or a city a means to an end? If so, which end? Or is the means/ends distinction one that should be collapsed, as pragmatists have argued? This paper draws on pragmatic philosophy for the task of identifying and considering the value orientations of two forms of urban design and development — suburban decentralization and the new urbanism.

New urbanism is a design movement that seeks to alter multiple facets of city and neighborhood design and development (see also Swearingen White and Ellis, 2007). The influence of the movement has expanded to a global scale (Marcuse, 2000). Once content to isolate their practices to specific projects, the new urbanists have expanded their goals over time as they have consistently encountered difficulty operating within the larger contexts of urban development. To be specific, new urbanists have sometimes found that their ways of designing and building neighborhoods and suburbs is difficult to achieve, or illegal, under current zoning and land-use law. In other instances, they have found that their projects do not realize their goals due to their physical location in regional contexts. The new urbanist response has been more sweeping proposals for metropolitan regions (Calthorpe and Fulton, 2001; CNU, 2000) that encompass nearly every aspect of contemporary urban design, development, and redevelopment. Combined with empirical findings of differences between new urbanist developments and the typical development of today, this evidence suggests that the adoption of the new urbanist perspective creates differences in many interrelated aspects of practice. The differences are more than theoretical.

Writers within the new urbanist movement contrast their designs to the present situation in development: urban, suburban and regional decentralization (or sprawl). New urbanists fault sprawl for any number of societal and environmental ills, often with evidence for their claims. In response, there have been a number of works in sprawl’s defense. These works also offer forms of evidence in support of claims that decentralization is not ethically problematic, ugly, alienating, particularly destructive, divisive, and inefficient. They also argue that suburban development is making the good life more attainable for more people, increasingly including racial and ethnic minorities. Tampering with or reforming the current systems, as the new urbanism proposes, is a problem for these theorists and practitioners.

Both new urbanism — and closely related visions of “smart growth” and “urban villages” (see Krier, 1998) — and their ideological opponents use empirical data to support their claims. In making their cases, these authors typically do not explicitly describe the values that underpin their arguments. It is possible in these debates, as in others, for both sides to argue based on history, rhetoric, and elaborate empirical methodologies — while accusing the other side of ideological bias. Terms such as “neoliberal,” “communitarian,” “individualist,” “free market,” and “big government” are employed to demonstrate that opposing views are invalid by reason of being skewed away from objectivity from the start. These tactics of debate effectively contest the objectivity of the proponents of the other strategy.

Instead of trying to answer the question of whether one side of this argument contains more objectively appealing theories and facts, this is a proposal for a contestation of the grounds by which
Theoretical/empirical objectivity is judged to be the important question. It is certainly not the case that any ultimate objectivity has been achieved by any of the participants in the development debate. And it follows that it will not be reached within this article. Yet societies are continuing to grow and must decide how best to grow, even if they cannot do so while objectively demonstrating that they are choosing the best possible way to grow. What assistance can social inquiry provide with this decision when it is possible that approaches as opposed as new urbanism and decentralization can each appear to be “right” on their own terms?

The last century’s drive toward academic disciplinary isolation has left most fields focused on empirical study of human concern inept at handling issues of valuation. If different arguments can each succeed on their own terms, might it be the terms themselves that provide a possible path for critical inquiry? Both new urbanists and sprawl’s defenders make claims based on value judgments. While empirical claims are often about magnitude, precedent, or correlation, the disputes hinge, to a greater degree, on causation (a point of continual difficulty in the social sciences) and valuation. As Stuhr (2003:213) writes, “[Values] are shot through all our practices — including our practices of theorizing.” The actions associated with belief in one particular theoretical approach may be better at achieving certain goals in particular contexts, but it is difficult to strategically consider problems and solutions when inherent values and criteria remain unclear.

There is a widely acknowledged need for more insight and empirical research on the new urbanism (Falconer Al-Hindi and Till, 2001). Brain (2005:218) observes, “Given the growing influence of [the new urbanism], it seems surprising that the response among social scientists has been limited and relatively unproductive, both from the standpoint of the practical issues and from the standpoint of relevant theoretical debates.” It is for this reason that a pragmatic inquiry is in order. Of the two approaches to urban design,¹ a pragmatic approach asks: What are the beliefs that inform this approach? If we are to adopt these beliefs in specific instances, what are the values for which we are working? And, why should we — in this context — believe these values to be worthy of our actions (and beliefs)?

A pragmatic inquiry cannot be expected to result in a conclusion that a given theory or practice is more true or even more useful in every set of circumstances. The conclusions drawn from taking up the pragmatic method must always be situational and tentative — they are “true” only for a particular place and time and in relation to a certain set of goals. It is also not the case that the new urbanism and decentralization represent anything like theoretical or practical opposites. In fact, there are many ways in which they differ surprisingly little. It follows, then, that there are any number of alternatives to both of these approaches, each of which might be better suited to particular situations in urban development.

**METHODOLOGY: PRAGMATIC INQUIRY**

American pragmatism (as variously understood through the classic pragmatisms of James, Peirce, Royce, Mead, and Dewey, as well as contemporary pragmatists) is a philosophical movement explicitly concerned with improving the circumstances of society. It provides a method for clarifying terms and conditions of beliefs such that values are more apparent. While pragmatist thinkers may individually espouse values toward which intelligent actions might be directed, they will not expect that these final values toward which they directed their efforts would (or should) be the same for other groups at other times. The method is adaptable and applicable to any practical problem, including the current fray in urban theory.

Most philosophical theory centers on rational thought directed at reality or realities. Knowledge and belief are made possible by an epistemological stance rooted in some philosophical certainty. Pragmatism cannot be characterized in this way (Rorty, 1979). It is opposed to the view that rational
thought can be expected to reveal any fundamental truth. It is a philosophy intended for practical and critical engagement with everyday concerns; one that is not permanently rooted in any particular metaphysical orientation. Truth is always contextual and conditional — belief is a gamble. Unlike many pluralist or post-structural theories, it is vocal about the possibility that human intelligence can improve human conditions — a possibility that is necessary if urban planning is to be considered.

A pragmatic approach allows reflective positions to be taken on social and political issues without claims about the transcendental truth or objectivity of the attendant facts and beliefs. It also allows conclusions to remain tentative as working hypotheses — continually open to testing and reevaluation. The mechanism for gathering new information and forming belief is experience (James, 1904/2000). This foundationless view of knowledge does not devalue knowledge or the inquiry that generates it. Rather, it makes constant revision necessary since the truth of a belief can only be based on it working in experience — as “working” is defined in a particular context in relationship to particular goals. The use of this method for criticism and inquiry into human affairs is intended to be an approach that enables intelligent consideration of problems of the human condition:

The problem of restoring integration and cooperation between man’s beliefs about the world in which he lives and his beliefs about the values and purposes that should direct his conduct is the deepest problem of modern life. It is the problem of any philosophy that is not isolated from that life.

(Dewey, 1929:204)

John Dewey pointed out that in the modern era, facts have become the property of science, and values remain tied in many ways to religion. Values, as a result of this divorce from fact, have experienced a diminution. When considering facts about urban development, or any other topic, a pragmatist would suggest that values are informing our reading of the facts — in fact, that we need values to experience facts. When we look to facts to help determine whether urban decentralization or the new urbanism presents a better future for our cities, we must first have a conception of “better” rooted in notions of goodness, badness, and the shades between the two.

Dewey (1929:212) also observed that “most conflicts of importance are conflicts between things which are or have been satisfying, not between good and evil.” Despite its problems and frequent negative characterizations, decentralization is not inherently bad. Neither is the new urbanism bad, except as it is experienced as such. Both can only be deemed bad in their relationships to living persons. Goodness and badness are relational qualities. Since many people experience elements of both urban design patterns as satisfying, a pragmatic view holds that no meta-critique can be leveled against these experiences. Inquiry can, however, be conducted to uncover the values held by the individuals involved in the relationships — so that action can be more intelligent. These values shape the preferences of those experiencing these urban forms. Patterns of valuation may help to distill the debates and clarify their terms.

Deweyan pragmatism envisages a philosophy engaged in the task of theorizing attainable values as both means and ends toward which everyday individual and structural efforts might be dedicated. The making of cities and neighborhoods is about everyday life. The individuals involved in the production of these spaces (Lefebvre, 1991) are acting within certain constraints on — and catalysts to — the goals that they may pursue in a given space. Among these are variations on the physical environment. Which values are the built forms under consideration facilitating? How can an inquiry into values be conducted?

Dewey repeatedly argued for the collapsing of theoretical dualities such as individual/community, means/ends, thought/action, theory/practice, subject/object. Following the pragmatic argument about the relational nature of values and facts, it becomes clear that values — often viewed as subjective — are neither exclusively subjective nor objective. A subject holds them, yet they manifest themselves in concrete preferences that can be viewed with some degree of objectivity. In this way, a value is a fact as much as anything is. And, it is a fact that can be viewed as “rationally” as any other fact can be.
VALUATION IN DECENTRALIZATION

In the growing body of literature defending contemporary suburbs, and the concept of sprawl from the criticisms it has garnered, it is possible to examine claims and word choices to begin to uncover a value orientation. Sprawl, like urban space (Gottdeiner, 1985), is a social construction. A search for the essence of sprawl is fruitless, whether one is driving around looking for it, seeking to define it, or reading the vast body of literature on it. And, despite the fact that (by any measure) a large and growing number of U.S. residents choose to locate in suburbs, Bruegmann (2005:18) captures a piece of the popular imagination when he says, “Sprawl is where other people live, the result of other people’s poor choices.”

Viewing the now familiar and widespread pattern of suburban decentralization, it is easy to assume that it has happened through practices with no coherent thought or set of theories guiding its development. And, with the unprecedented scale of growth in America’s suburban areas, it may be assumed that the pattern is novel to the second half of the 20th century. Neither is true. Processes of geographic dispersion and the preference of the rich to locate in areas peripheral to the city are ancient — but the growth of these areas to the proportions of the last 50 years has been facilitated by a number of processes. Among them are highway construction, zoning law, subsidies and patterns of taxation, urban renewal projects, legal desegregation, educational zoning, and the shifting preferences of homebuyers. Sprawl has certainly not been unintentional or freely created by independent private decisions (Pyatok, 2000). Most of the instruments of its development have been infused with a liberal, modernist orientation that aspires to a similar set of values.

Along with patterns of growth and decentralization, there has been any number of attendant social, aesthetic, environmental, economic, and health impacts, as well as impacts on the cities that suburbs surround. Bruegmann (2005) points out that the recent trends toward urban densification, infill, and gentrification are intricately connected to the processes of suburban sprawl. Many of the urban areas that were abandoned by those with economic wherewithal 30 years ago have been purged of the qualities that made them undesirable and are in the process of being converted for a variety of middle-class purposes. The preference for these urban locations is based on substantially different conceptions of urban space since many of these places are now much less densely populated than the surrounding suburbs, having been nearly emptied of their population during the periods of blight and renewal. Regarding the mechanics of decentralization, though, it is sufficient for the present purposes to acknowledge that the forces driving them are not natural or unintentional (see Wright, 1983). They are not untheorized.

David Brooks (2004) sheds light on the motivations of Americans to move to suburbs and engage in a life disconnected from traditional urban and rural ways of life. He traces the imaginations of American paradise to early European conceptions of the “new world.” According to Brooks, this quest for material paradise permeates U.S. culture and pushes people to the outer edges, not only of metropolitan areas but also to the limits of their ability to work, consume, and live.

When it comes to suburbia, our imaginations are motionless. Many of us still live with the suburban stereotypes established by the first wave of critics. Yet there are no people so conformist as those who fault the supposed conformity of the suburbs. . . . If you were to judge by the literature of the past century, nobody is happy in suburbia.

(Brooks, 2004:5)

The anti-sprawl literature (i.e., Garreau, 1991; Morris, 2005), including new urbanist writings (e.g., Duany and Plater-Zyberk, 2001), has portrayed sprawl in negative ways that are certainly not always borne out in reality. Closely related to current trends in economic growth and, some would say, democracy, the suburban U.S. is interpreted in the eyes of the beholder. While social isolation is certainly possible in decentralized regions, so is “community.” Brooks and others are vocal and imaginative about the tendency of post-war Americans to associate with communities based on common interests, all while dreaming impossibly big dreams (Martinson, 2000). As components of the oft-discussed concept of social capital, Putnam (2000) proposes two functions: bridging and bonding.
Bridging takes place across groups of perceived difference, while bonding is a building of relationships among those of perceived similarity. Using this distinction, the literature in support of decentralization shows that social processes associated with it have been more about bonding than bridging. However, there is little evidence that the suburban form itself either encourages or discourages political or voluntary associational activity (Oliver, 2001).

Notions of paradise and bonding of communities that are more similar are both causes and consequences of the spatial form that metropolitan regions have taken. The dominance and near-exclusive reliance on automobile transportation is associated with freedom, independence, and modern efficiency. Large yards provide privacy, comfort, and prestige. Detached, single-family homes are a market-tested preference of the U.S. family. The spatial forms of sprawl are characterized by an aggregation according to function (Brain, 2005). Highways, houses, retail stores — all are larger in suburbia and concentrated based on their intended function. And undergirding the whole project is a form of market liberalism. Possibilities for individual properties are left somewhat open for the private market to develop. Within varying ranges and forms, designs are left up to the developer or the homeowner. The market often plays the largest role in determining whether something will be built, where it will be, how it will look, and who will use it. Although, as previously noted, the market is less responsible for the forms of suburbia than is often imagined.

The forms that have resulted from the pursuit of these values have allowed people to build wealth by owning homes. While this has tended to benefit everyone but the poor — who are typically paying rent — it has increasingly benefited households of many races and ethnicities. Public health and environmental studies (see Frumkin, et al., 2004) show some worrisome impacts of decentralization. And, although Bruegmann (2005) points out that the amount of land consumed by sprawl is only a small fraction of the open land in the U.S., it must be recognized that hypertrophy (unending growth) is clearly not a viable option for the future.

The values associated with decentralization, then, include pursuit of paradise, economic liberalism, private property rights/transportation, functional aggregation, efficiency, and bonding within communities of individuals with perceived similarities. Both supporters and critics of decentralization often experience it as a representation of these values. Those that hold similar values to these, however, may experience pride or exhilaration while surveying the suburban landscape, while a critic might see only ugliness and individualistic materialism.

THE NEW URBANIST VALUES

The new urbanism and the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) constitute perhaps the most influential design movement since modern architecture and the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) (Bohl, 2000). The design proposals of the movement hinge on a neo-traditionalism that decries the departure from functional aggregation and residential density in urban design, along with details like sidewalks, porches, and alleys. While the number of new urbanist projects in existence is tiny when compared to the suburban metropolitan regions of the U.S, the movement has steadily gained influence and elements of the new urbanism have been incorporated into the functioning of many public and private development patterns.

The literature on the new urbanism is written from a variety of perspectives, with much of it amounting to marketing material full of potentially problematic claims. While this broader body of literature can easily be critiqued (i.e., Harvey, 1997), other notable examinations (for instance, Brain, 2005; Talen, 2002) have restricted the critique to the more central and official publications of the movement (i.e., CNU, 2000) and found important differences between what the new urbanism is often perceived to be promising and the movement’s actual goals.

One central distinction between the value system informing decentralization and the new urbanism is the preference for private or public control. “The deceptively simple responses the new urbanists
propose ... are based on one, equally simple principle: Community planning and design must assert the importance of public over private values” (Bressi, 1994:xxvi). New urbanists view the “public” as the necessary arbiter of the changes they want to see in urban form. There is less of an emphasis on market liberalism, although the movement has been careful to position itself to be able to take advantage of this macro-level trend. It is simply less liberal — new urban proposals require legal restrictions at least as constraining as the most prescribed current zoning and land-use systems.

Environmentally, the new urbanists favor more compact designs that use alternate, typically public forms of transportation. Their reasons for this are often based on the concept of “sustainability.” The environmental hazards of dispersion and private automobile transportation must be acknowledged — and this is one of the greatest appeals of the new urbanism as an alternative.

In social terms, Talen (2002) finds that of the official 27 principles of the new urbanism, eight are related to promoting social equity, while 19 make claims related to the common good. She did not find that any were explicitly tied to claims about community, however the concept was implicitly tied to the goals.

A more rhetorical reading of the literature suggests that

at the core of the new urbanism, it is possible to identify two quite different and, at times, contradictory ideals ... there is the ideal of community, with its rhetoric of solidarity based on common feeling and personal connection [and] there is a loosely connected set of ideals that is commonly summed up under the heading of urbanism, with its rhetoric of vital diversity, the normative order of the public realm, and civic idealism.

(Brain, 2005:218)

If the decentralized suburban form has been associated with aggregation of commonalities and communities of interest — or bonding forms of social capital — the new urbanism, by comparison, produces neighborhoods more likely to catalyze bridging functions of social capital across differences. The rhetoric of the field envisions a geographically close, diverse group of people building “community.” However, the value claims based around “community” have probably made the new urbanists the most vulnerable to criticisms. Community (in common parlance) is used as a nostalgia-inducing term for the social forms being obliterated by the industrial modern era. Community connotes security, face-to-face interaction, common goals, and often a comfortable or even intimate warmth. There is a debate across different fields of social inquiry on whether community, social capital, and civic engagement are in decline — as much evidence suggests they may (Putnam, 2000) or may not (Ladd, 1996) be. There are also relationships between these concepts that empirically contradict the seemingly intuitive correlations.

The new urbanist hopes for social equity and the common good often allude to a “sense” of community (see McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Several pragmatic questions loom over this goal: What (or whose) purposes does a sense of community serve? It can be argued that the attempt to build an environment that will result in sense of community or social cohesion is a fruitless endeavor born of the dross of utopian thinking. The pursuit of these communitarian values could be misguided, or as Talen (1999:1362) notes, “More insidiously, it could mean that the social cohesion goals of new urbanism are simply an excuse by developers to squeeze more development out of less land.” Sociologists have pointed out that many historical examples of community tend to have ill effects such as exclusion, inequity, parochialism, coercion, and conformity. These forms of community can be directly opposed to civic ideals as they partition segments of society around particular dogmatically pursued self-interest.

A scepter over the theory of the new urbanism is the allegation of physical determinism, or the attempt to intervene on the built environment in hopes of achieving social change. Manipulating the physical environment for social modification garners charges of “social engineering” and is not as clearly effective in practice as it is often thought to be. Yet change in the physical environment does have power to alter human behavior. As an intentionally socially conscious doctrine, the new urban-
ism is often trapped between a cautiousness that posits no social impact and a naïve idealism that sees architecture as central to all human affairs. However, models of social functioning and intended progress are employed by any plan for physical development, even those that come without Charters, such as decentralization.

The writings on the new urbanism value social equity, the common good, bridging of social groups, sustainability, community, and a vibrant public. These values are not always necessarily opposed to the values of market liberalism, physical growth, paradise, bonding within social groups, and privacy. They do represent a different emphasis and an environment that is demonstrably different. These two sets of values jostle for influence over the built environment in different ways, and have been doing so for some time.

**Valuation in U.S. Urban Planning and Design**

The diverging views on cities in the U.S. can be traced back at least as far as the political philosophies that emerged during and after the American Revolution. The social ideals of Thomas Jefferson were rooted in moral conceptions of the agrarian life. In the Jeffersonian ideal, individuals and families would be free to lead their lives without the institutional interventions that had so often hampered their plans in Europe. The early United States, with its abundance of free or cheap land, seemed a place in which this ideal would be attainable for an unprecedented proportion of the society. Liberated from societal and institutional constraints, Jefferson believed that individuals would develop into more fully free and happy beings. Kincaid (2003:146) states, “Jefferson had little patience for a city dweller far removed from the ‘noble existence’ of pastoralism (repeatedly claiming that those who work the land are God’s chosen people).”

For Jefferson, the key to the development of a just society lay in the cultivation of the moral traits of agrarianism. Jeffersonian morality could naturally spring forth from individuals when they were left to their natural tasks. In contrast, Alexander Hamilton did not locate the origins of moral development in the nature of humanity. He was less hopeful about the natural morality of humanity and wanted a society that was capable of moral socialization. Because individuals’ moral intuitions were not to be trusted, their preferences on matters of public moral socialization were not necessarily to be enacted. The business of the government was to decide which political and social arrangements would best lead to the creation of a moral citizenry and a just society. These ends could best be achieved in a harmonious, efficient, planned city.

The contrast of the Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian social ideals is one that is tangible in contemporary planning and design, theory and practice. Jefferson’s social atomism and Hamilton’s social holism, Jefferson’s belief in human agency and Hamilton’s in social structure — these differences suffuse their shared idealism. It is this contrast that is highlighted when observers read U.S. central cities as Hamilton’s, and the suburbs as Jefferson’s (i.e., Eisenman, 2005). The basic question of how development should be structured in relation to social forces continued in the mid-20th century with the urban design theories of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier, the modernist machismo of Robert Moses, and the urbanist machinations of Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs.

It is possible to trace the ideals of the proponents of decentralization from Jefferson to Wright, and in some surprising ways, to Mumford — and today’s theorists like Bruegmann (2005) and Rybczynski (2005). And, although it is murkier, the Hamiltonian political philosophy and the urbanism of Jacobs are present in the ideals of the New Urbanism. The pursuit of divergent values, in other words, is not new. What is new is the set of inherited circumstances that make the present a unique historical moment, and the terms and guises that these sets of values are currently taking. A pragmatic stance is constantly aware that what was “true” for Hamilton or Jefferson, or even Le Corbusier and Wright, may be “false” today, in that it will no longer work as well in practice.

Pragmatist philosophers have identified societal goals based on values that were rooted in their everyday experience. Josiah Royce (1916/2000) wanted an association of human individuals to com-
prise a “community” by a conscripted definition that involved a shared future project and a shared imagination of a collective past. The cooperation of individuals in achieving a common future that informed each of their identities would be what united them in a meaningful association through their everyday activity. Using Royce’s Great Community as the goal, it might be advisable to choose either of the patterns of development in question as long as there is agreement and benefit from working toward the shared goal.

John Dewey’s central ideal was growth — one which, at first glance, might place him squarely in the decentralization school. Dewey’s “growth,” however, is not spatial or economic — it is about a progressively more substantial measure of control over circumstances and the improvement of experience. Dewey’s growth is the dualism denying means/end combination — it is relative to nothing except more growth. Attendant processes to growth are education and democracy. These social goals would also be facilitated by the development of a Great Community, in Dewey’s writing. The pragmatists often shared the goal of “community” with the new urbanists. Of course, Dewey’s use of the term community is not at the expense of the abstracted “individual” since he viewed such a distinction as useless. It is safe to say, though, that today’s society has yet to realize Dewey’s vision of the Great Community. Is the achievement of a community of this sort still a goal that will pay off?

Each pragmatic thinker adapts the method for their purposes. Lachs (2005) has proposed that a pragmatic stoicism corrects for many of the shortcomings of either philosophy in isolation. Intelligent pragmatists, Lachs claims, must behave like stoics at times. Stoic thought directs away from positively or negatively valuing certain potential outcomes, such as pleasure, pain, or popularity. These goods are external to our control, or at least, it is possible or likely for them to be so at some point in our lives. The stoic approach is to desire virtues that are consistently within our control — assuming that such mental self-control is possible. The stoic would most likely take issue with the situation that posits “paradise” as a value. And though the stoics were some of the earliest proponents of cosmopolitanism, the stoic would not likely view the pursuit of nostalgic notions of “community” as wise.

Brain’s (2005) reading of the new urbanist proposals problematizes the quest for community, as do many others (Harvey, 1997; Talen, 2000). He suggests, as a stoic pragmatist might, that the ideal more appropriate to efforts at building vibrant and livable neighborhoods and cities is civility. Civility is impersonal but involves a level of trust and capacity for social relation that makes collective decision-making possible. He argues that what often gives the onlooker the impression of an eroding social setting is not the more intimate relations (community), which are typically still intact, but the capacity to relate to strangers (civility). This erosion may be partly due to suburban development patterns, with their private spaces far exceeding their public ones. Civility does not require sameness or shared emotions the way that community does, and it can be facilitated by the new urban designs that give careful attention to the transition from private to public space.

Pragmatic consideration of theory discards ideas that have run their course in the same way we adaptively discard outdated technology. It may indeed be useful to modify or discard the ideals that supporters of decentralization have inherited from Jefferson. However, the values that move in to experimentally fill this ideological void must be similarly examined in theory and practice. It may also be time for this era’s more Hamiltonian idealists to stoically modify their ideals around “community.” Dewey’s and Royce’s hope for the Great Community may be an ideal that is out of place in today’s social milieu. Just as human thought is constantly directed toward better ways to move faster, live longer, and communicate more effortlessly, pragmatism asks us to search for ways to hope, think, and believe better.

**DISCUSSION: CONSIDERATION OF VALUES IN PLANNING AND DESIGN**

To a pragmatist, the ideas of these two types of urban design are tools. If we live in one kind of world, it might be adaptive to use a hammer to scoop cereal into our mouths. In another type of world, a
spoon will work better. Neither circumstance makes the hammer or the spoon “true” or “right,” but we will likely be able to agree that the spoon seems to work better right now. The results of the experiments will tell us something about the kind of world we inhabit — although, we will always leave the possibility open that we will need to revise our findings at a later time. One possibility is that the currently unfolding quest for paradise and reliance on market liberalism will continue to decentralize built forms, and that this will have continually productive results. It is possible that this decentralization is part of a process that will lead to more valuable and enjoyable ways of living. Perhaps the sprawl that is so often lamented today is only a first, awkward form of what will later be prized. This scenario should not be too hard to imagine since it has been such a short time since the now prized ex-industrial urban areas were viewed as blighted, dirty slums — absolutely begging for demolition.

Pragmatic belief in this optimistic decentralization strategy is a gamble. There are serious risks of continuing down the path toward hypertrophy. The difficulty with gambling on the theory of the new urbanism is that it has not yet been tried out in practice across an entire metropolitan area, as it often claims it must be for its potential to be realized. Although cities such as Portland, Oregon, have become emblematic of the new urbanism in many ways (Calthorpe and Fulton, 2001), they are still decentralized metropolitan regions with a few new urbanist concessions and stylings. Atlanta, Georgia, could be the analogous quasi-posterchild for decentralization — millions of suburban residents, including a growing suburban African-American middle class.

The pragmatist approach to a project is to ask which beliefs work in practice in certain contexts. Just as some suburbs are better than others, new urbanist developments have succeeded or failed by some measures in different contexts. Seaside, Florida — an icon of the new urban project — can be understood as successful when held up to many standards, but the predominantly wealthy population of the town does not do anything to achieve many of the stated goals of the new urbanism. Bohl’s (2000) and Dietrick and Ellis’ (2004) writing on new urbanist strategies for low-income inner-city areas is hopeful. Looking at examples, however, shows that in order for many of the desired transformations of social and economic conditions to take place, new urbanist physical design must be only a part of a larger, more comprehensive strategy that involves components other than physical design and planning.

When considering a proposal of belief such as the New Urbanism, “pragmatists must remind societal leaders, the media, and the general public that the search for a magic bullet has only led to a revolving door of fads and fashions” (Fishman, 1999:293). As comprehensive as the new urbanist project has become, it is clear that the isolated projects that focus exclusively on physical development are certainly not always reaching the goals to which the values of the movement aspire. On this point, the critics of new urbanism have found fertile ground: it is not possible to simply build a neighborhood or a city in order to transform social relations — to achieve equity or the common good. Alone, “it remains simply a shell, a vessel to be filled randomly by whatever the marketplace wills. As an isolated approach, new urbanism is open to the criticism that it represents a quick real estate fix” (Bohl, 2000:794).

Similarly, a read of the criticisms of the new urbanism shows that certain values, such as the form of “community” that is implicit in the theory, are in need of modification. “The new urbanist project is focused on the pragmatic problem of learning from the best of the past to develop and legitimate new techniques for producing good places” (Brain, 2005:220). What if aspiring to facilitate the ideal of a community does not make a place good? The theory and practice of new urbanism ought, then, to be capable of reforming itself continually in pragmatic fashion to compensate for both changing circumstances and criticisms. Civility is a goal that is a more plausible value than community for planning and urban design, and one that is frequently lacking in contemporary cities.

Aesthetically, the new urbanism and suburban decentralization are each adaptable enough as to not necessarily be considered distinct entities. For example, modern homes or neo-classical post offices can be built in the urban designs of either one. Environmentally, the new urbanism is surely a safer
The economic feasibility of either approach is complex and depends on macro-level policy as much as the choices of individuals. Socially speaking, the choice between continuing decentralization and the new urbanism depends on the goals for the civic nature of the neighborhoods and cities that are built. The civic ideals of the new urbanism imply steps toward a more interconnected society — one that might, for instance, be capable of moving toward something like a public sphere (Habermas, 1993).

The failure of decentralized suburban space to act as anything approximating a catalyst to growth toward the values of bridging-style social capital, environmental conservation, and a vibrant public sphere necessitates the search for alternatives. These threats to progress in the U.S. must be taken seriously, and experimental modifications should be a priority. The New Urbanism represents an alternative that is promising in some ways, but in need of modifications and clarifications (as are all theories to the pragmatist). Many clarifications are needed on the values that are being pursued, and at what expense. Which of the values that have made decentralization attractive must be sacrificed if the New Urbanism is to succeed on its terms? Answering this question is crucial for the New Urbanism.

The discussions of strategies leading toward decentralization and many New Urbanist strategies frequently do little to span the rhetorical gap between groups of values competing for power and influence. What Peirce called the experimental habit of mind (Bernstein, 1999) is notably in short supply. Instead of imaginatively considering strategies for urban design, many mistake their reactions to types of place making as the product of rational thinking around foundational facts. The pragmatic rejection of this frame for knowledge may be helpful in the task of constructive communication that is necessary in this case — as well as many others in which components of society repeatedly talk past others.

Others have argued for a pragmatic approach in planning (e.g., Forester, 1993; Harrison, 2001). Hoch (2002:65) states, “Pragmatism does not provide a miraculous cure, but modest practical steps for recognizing and assimilating differences.” Perhaps the values of social equity, the common good, bridging, sustainability, and a vibrant “public” are not too far from the ideals of paradise, efficiency, privacy, and liberalism. This paper has attempted the task of recognizing and juxtaposing these sets of values. The next step is to experiment with these values in design praxis while remaining open to the modification of established truths. Or, as Forester (1993:161) writes, “A critical pragmatism can reveal, expose, reevaluate, illuminate, encourage, explain, decipher, simplify, inform, educate, challenge, threaten, or support only as it is articulated in practice.”

This inquiry into value-based claims does not independently make the task of planning, designing, and constructing habitable spaces simpler. It cannot demonstrate that one current approach is theoretically superior to the other. What it has done is to further delineate the values that are infusing urban design strategies, in hopes that dialogue regarding these alternatives will rise to the task of pragmatic value considerations. Preferences for place making are more visible representations of latent systems of valuation, which are intricately tied to social life (see Christens, et al., 2007). Planning and neighborhood design occur in sets of specific local circumstances that may require specific solutions and designs; the theories that supply the rhetoric of architects, planners, activists, and developers should continue to be subjected to critical evaluation.

NOTES

1. It may be argued that suburban decentralization is a form of planning practice, while the New Urbanism is urban design. While suburban decentralization implies no design content, it has tended toward several design typologies that tend to be replicated. These low-density patterns are, for present purposes, understood to be a form of design comparable, in many ways, to more explicit and principled design forms.

2. U.S. suburban homes have historically appreciated almost across the board. Current trends cast doubt on whether they will continue to act as effective vehicles to wealth for their owners.
3. Nor does it necessarily bring to light insights that cannot be revealed by inquiries less explicitly linked to philosophical methodologies.

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