

The New Urbanism and the Ancient Communitarian Paradigm. A Brief Dialectic

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Abstract

Starting from the premise that post socialist Romania is as sprawl vulnerable as Southern California, this paperwork tries to research the so called “sense of community” that has been associated with New Urbanism developments. There has been much debate on this issue regarding the North American architecture and urban planning movement and there has been recommended to operate deeper sociological research in order to formulate a strong doctrine. As a hotspot stands the notion of diverse community, an antithetical construct standing in the center of New Urbanist rhetoric. Structured as a classical dialectical discourse, this paperwork sets its goal to analyze the apparently monolithic oxymoron of the diverse community and embed this concept with an ecological dimension – thus submitting it to pluralism – and elaborating a framework for future research.

Rezumat

Pornind de la premiza că România post socialistă este la fel de vulnerabilă la sprawl precum California de Sud, această lucrare încearcă să investigheze așa numitul ”sentiment al comunității” ce a fost asociat dezvoltărilor de tip New Urbanism. S-a dezbătut mult pe această temă privind mișcarea nord americană de arhitectură și planificare urbană și a fost recomandat a se opera mai multă cercetare sociologică pentru a formula o doctrină puternică. Ca un subiect important este noțiunea de comunitate diversă, un construct antitetic ce stă în centrul retoricii New Urbanism. Structurată după discursul dialectic clasic, această lucrare își setează ca scop analiza acestui aparent oximoron monolitic al comunității diverse și de a îl investi cu o dimensiune ecologică – atribuind-o astfel pluralismului – și creând un cadru de aprofundare pentru o cercetare ulterioară.

Key Words: New Urbanism, community, social ecology, environmental sociology, Andres Duany, Peter Calthorpe, Traditional Neighborhood Development, Transit Oriented Development

1. Introduction

Urban Romania is now experiencing the explosion of the post socialist city. What for almost half a century has been the focus point of centralized urban planning has become nowadays the vague territory of the *laissez faire* eruption. Cities have emerged aggressively into their hinterland, merging architecture, infrastructure and landscape alike, both urban and rural, blending them into an amorphous mixed mass. Shortly, Romania has come to know the prejudices of sprawl, an suburban phenomenon that the United States have been tackling with since the late '50s. Like in North America, the real estate developers and not only, are selling today what cunningly and improperly has been called “community”. The sprawling uncontrolled development has been

identified by the specialists as a process of disseminating real community. The North American solution to this problem is called *New Urbanism*, a planning movement that emerged in the '80s with an increasing momentum ever since.

The present essay is concerned with the relation between the *New Urbanism* and the community issue, a hot spot of the doctrine regarding the mentioned American architecture and urban planning movement. Romania, as it has been said, experiences today the conditions in America 50 years ago, and thus should learn, import and adapt from America the techniques of counter fighting sprawl and building real communities. The first question that should be put is whether there is reason for building local communities in a postmodern world of globalisation, mobility and virtualization. The *New Urbanism* stands for that cause, but the opinions are divided whether it has really succeeded so far in creating new communities. While the New Urbanists - Peter Calthorpe, Andres Duany, - plead for socially, economically, culturally diverse and local communities, their critics – David Harvey, Paul Walker Clarke - state the approach as exclusionary and social corrosive. What has been generally reproached to *New Urbanism* is the lack of empirical frame, a background that this essay tries to sketch. No doubt that the concept of community cannot be constructed on the old metaphysical scaffolding, existing before the modern age, the belief in the same shared values of ideas (religion, philosophy, ethics), kinship and place belonging, as sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies had stated at the end of the XIX-th century. Instead, Peter Calthorpe advances the idea of the ecology of communities, not (only) the ecology of natural systems, but taking its principles of diversity, interdependence and decentralization an translating them into sociological methods in order to create a better built environment.

The paper is organized following the classical dialectical discourse, presenting the thesis of community's diversity proclaimed by the new urbanists, followed by an antithesis punctuating the main critiques. The synthesis roundly blends the priori affirmative and negating sides, advancing the hypothesis/hypostasis of an all encompassing ecological community.

2. Thesis: Traditional community – unity over difference

“The ideal of community privileges unity over difference” postulates Iris Marion Young [1]. In this sense, to be a part of a community means the leveling of identities, common sublimation of individualities, the abolition of the “I” for stating a higher, trans-personal “we-ness”. Community, as we know it – the ancestral form of social organization – has always been seen as a highly desirable goal, a normative scope. In various times and places, there have been community dreamers and the history of urban planning is full of examples of these restorers of the communitarian spirit. From the Socialist Utopians to Camillo Sitte, from Ebenezer Howard to Patrick Geddes, the nostalgia of a all encompassing community has been a constant *gestalt* force of numerous designs. The feverish community search is also the main concern of *New Urbanism*; it is the *credo* of this movement's adepts that community building represents the panacea of all the maladies of both built and natural environment. As the first article of the Charter for *New Urbanism* puts it:

“The Congress for the *New Urbanism* views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society’s built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge.”[2]

Thus being the official statement of the doctrine, the intrinsic belief – borrowed from the Garden City ideal - that there is a ambivalent structural relation between the built form and the social behavior[3], so that the sense of community can be induced through physical design. The question

that arises is to what type of community is *New Urbanism* addressing? First of all, in the most postmodern style, *New Urbanists* proclaim diversity as the main ingredient of their community concept. That surely contradicts the generally known type of community, one based on homogeneity, sameness and similarity. Is it?

Diversity has become an imperative demand ever since Jane Jacobs demonstrated its necessity for promoting urban vitality. But diversity could have various and different meanings to urban planners and sociologists. For an urban planner, diversity is a mixture of uses, densities, building types and people of different economic, cultural, ethnic backgrounds that all summed up make the whole of community. A sociologist might try to measure the level of social interaction among a group of individuals, summing up the totality of community in the network thus created. Anyway, the diverse community is the hard core of *New Urbanism*, achieved by blending in the same place of individuals of different races, ethnic backgrounds, ages, incomes. To understand the complex oxymoron of diverse community one should look to the past, more precisely to the most famous diagram in the history of urban planning: the Neighborhood Unit from Clarence Perry, the first sociologist urban planner. It is there that the rootedness of the communitarian ideals of *New Urbanism* should be sought. “A social synthesis” (Leon Krier), the diagram held at its center the communitarian public space and buildings. *New Urbanism* upgrades this concept by both validating and endowing it with new meanings, resulting the Traditional Neighborhood Development or T.N.D. (Duany and Plater Zylberk) (See Figure 1). Although the purpose of diversity – this means mixture - is demanding, the neighborhood must have some discernible features: to have distinctive center and edge and its size should be a quarter of a mile distance from the center to the edge.

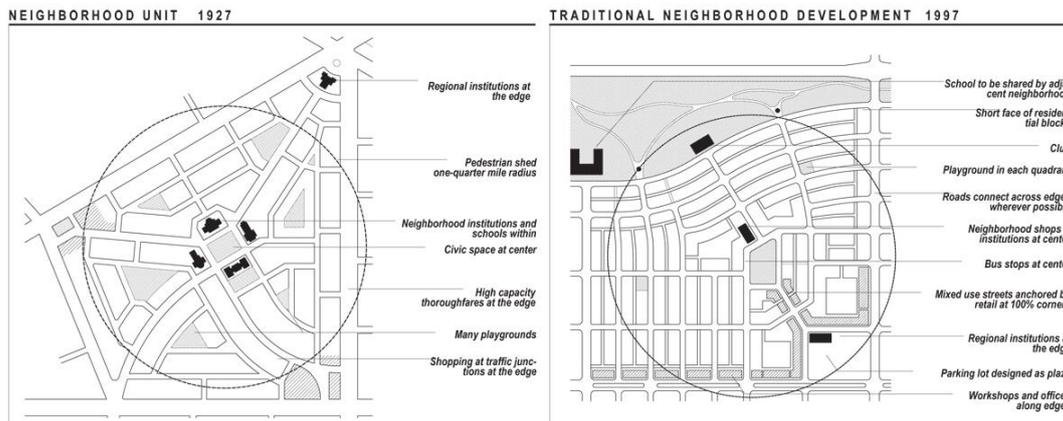


Figure 1. Neighborhood Unit and Traitionl Neighborhood Unit (TND)

There is in both diagrams a great emphasis laid on public space, carefully designed and placed. The space is tailored to promote social interactions by “reclaiming of the streets”[4]. The residents are encouraged to step out of their houses and enter the public realm. This desideratum is accomplished by reducing the private space, integrating the residential. There is a certain shrinkage, of the houses, lots and setbacks, in order to favor face to face interaction. The public spaces – in forms of parks and civic centers – enhance the possibility for chance encounters and provide identity and memory, necessary ingredients for building a stable community. The life on the streets is encouraged by “accommodating the pedestrian” [5] and the exteriorization of traffic. At the street level it is thus created a direct socialization, in safety conditions, since all “eyes are on the street” [6]. The same Jane Jacobs was the first to discuss the relationship between mixed land uses and social interaction and the effects over the sense of community. The new urbanists are advocates of the old lifestyle, where work and living were both in proximity. The neighborhoods functions should be mixed and diverse: mixed-housing facing the sidewalks, pedestrian walkways and center squares or parks, all within walking distance of retail, services, cultural centers and mass transit, are key ingredients to a

successful design product of “close-knit communities”[7] and more traditionally planned towns. This diversity of places and functions will produce social diversity, the so called “closed grained community” (Duany).

Emily Talen, an objective critic of *New Urbanism*, identifies four imperatives as being necessary for gaining diversity in urban planning: place vitality, economic health, social equity and ecological sustainability.[8] *Place vitality* is among the four principles postulated by Jane Jacobs - along with mixed functions, small sized urban blocks, and high density of population – which is necessary for attaining diversity. The *economic health* principle – similar to that of the creative city imagined by Richard Florida - requires the positioning of various industries in proximity for nurturing innovation and creativity. This economic rule will trigger the agglutination of both social and cultural diversity. *Social equity* refers to the accumulation of social capital, stimulating social interaction and reducing social segregation. The *ecological sustainability* resembles the bioregionalist principle, of regions needing diversity - both human and biological - to reach the complexity of beings analogous to that of the built environment. It is this last direction that is indicated by Talen [9] to be explored by the new urbanists, through replacing the sense of place and implicit of community with a much greater totality - the biotic land community – direction sketched in the 4-th chapter of this paper. For now we should present an example of a new urbanist design, a partial success, whose critique relates to the third chapter - the antithesis - the critique of *New Urbanism* ideology.



Figure 2. Seaside, Florida: view and plans

Seaside, Florida is the first and most well known prototype *New Urbanism* trademark that has been designed, having the complementary principle “unity in diversity, diversity in unity” in mind (See Figure 2). Its architects – Duany and Plater Zylberk – thought of a way of achieving formal homogeneity and social heterogeneity. Formal resemblance has been obtained in spite or because of the law instituted by the planners: that there shouldn't be allowed for an architect to build more than three houses in the small summer beach resort. Despite this building rule, the final resulted image has been one of equivalence, of congruency, creating an easy recognizable image of the small town. The design stands as a brand for *New Urbanism*: a complex layering of streets, public and private buildings and open spaces; a diversified street grid with various street profiles; visually controlled vistas towards the public buildings and spaces; the so called “euclidean zoning” system – all principles being carefully stipulated in an entire building code. This gives birth to an entire spectrum of critiques, the most sharp being the accuse of spatial determinism that in the end will produce social homogeneity. So, in the end, the desired objective of social diversity in Seaside has not been achieved, paradoxically because of its success – though the community has emerged – because the resort has suffered an acute process of gentrification. This leads to the critiques section,

as follows.

3. Antithesis: Anticommunity – difference over unity

The most vehement critique of *New Urbanism* consists in the formulated reproach regarding the enterprise of social engineering along with a spatial determinative touch that the *New Urbanist* ideology promotes. “Community has ever been one of the key sites of social control and surveillance bordering on overt social repression.”[10] Community is viewed as exclusionary, monolithic and elitist, nostalgic, leaving no space inside for the unaccustomed “stranger”. It is seen as dangerous, entailing a certain form of inner violence [11]. Aspiring to a community triggers the erasure of differences.

As Paul W. Clarke puts it, the very true but unconscious reason people seek the protective shelter of community “is the desire to avoid confrontation, to avoid actual participation [12].” He further emphasizes the paradoxical construct of community, its oxymoronic and ambivalent character, a term being “part romantic, part spiritual, part utopian, part pragmatic, and part illusory [13].” Anyway, it seems that for the most of the social scientists community is very rarely ethnic or economically diverse.

In the case of *New Urbanism*, both Clarke and Talen cite studies which x ray the *New Urbanist* dweller's profile: white, middle-class, affluent or intellectual – yuppie type. This type has been for decades – starting with the 50's – the target of the suburban real estate developers. For those who sell this “sense of community” underline both neighborly behaviors and “sense of community”, but social scientists believe it has more to do with the homogeneity of the neighborhood than with the character of the public space [14]. It is a natural consequence, since Clarence Perry is the first to acknowledge that the Neighborhood Unit – and thus the Traditional Neighborhood Development of *New Urbanism* – produces social segregation.

The paradox of the Neighborhood Unit consists in the fact that it generated its officially declared enemy: the suburban sprawl. As it is known, the implementing of Perry's diagram was incorporated in the Radburn arrangement, the work of Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. Radburn was the only successful designed community with the scheme in mind, all the rest which came afterwards being nothing but a misinterpretation of the original model, degenerating constantly into pure sprawl.

Paul Murrain underlines the enclave like character of the Unit, isolated and separated by externalizing traffic and drawing clear edges and limits [15]. Moreover, Murray deploys the disappearance of the Main Street, later celebrated by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. Main Street is a sign of hyper urbanity, the acting scene of the strangers with a clear role, being internalized by the local community.

The same social scientists that criticize the doctrine of *New Urbanism* agree that there should be done more research in order to explain what this “sense of community” means. They seem to agree that *New Urbanism* promotes a “neighborly behavior” as an *Ersatz* for the real community. One thing is clear: our present understanding of community needs an extending, some critics expanding it as an ongoing form of dialog. Clarke argues that “there is no proper, universalizing ideal for a single public, but rather constellations of distinct and overlapping public discourse, public sphere, public realms that are negotiated interaction, ongoing change, and evolution”[16]. Chris Ellis seems to encourage this tendency and argue that resident interaction through neighborly behavior can act as a tool to overcome the ancient monolithic concept of community and therefore implement a place design action [17]. However, one should keep in mind the word *extension*, that is the expanding of community's subjects, from a purely human to a not-only-human one, including other earthly beings, and the extension of the notion of *place* to the umbrella term of *environment*. This type of

community might overcome the unity-diversity dialectic, providing an all encompassing ecological awareness as a base for sustainable development.

4. Synthesis: Ecological community – diversity in unity, unity in diversity

There have been attempts by philosophers and social scientists of sketching the premises of a reconstructive version of a postmodern community coming from the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. One of them is Geoffrey Frasz [18] who argues that the concept of community must be expanded in order to include both human and non human beings, forming what he terms as a *expanded biotic community*. The important fact is that community should be shaped according to ecological principles of reciprocity, spontaneity and mutual aid, and, last but not least, the dialectic unity in diversity, diversity in unity. From the multitude of aspects regarding ecology this paperwork is concerned with the theme of social sustainability, the socio-environmental factors that concern the formation of community. There has been too often sought a technical solution to environmental problems that actually lie embedded in the social dimension. Taking this into consideration, the conceptual ground lies between two complementary poles: one is social ecology and other is its overturned, the environmental sociology.

Basing on environmental factors that generate social contact and sense of community indicates that *New Urbanism* may have to do with the “Chicago School” of sociology. According to this source, social contact and behavior is determined and maintained by environmental characteristics, the spatial pattern being connected to the diversity of the natural world. The representatives of the Chicago School compared the urban experience with biological and natural evolution, more than being shaped by economical, political, class and gender imperatives. The social dimension was naturalized, regardless to the true power determinants of urban life.

Coming from here, one might suggest that *New Urbanism* might be connected to a more specific branch of human ecology known as “environmental sociology”. The theoretical model is constructed by Talcott Parsons and indicates the impact of space on social interaction.

Taking into consideration the counterpart of environmental sociology, the social ecology, term coined and developed by Murray Bookchin, one may find resemblance in the utopian transformation of the urban promoted by social ecologists and the “pragmatopian” approach of “smart growth” *New Urbanism*. There is a common critic on both sides of the endless city and suburban sprawl. Both social ecology, seen as a social solution to the ills of the environment, and *New Urbanism* originate from the works of Patrick Geddes, Ebenezer Howard and Lewis Mumford. There can be drawn parallels between Bookchin's writings and new urbanist dogma, like their common interest in “authentic urban community”. “The city is at its best an ecocommunity” writes Bookchin and this might sound as a new battle cry slogan for the new urbanists as well.

Returning to *New Urbanism* paradigm, a counterpoint to the already mentioned East Coast wing led by Andres Duany is represented by the California based architect Peter Calthorpe. Although aligned under the same flag of neo traditionalist developments, militating for a return to pre-industrial forms of cities, Calthorpe instead rejects the whole “disneyfication” and nostalgia of old American towns previously associated with the movement, and therefore proposes a more urban-metropolitan, environmental aware approach.

Calthorpe extends his spectrum of an ecological approach of the urban research from the regional perspective to the neighborhood dimension and the building microscale. As he puts it:

“the effort to create more compact, walkable communities must be complemented with three orders of space: those that define the edge and limits of region, those that form a large scale connecting network within the region, and those that provide identity and recreation within a neighborhood. Each should respect the preexisting ecology and climate, and each can be a primary form-giver to the region, community and neighborhood” [19]

His conceptual scheme is called “Transit Oriented Development” (TOD) or “Pedestrian Pocket”, derived from Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) with an emphasis laid on public transport and transit, but the watchword is “mix”, as reflected in the definition stated by its author(See Figure 3):

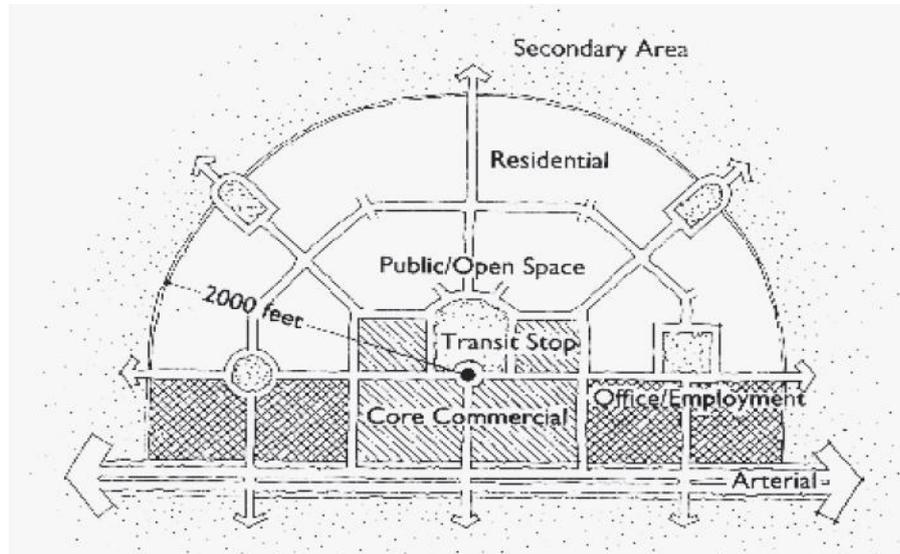


Figure 3. Transit Oriented Development (TOD)

“A Transit-Oriented Development is a mixed-use community within average 2,000 foot walking distance of a transit stop and core commercial area. TODs mix residential, retail, office, open space, and public uses in a walkable environment, making it convenient for residents and employers to travel by transit, bicycle, foot, or car.”[20]

TOD aspires to create a benign relationship between place and node, region and neighborhood, or house and workplace. The main purpose is to encourage people to use public transit instead of their own personal cars, but also other forms of physical mobility as walking on foot and bicycling. The automobile is seen here as the *anathema* of the real community, not only by provoking direct environmental damage, but also affecting the social mobility of population.[21]

But TODs do more than regulate the interaction between humans and automobiles. As Calthorpe argues, they provide a recipe for attaining affordable communities, affordable used here with an extended sense. Firstly, by using efficiently the land, preserving open space they lay the ground for the variety of housing types, with various costs and densities. Secondly, they are affordable to families with small incomes and are also affordable for business, workforce and public taxpayers.

Calthorpe summarizes the main characteristics and goals of TOD as follows:

- Organize growth on a regional level to be compact and transit-supportive.
- Place commercial, housing, jobs, parks, and civic uses within walking distance of transit stops.
- Create pedestrian-friendly street networks which directly connect local destinations.
- Provide a mix of housing types, densities, and costs.
- Preserve sensitive habitat, riparian zones, and high quality open spaces.
- Make public spaces the focus of building orientation and neighborhood activity.
- Encourage infill and redevelopment along transit corridors within existing neighborhoods.

Though thought as a “car replacement” diagram, the main feature of this scheme is the walkable environment. There are many options left to the pedestrian in order for him to do his daily trips,

providing many destinations and alternatives, intermingling in proximity retail, parks, services, and thus integrating healthier communities. Since there is no universal chart for urban ecology, one should look at the decalogue of “Urban Ecology”, a society that has been existing since the mid 70's and which releases a publication under the same name. The imperatives are as follows:

- revise land use priorities to create compact, diverse, green, safe, pleasant, and vital mixed-use communities near transit nodes and other transportation facilities;
- revise transportation priorities to favor foot, bicycle, cart, and transit over autos, and to emphasize "access by proximity";
- restore damaged urban environments, especially creeks, shore lines, ridgelines, and wetlands;
- create decent, affordable, safe, convenient, and racially and economically mixed housing;
- nurture social justice and create improved opportunities for women, people of color, and the disabled;
- support local agriculture, urban greening projects, and community gardening;
- promote recycling, innovative appropriate technology, and resource conservation while reducing pollution and hazardous wastes;
- work with businesses to support ecologically sound economic activity while discouraging pollution, waste, and the use and production of hazardous materials;
- promote voluntary simplicity and discourage excessive consumption of material goods;
- increase awareness of the local environment and bioregion through activist and educational projects that increase public awareness of ecological sustainability issues.[22]

Although this content might be regarded as natural system oriented and avoiding the transportation concerns, it is still discernible the social dimension of ecology. The implementation of these principles must be done carefully, so that environmentalism does not overthrow real urbanism, so that the risk of green Ecotopia does not exclude social vitality. This can be regarded as a transition towards a what might be called synthesized an eco-TOD (See figure 4).

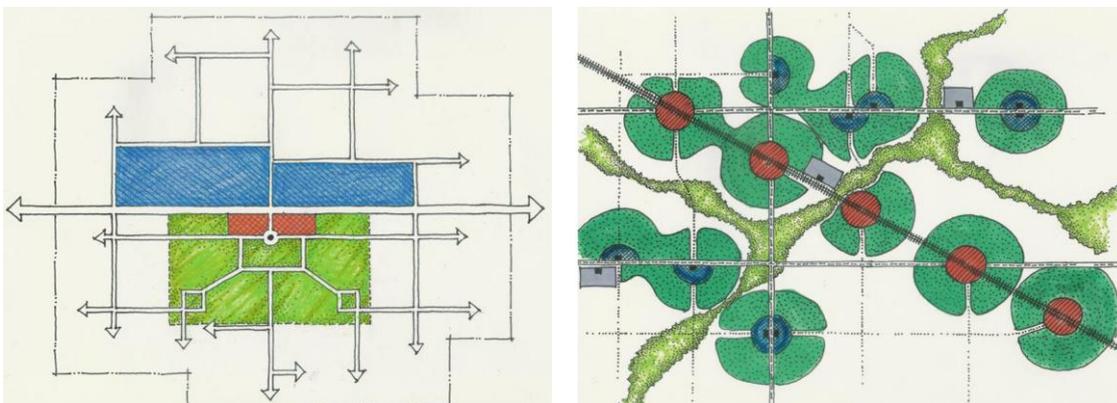


Figure 4. eco TOD

Another ecological adaptation of the TOD is the Green TOD, hybrid created by Robert Cervero and Cathleen Sullivan [23]. The Green TOD incorporate green urbanism and architecture in community design. The synergistic outcome, resulted from the cross hybridization of TOD and green urbanism, is based on derivatives like: high densities, mixed land uses and solar power generators, with an emphasis laid on community gardens and open space. It seems to be perfect solution that mediates between the percepts of *New Urbanism* and its declared enemy, the Landscape Urbanism, with equal measures taken from both components. As asserted by Cervero & Sullivan, beside the role of communitarian catalyst, the Green TOD is kid-friendly, allowing their surveillance like in the

writings of Jane Jacobs. Also stations are community hubs, places to socialize, relate and congregate.

Returning to the original scheme, there is even an upgraded version of the Traditional Neighborhood Unit: the diagram of the sustainable neighborhood, conceived by *New Urbanist* advocate Douglass Farr (See figure 5). Following the previous characteristics, five distinctions related to the Traditional Neighborhood Unit result:

- the neighborhood is a building block of a transit corridor.
- the central bus stop is replaced with a higher density transit mode (trolley, light rail).
- it is fitted out with high-performance infrastructure: district power, dimmable streetlights and a share car per block.
- the mix and density support car-free housing and a “third place”.
- habitat and infrastructure greenways give the neighborhood distinct edges.

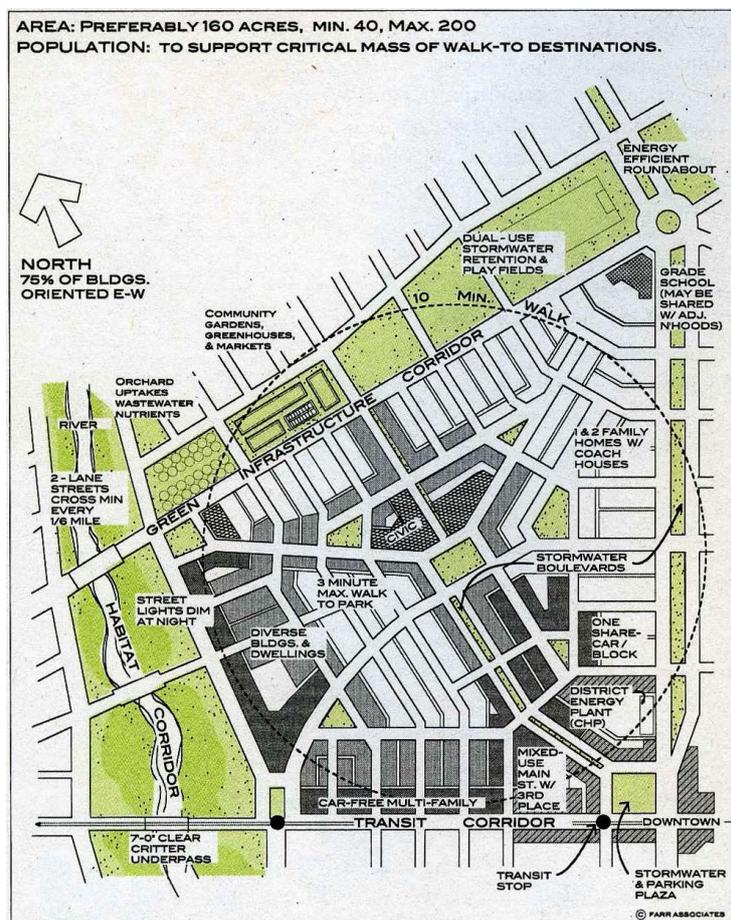


Figure 5 Sustainable TND

Though a slightly changed and adapted scheme, remains to be seen if the eco T.N.D. fosters the required diversity. What relates directly to community building is the presence of the “third place”, defined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. Third places – cafes, bars, bookshops – are community incubators, places situated at the confluence of two social environments: the workplace and the living place. The “third place” is the generator of social sustainability and urban vitality.

Another green and ecological metaphoric diagram used by *New Urbanist* proponents is the transect (see figure 6). For biologists and ecologists this section through a part of the environment portraits

the symbiosis elements within the habitat. In *New Urbanist* terms, according to the definition stated by its authors, Andres Duany and Emily Talen, the transect is:

“ a system that seeks to organize the elements of urbanism – building, lot, land, use and street, and all of the other physical elements of the human habitat – in ways that 1) link urban elements to natural ecologies in one integrated and continuous system; and 2) create immersive environments that preserve the integrity of place at each location within the system. The two approaches are interconnected: cities are seen as having a place in nature's order, but it is also recognized that they must find their own internal ordering system that binds them to that order This is a matter of finding an appropriate spatial allocation of the elements that make up the human habitat.”[24]

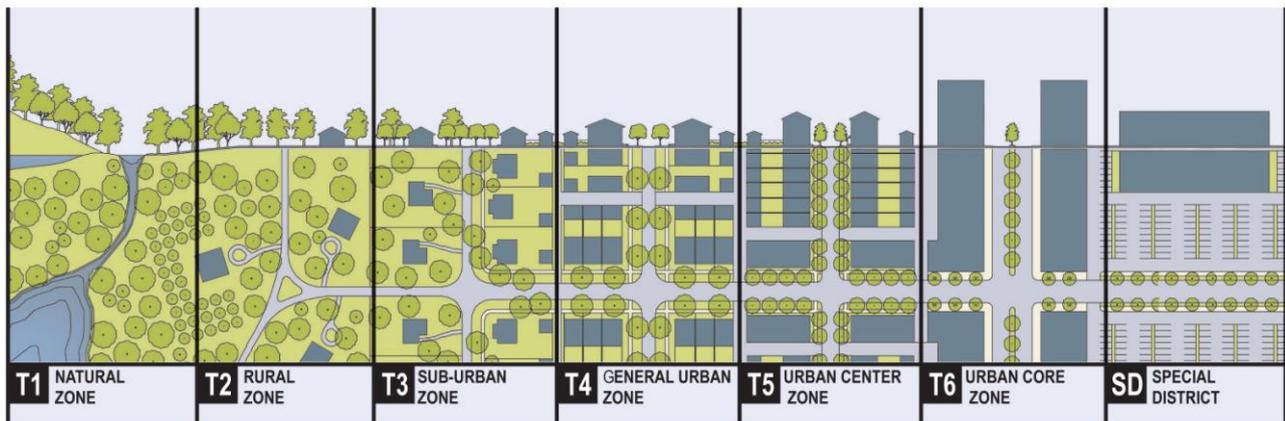


Figure 6. The Transect of *New Urbanism*

Exhibiting a fractal dimension, the transect shows a major similarity between the biological model advocated by the Chicago School and the shared beliefs of *New Urbanism*. The implementing of urbanity or rural character must be distributed among the best sustaining habitat, which is self regulating. The transect is a method to both restore natural environments and to permanently host identity and community spirit. The whole idea of the scheme is to maintain a permanent balance and shape of urban and rural environments, though the main principle means constructing a continuum gradient from urban central to natural state, via rural. Even where natural environment seems to be excluded, the transect spectrum is extended into the urban core and biological diversity is applied onto this antibiomatic environment.

What relates the transect to the original forerunner, the Traditional Neighborhood Development, is the same incorporation of basic principles: the emphasis laid on public space, the mix of land uses, the important role of the pedestrian, and so on. The transect zones determine different types of community, not one is isolated, they are “immersive”[25]. Different degrees of density create different urban forms, ranging from a village – the ancestral predecessor of the Neighborhood Unit – to a town organized to the principles of the Transit Oriented Development.

As it has been stated in the antithesis part, the main criticism lies in the environmental determinism, in the corset of social planning. That brings us to solving the eternal dichotomy in urban planning: planning for order or/and planning for diversity. Unlike the percepts of the Chicago School, Emily Talen recommends that the system of order should be tied to nature, not to social process [26]. Despite its simple appearance, the transect resembles the natural ordered system of complexity embedded in nature, exhibiting the pluralism of environments part of that system. Even Jane Jacobs explained the analogy between the city and a natural ecosystem. Different types of environments,

related to the local/vernacular, will foster a diversity of population.

5. Conclusions

There is an endless debate over the issue social determinism versus planning with no conclusive result. While *New Urbanists* maintain their common belief in formally designing communities, they also recognize the incapacity of strictly determining social behaviour. This essay tries to focus on the ecological dimension of community insufficiently articulated by social scientists. A new direction is given through relating with connected disciplines as social ecology and environmental sociology, all under the umbrella of urban ecology. There is much research to be done in this sense. Returning to the Romanian context, the result of such a research would be a total new approach in first repairing and afterwards designing the post socialist city. The communist regime meant the dissolution of community and the rise of the communist society, painful operation whose aftereffects can be experienced today in the contemporary sprawling urban developments. The *New Urbanism*, played in an ecological key, reinvested with new meaning, adapted to local circumstances, could be the healing method for this global scourge.

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