Beyond Relativism
Reclaiming the Search for Good City Form

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Abstract

This article argues that the search for a theory of good city form should be given a more prominent place in planning theory alongside theories of planning as a process. The professional practice of city and regional planning requires well-validated, durable criteria for successful outcomes. Fortunately, many recent developments in philosophy, science, political theory, and the arts challenge the postmodern relativism that has deflected attention away from normative theory toward procedural issues. The authors argue that planners should take advantage of these new ideas and launch a renewed quest for the elements of good city form.

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This article explores multiple intellectual currents that challenge relativism and attempt to define a more secure foundation for planning practice. We argue that the planning profession needs a renewed focus on substance rather than process and specifically a strong, well-articulated theory of good city form. The *telos* of urban and regional planning as a profession is the making of good cities, not the study of its own internal procedures or social science research on urban affairs. It seems unlikely that the good city can be achieved if planners do not have clear, durable standards for successful outcomes. We acknowledge that any definition of the good city must extend beyond physical planning, but we question the profession's tendency to avoid a more definitive commitment to a theory of good city form. In the absence of clear principles, the public cannot tell what planners stand for, planners themselves are left with shallow resources when engaging more powerful and less public spirited actors, and students in planning programs are led to believe that unfamiliarity with standards of good city form is professionally acceptable. Ultimately, if planners remain tentative about good city form, they are likely to be perpetually confined to an administrative role in the city-building process.

Underlying planning's diffident and cautious attitude toward normative theory are philosophies suggesting that facts are separate from values, beauty is subjective, there is no human nature, virtues cannot be identified or ranked, and in general, that we do not need to decide between different substantive conceptions of the good. For planning, this means that we cannot tell a good city when we see one. But recent developments in science, philosophy, and culture suggest that these relativistic philosophies may be mistaken. For example, in a series of provocative books, cultural philosopher Frederick Turner (1995, 1991a, 1991b) has defined what he calls the "radical center," a position that rejects both the acute relativism of postmodernists and the rigid moralism of traditional conservatives. Turner and other thinkers aligned with the radical center share in common a belief in self-organizing principles—that the universe is not deterministic but is self-renewing and infinitely creative. They are exploring exciting, hopeful connections between diverse fields—such as evolutionary theory, neurobiology, and chaos theory—and the return of classical ideals, craftsmanship, and poetic meter in the arts. In short, there may be strong foundations for a new classicism that rises above the current disorganized cacophony of ever more bizarre aesthetic experiments.

Similarly, in epistemology, moral philosophy, and political theory, there are growing challenges to relativistic perspectives that deny our ability to apprehend truths about the physical world, human nature, and the good society. Arguments of this nature may be found in a wide range of thought, including critical realism and theories of "republican community." Antirelativistic positions are receiving renewed attention in part because postmodernism has reached a point of diminishing returns, and in its more extreme forms it has veered toward incoherence (Argyros 1991; Bhaskar 1994; Norris 1996, 1997; Beiner 1997; Rapp 1998). The society of consumerist or bureaucratic liberalism is showing a rougher edge as it gradually loses its ability to live off values borrowed from earlier traditions. Planners and citizens in general may wish to question the complacent assumption that nothing was lost by abandoning political theories and ethical perspectives that take the discussion of substantive goods seriously (Etzioni 1993, 1996; Frohnen 1996; McMylor 1994; Mulhall and Swift 1992).

In this article, we attempt to tie these developments to the world of urban planning by postulating that there are durable, time-tested truths and discoveries that have been (and continue to be) made about urban form. This is not an easy task, and in the brief pages that follow, we offer only a framework for how urban planning's theoretical development can become better integrated with a shift away from relativism. We propose that the construction of a theory of good city form be rescued from its marginalized position in the ambiguous subfield of urban design and elevated to an equal rank with process-oriented theories of planning.

We anticipate strong objections to our proposal and it is useful to lay these out up front. Planners might reject the search for a coherent theory of good city form and its elevation to a more fundamental position based on one or more of the following beliefs:

- Urban form is not important enough to warrant its elevation to the same level as planning process theories. Social, economic, and cultural variables are far more important in determining the good city than any choice of spatial arrangements. The proposed resurrection of normative form theory will tend to encourage environmental determinism and the naïve belief that complex urban problems can be solved by the redesign of streets, buildings, and public spaces.
- Even if we wanted to arrive at a powerful normative theory of urban form as a foundation for the professional practice of planning, when we examine the current state of theory in urban design, it is chaotic and lacking in consensus. Radically different images of the good city are advanced by different groups: deconcentration and low-density, deconstruction, everyday urbanism, New Urbanism, Corbusian modernism, and so on (Hays 1998; Lang 1994).

Why should the planning profession get entangled in this briar patch of competing design theories?

- In a liberal democracy and a postmodern world, it is more appropriate for planners to simply provide a framework within which citizens may pursue many different diverse and even conflicting types of urban form. Any attempts to impose a particular normative theory will infringe on freedom, limit consumer choice, and enforce a sterile sameness of design. The search for good city form can only lead to new forms of domination.
- The history of urban planning shows that one generation's "solution" to the problem of metropolitan form often becomes the next generation's "problem" (e.g., modernism's prescription of freeways, austere skyscrapers, rigid zoning, etc.). Why should we think that planners in the year 2000 are suddenly going to get it right in some timeless or enduring way rather than just producing another temporary fad that will be discarded in 2030 because of new economic, technological, and social realities?

These objections, while formidable, can be addressed. In the pages that follow, we present a brief outline of how we believe a rebuttal of the rejection of normative theorizing could be structured.

► Crisis and Response in Current Planning Practice

Kevin Lynch (1981) admonished planners for failing to develop a normative basis for planning. Unfortunately, the problem has not changed much since Lynch's time. Urban planning is in need of a theoretical infrastructure that can support the procurement of good city form, but the planning academy has tended to steer clear of any focused attempts to agree on a unified theory. In this article, we use the terms *good city form* and *normative planning* interchangeably. They refer to the quest for excellence, quality, and beauty in our built environments—how our metropolitan areas *ought* to be. Particularly important in this discussion is the notion of *beauty*, which acts as a powerful unifying concept. In Frederick Turner's (1991a) phrase, beauty is "the value of values."

Heeding Santayana (1896, 163), we should be cautious in trying to define beauty: "Beauty as we feel it is something indescribable: what it is or what it means can never be said." And yet it is possible to situate beauty within a coherent worldview, drawing on insights from the social sciences, the humanities, and the natural sciences. This has been the project of Frederick Turner and other theorists of the radical center. Beauty is a quality of certain "complex, organized, and unified patterns" (Turner 1995, 20) that emerge out of the creative advance of a world that is conceived as "nonlinear, chaotic, dissipative, and self-organizing" (Turner 1991b, 16). "Patterns are beautiful

that exist at the margin between order and disorder, that exhibit a hierarchical organization which is troubled and opened up by contradictory elements" (Turner 1991a, 93). Ultimately, "beauty is a recognition of the deepest tendency or theme of the universe as a whole" (Turner 1991b, 11).

In a world stripped of meaning by postmodern philosophies and outdated, reductive views of natural science, this may seem like a speculative leap, but we challenge our readers to consult the supportive works directly. Seeing beauty as "something real in the world" (Argyros 1991, 282) opens up welcome escape routes from the claustrophobic relativism of current cultural discourse. It returns beauty to its rightful place as an indispensable concept for urban planners, one that we should not be ashamed of using in our work.

Our current, unsophisticated model of urbanization—formless sprawl—is in a profound way linked to the lack of a solid theory of good city form. While planning theorists continue to develop ever more sophisticated models of the planning process, and spatial analysts produce volumes describing urban structures and functions, the American built environment continues its seemingly inexorable spiral toward the "fragmented metropolis" of hyperprivatized single-use pods, extreme auto-dependency, degraded public spaces, and visual chaos (Barnett 1995; Kunstler 1996; Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck 2000). While there are defenders of such places as the pinnacle of civilization, it scarcely behooves a profession that should be deeply familiar with the great urban places of history, and capable of making its own independent judgments about design excellence, to settle for whatever developers happen to be building.

The lack of a theory of good city form weakens planning practice in the following ways:

- Process theories leave planners without guidance when making many critical decisions in their daily work. Urban planning as a profession is prescriptive. It must offer specific alternatives for particular places, not just description or analysis. Planners cannot prescribe well if they have no richly articulated theory that distinguishes good city form from the mediocre and the bad.

- Planners should not have to reinvent the wheel or launch a research project every time they face recurring problems in regulating or designing urban space. While creative problem solving and adaptation to particular contexts will always be required, this can be done more effectively if it draws on a thorough, well-documented, and richly illustrated body of design principles for the reliable, reproducible generation of good city form. As Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck (2000) have argued, our goal should be a very high "win-loss ratio," not sporadic, serendipitous victories.

- Not having a strong normative theory of city form simply cedes the field to other actors who have no qualms about fighting for their preferences, even if they are narrow, short-sighted, and in conflict with the public interest.

- The planning profession appears weak, uncertain, and divided when it cannot articulate the key elements of a good city. How can we claim to be "city and regional planners" without such discriminatory power? This detracts from our professional credibility, especially vis-à-vis other professions that are not so diffident.

- It can be argued that urban planners often are poorly prepared to make critical decisions about the built environment because they have received little training in physical planning and urban design. Nor is there any peer pressure to achieve excellence in these domains. The unimportance of striving for good city form is communicated to planners by the absence of any sustained pursuit of a normative theory by the profession's intellectuals.

- Serious discussions of beauty seem to have almost vanished from the planning literature, as have reflections on how different city forms might either support or frustrate civic virtue and public-spirited behavior. This seems anomalous and reinforces the perception that planning is bureaucratic, uncreative, and administrative in nature when in fact it deals directly with critical issues of aesthetics, culture, and ethics.

Theories of good city form do indeed exist and are deeply relevant to current planning practice. The problem, however, is that such theories have been relegated to the level of *urban design*, viewed as stylistic or architectural solutions to peripheral problems. Such theories have therefore failed to become integrated as an essential component of mainstream planning theory alongside procedural, communicative, instrumental, and other theories *for* planning (Kreditor 1990; Dagenhart and Sawicki 1994; Dyck 1994). A refreshing exception to this trend is Susan Fainstein's (2000) article "New Directions in Planning Theory," which treats New Urbanism respectfully on the same plane with the Communicative and Just City models and correctly sees that New Urbanism provides substantive principles of good city form that are lacking in process theories.

In the absence of a robust theory of good city form, planners have tended to rely on various environmental, economic, and social principles as the basis for pursuing particular spatial patterns. While this strategy is useful, it is necessarily incomplete, since a theory of good city form must directly engage both aesthetic ideas about the organization of space and ethical ideals concerning the city as a supportive setting for quality of life (Harries 1997). A normative theory, therefore, must deal with the complexities of aesthetic, ethical, and political theory to secure its foundations and cannot rely solely on empirical evidence from the social and natural sciences.

We believe that a theory of good city form should coexist at the same level with other planning theories and animate planning practice more than it does at present. These ideas are conceptualized in Figures 1, 2, and 3. Figure 1 represents the existing situation. Here, planners have at their disposal planning
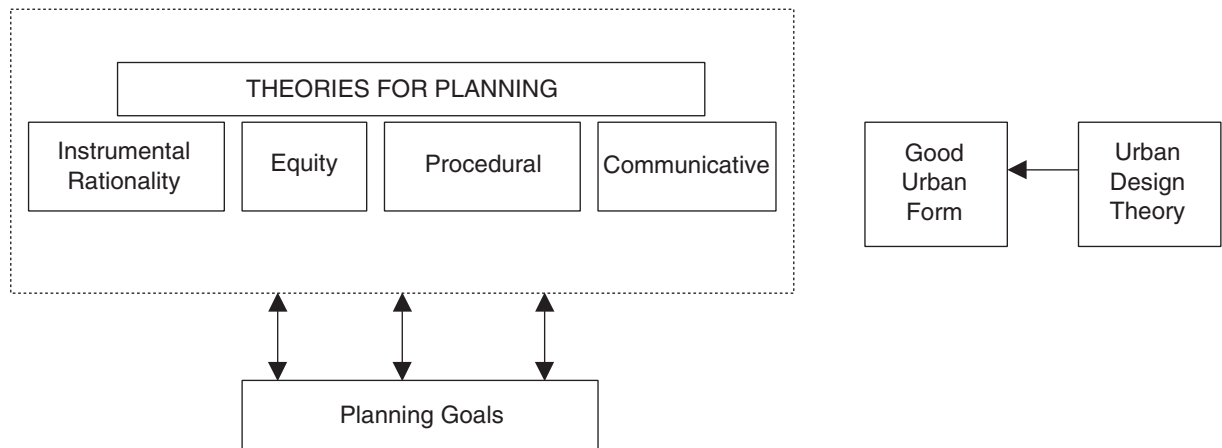
Figure 1. *Current status: normative theories of good urban form exist outside mainstream theories for planning.*
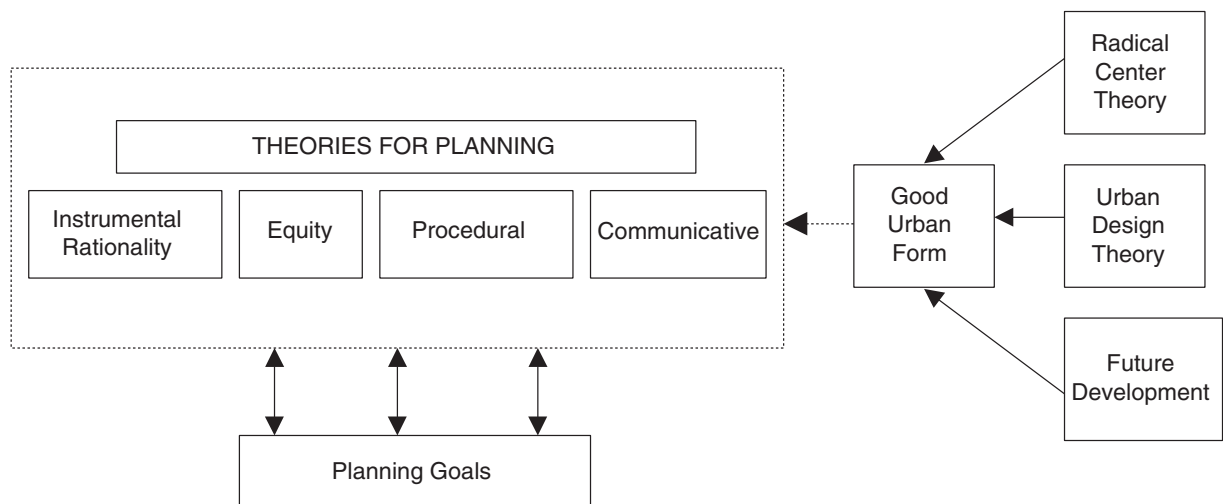

Figure 2. *Strengthening normative theories of good urban form.*

theories that are intended to improve the process of planning, but to incorporate notions of good city form, planners are forced to look elsewhere—that is, urban design theory.

Figure 2 represents what we hope may be representative of future theoretical work in planning. Existing urban design theories could be combined with broader insights from other fields (e.g., radical center theory, with its exploration of the aesthetics of spatial organization and quantitative models of complexity; political theories that focus on the elucidation of substantive goods for human societies, including the nurturing of a vigorous public realm) to strengthen the intellectual foundations of normative theory and elevate its status. Accordingly, the box in Figure 2 labeled "good urban form" is shown being drawn into the larger picture, that is, the main theoretical infrastructure of urban planning.

Figure 3 conceptualizes what we hope will be a future development in the theoretical infrastructure for planning. It represents a situation in which a theory of good city form is brought into the mainstream of planning theory and is not relegated to a tangential region of planning reserved for urban designers. Here, theories of good city form become an essential, integral part of planning.

To date, urban designers and nonacademic urbanists have carried the lion's share of work on exploring and generating a theoretical basis for good city form. Some notable classics are Jacobs (1961), Cullen (1961), Alexander et al. (1977), Krier (1998), Kostof (1991), and Lynch (1981), as well as the growing literature produced by New Urbanists (Congress for the New Urbanism 2000). Other contributions are Sternberg's (2000) recent work on developing an integrative theory of
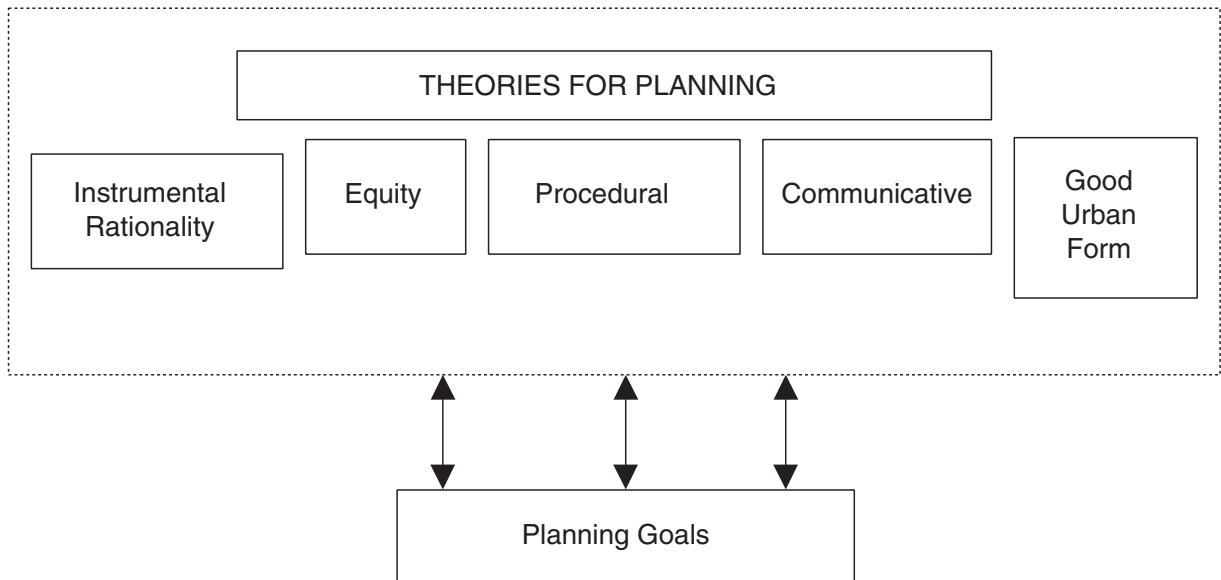
Figure 3. *Proposed future status: normative theories of good urban form make up an essential part of planning's theoretical infrastructure.*

urban design, Montgomery's (1998) ideas about urbanity, Greene's (1992) taxonomy of community design, and George's (1997) promotion of second-order design. But within the mainstream of academic planning scholarship, there is very little theoretical support for the reinvigoration of normative theory. The dominant theoretical constructs on which planners rely—communicative rationality, instrumental rationality, equity, advocacy, incrementalism—simply do not support the quest for good city form with the specificity that is required in professional planning practice (Mandelbaum, Mazza, and Burchell 1996). They provide a context for decision making, insights into the workings of the planning process, and some important nonspatial normative content, but they provide no richly articulated and illustrated "pattern language" to which planners may refer when the moment comes to make decisions about the planning and development of particular urban places. In addition to this lack of structure, there is actual antipathy for theories of good city form among many scholars of urban affairs. David Harvey (1997, 69), for example, views any such quest for a normative theory as insidious since it "perpetuates the idea that the shaping of spatial order is or can be the foundation for a new moral and aesthetic order."

This is a critically important time for planning scholars to rekindle the normative approach and nurture the branch of theory Lynch (1981, 37) called "spindly and starved for light." Two phenomena set the stage. First, there has been a gradual convergence of opinion about good city form—for example,

that walkable, diverse, mixed-use landscapes produce the highest quality of urban life. The great urban places of history have these characteristics. The sprawl alternative, planners recognize, creates private luxury embedded in an impoverished public landscape, with disconnected urban fragments cobbled together only by cheap energy and enormous amounts of driving (Newman and Kenworthy 1999). New Urbanists occupy much of the front line in the battle against auto-dependent sprawl, but many other groups are also involved under the rubrics of smart growth, sustainable development, and ecological land use planning.

The second phenomenon has to do with the diverse critiques of relativism that seem to be emerging across a range of disciplines. One thread, as mentioned above, is the "radical center," which rejects postmodern relativism. In books such as *The Culture of Hope: A New Birth of the Classical Spirit* (Turner 1995); *A Blessed Rage for Order: Deconstruction, Evolution, and Chaos* (Argyros 1991); and *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (Lasch 1995), philosophical critiques of emotivist ethics, liberal political theory, and relativist philosophies of science have gained prominence. Some (Turner in particular) have pursued the theme that evolutionary theory, chaos theory, and classicism can be tied together to spur a renewed attention to durable, time-tested cultural patterns grounded in our evolutionary history and neurobiological structure. These critiques try to clear a new space for the elaboration of a substantive ethics of the "virtues" (MacIntyre 1984; Pincoffs 1986) and a political theory possessing the critical resources to

distinguish societies in which human beings can flourish from "ways of life that are banal, empty, and stultifying" (Beiner 1992, 28).

These two events—a coalescing of prescriptions for optimal urban form and the growing critiques of relativism in science, political theory, and art—provide a renewed impetus for planners to get serious about normative theory. Good city form is not a sideshow that can be delegated to architects and landscape architects—it inhabits the very center of planning practice, the shaping of great urban places. We willingly follow in the footsteps of those who have authored earlier calls for planners and planning professors to "bring the city back in" (Beauregard 1995), restore respect for skilled urban design (George 1997; Sternberg 2000), and put the plan back into planning (Brooks 1988; Levy 1992; Lucy 1994; Neuman 1998).

▶ **Planning's Best Current Model**

Lynch (1980) was very clear that normative theorizing should not be restricted to architects and landscape architects and that "city design," as he called it, was not just "big architecture." In fact, he thought that an academic program in city design should "be centered in city planning" to take advantage of planning's more encompassing perspective on urban affairs and wide range of skills. However, planning academics have resisted this summons and all others like it. Why is this so?

A central, daunting question has been, Whose normative vision is to be adopted? Any review of the current state of urban design theory would reveal many competing perspectives. Since they contradict one another, they cannot all be correct. Indeed, choices have to be made, and this is where planners must take a fundamental stand: they must acknowledge that on the plane of fundamental spatial principles, some theories are just better than others.

This does not entail, however, a flattening of all perspectives into a homogeneous city of uniform, cloned elements. After all, cities are very large and complex objects. There is space within the city for different kinds of districts, neighborhoods, and streets suited to varying individual and group preferences. A theory of good city form can have as one of its principles that different "identifiable neighborhoods," to use Christopher Alexander et al.'s (1977) terminology, be allowed to flourish, creating a "mosaic of subcultures" lodged within a coherent overarching pattern at the urban and regional scales. It would seem that some kind of "unity-within-diversity" would be the proper goal, incorporating "baseline" principles for neighborhood structure while still leaving room for the expression of diverse local cultures and historical vernaculars.

We believe that at present, the New Urbanism comes closest to providing the core principles by which this kind of urban form can be achieved. The alternatives fall short. Modernist urbanism tried to impose rigid, abstract, geometric patterns and functional land use separations on the city, in contrast to all earlier urban morphologies. This has been a manifest failure (Holston 1989; Blake 1977; Brolin 1976). The current default setting for city building in the United States, Conventional Suburban Development (CSD), also fails because it institutes a particularly extreme and sterilizing separation of land uses while simultaneously producing visual and functional disorder along commercial arterials (Solomon 1992; Kelbaugh 1997). New suburbs thrive while huge swaths of the inner city decay and older suburbs slip into decline. Private space metastasizes while the public realm withers away (Lofland 1998). The wilder experiments of the architectural avantgarde seem to confuse city planning with architecture and emphasize bizarre innovations that often show open disrespect for the public realm (Bess 2000; Soltan 1996). By contrast, the New Urbanism borrows from the great cities of the past to create a proper mixing of different urban functions unified by fundamental rules about neighborhood structure, the placement of buildings on streets, and the design of public spaces. New Urbanism is a syntax (Smith 1977) that can provide for a wide range of density preferences and architectural styles while maintaining the baseline rules that make for walkable, diverse cities. It is most certainly not limited to the small town as a model. Most of the leading New Urbanists live in large cities such as San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and Miami and are thoroughly versed in the complex morphology of large metropolises.

At present, New Urbanism derives its legitimacy from (1) a large body of historical literature on city design; (2) the close study and emulation of universally admired, "great urban places"; (3) existing research in the field of "environment and behavior"; (4) experience with the actual planning and construction of New Urbanist projects; and (5) a growing body of scholarly research on the performance of New Urbanist plans (Moudon 2000). Table 1 provides excerpts from the *Charter* of the Congress for the New Urbanism (2000). The *Charter* is composed of three sections (the region: metropolis/city/town; the neighborhood/district/corridor; and the block/street/building), and Table 1 lists a selection of three principles from each section (each section has nine principles for a total of twenty-seven). Clearly, the New Urbanists have crafted a very specific set of prescriptions for the shaping of urban form, as opposed to the vaguer, higher-level abstractions of policy analysis.

Why should we think that the New Urbanists have finally approximated a theory of good city form that can withstand

**Table 1.
Selected principles of New Urbanism.**

1. Development patterns should not blur or eradicate the edges of the metropolis.
2. Where appropriate, new development contiguous to urban boundaries should be organized as neighborhoods and districts and be integrated with the existing urban pattern.
3. The development and redevelopment of towns and cities should respect historical patterns, precedents, and boundaries.
4. The neighborhood, the district, and the corridor are the essential elements of development and redevelopment in the metropolis. They form identifiable areas that encourage citizens to take responsibility for their maintenance and evolution.
5. Neighborhoods should be compact, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed-use.
6. Concentrations of civic, institutional, and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes.
7. A primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use.
8. Individual architectural projects should be seamlessly linked to their surroundings. This issues transcends style.
9. Civic buildings and public gathering places require important sites to reinforce community identity and the culture of democracy. They deserve distinctive form because their role is different from that of other buildings and places that constitute the fabric of the city.

Source: Congress for the New Urbanism (2000).

**Table 2.
Selected principles of growth
management and smart growth.**

1. Provide a mix of land use to create a mix of housing choices and opportunities.
2. Provide a variety of transportation choices, including pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods.
3. Maintain a unique sense of place by respecting local cultural and natural environmental features.
4. Provide staged and managed growth in urban transition areas with compact development patterns.
5. Promote the safety, livability, and revitalization of existing urban and rural community centers.
6. Preserve the character of the community and promote community identity.
7. Improve housing opportunities, increase diversity, and promote better housing developments.
8. Prevent sprawl.
9. Promote aesthetics and preserve historic and cultural features.

Source: Items 1 through 5, 1000 Friends of Minnesota (2000); items 6 through 9, DeGrove (1991).

the test of time? Will it not just be discarded as one more fad, perhaps in 2020 or 2030? This is far from certain. Modernist urbanism, as a serious building program, only extends back to the early decades of the twentieth century. CSD is really a post–World War II phenomenon. That is to say, these modes of city planning are rather small slivers at the tail end of a much larger and temporally deep body of city building experience (Kostof 1991, 1992). New Urbanism, while fully aware of the twentieth century's technological and social revolutions, is quite different from its competitors in that it continues to work within the tradition that has produced the most admired examples of good city form in human history. Unencumbered with crude zeitgeist theories (Watkin 1977) that mandate the violent rejection of the past, and not hampered by misconceptions about the relation of freedom and order (i.e., that originality and freedom can only be demonstrated by the deliberate pursuit of disorder and radical novelty), New Urbanism can build on a very sturdy and resilient body of urban form theory. It is far from being a shallow, casually adopted, cosmetic style or marketing tool.

New Urbanism also shares much in common with more environmentally based solutions to the crisis of metropolitan fragmentation that have been proposed, such as sustainable development, smart growth, and ecological land use planning (Platt, Rowntree, and Muick 1994; Beatley and Manning 1997; Benfield, Raimi, and Chen 1999). What is important to recognize is that there is an aesthetic, value-laden, normative basis inherent in many of these objectives and principles. We provide examples in Table 2. We present a selection of principles that specifically require a normative foundation—their value cannot be established exclusively by empirical or statistical measure. Thus, normative principles are prevalent in current planning—they have simply failed to be explicitly interwoven into a coherent theory of good city form.

Of course, some of the principles advanced by proponents of sustainable development, smart growth, and New Urbanism can be judged on the basis of empirical results, and thus it is important to continually judge whether certain outcomes that are claimed actually occur. For example, whether compact urban forms produce fewer car trips or impact social groups differently can be empirically treated. But there are aesthetic and ethical components to these theories that need to be debated on their own terms. They cannot be resolved by an appeal to data alone. Some principles are not provable in the conventional scientific sense, and indeed, the constant war of numbers engaging prosprawl and antisprawl debaters has not convinced anyone to change direction. What is needed is a more explicit discussion of normative ideals, hopefully leading to a better connection between theory and practice.

► Command and Control Planning?

A recurring concern about theories of good city form such as New Urbanism is that they will codify and institutionalize a particular regime of "totalizing" order, infringing on personal freedom, frustrating consumer choice, and excluding "the other." Geographers have spun some elaborate critiques of New Urbanism using postmodern theory (Falconer Al-Hindi and Staddon 1997; McCann 1995), and it goes without saying that the libertarian Right has no tolerance for New Urbanism, which is viewed as a dangerous expansion of the planning function in society (Cox 1999; Staley 1999; Gordon and Richardson 1997; Conte 2000).

We do not propose that an elite cadre of expert planners be given dictatorial powers to mandate a singular, one-size-fits-all mode of city planning. This was the downfall of modernism, and planners have ever since been hyperaware of the repressive qualities inherent in grand, totalizing visions. But at the same time, it is possible to make qualitative assessments of codes and guidelines: all codes are not repressive, and some codes are better than others (Beiner 1997). And in its implementation, New Urbanism seems remarkably open and democratic when compared with typical sprawl subdivisions and gated versions in particular. Similarly, New Urbanism does call for strengthened regional planning, respect for the long-term common good, and regulation of the city building process by reasonable public policies, but there is nothing particularly radical about this. What the libertarians fear as "command-and-control" planning, is really just sensible urban planning for modern, mixed economies (Ewing 1997).

The call for a proactive, normative view of urban form may be looked at as antithetical to an emerging view that elevates the importance of planning "conversations." One example has been labeled *Everyday Urbanism* (Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski 1999) or what Grady Clay (1994, xxii) has called the generic landscape of "focal points, cruxes, fluxes, and transition locations." Crawford (1999, 15) describes everyday urbanism as seeking "to release the powers of creativity and imagination already present within daily life as a means of transforming urban experience and the city." This open and fluid evaluation of urban life is important in its celebration of everyday experience. Planners should welcome the approach of everyday urbanism as a necessary link in the ultimate goal of stimulating more desirable patterns of urban growth and change.

But there should be more than simply a recognition of the importance of the underlying regional vernacular traditions present in urban environments. Such traditions must be accounted for, but they must also be reconciled with normative principles. In particular, the way in which immigrant groups find resourceful ways to use and change urban elements to support their needs—and at the same time create artful spaces—needs to be part of the process. But there is a danger that this approach "overestimates the mythic aspect of the ordinary and ugly" (Kelbaugh 2000, 287). To avoid this, it is important that the recognition of these vernacular experiences be channeled into directions that can improve the urban condition. Open-ended evaluation is important in its celebration of everyday experience, but the achievement of planning goals can quickly become a process of urban design by default rather than the deliberate attempt to achieve ideal urban forms—places and spaces that are more useful and beautiful for the residents who use them.

To achieve this, it is necessary to integrate everyday experience with known principles related to good city form. Planners must have a keen sense of the physical domain of everyday life, working through participatory planning processes and democratic politics and making compromises where necessary. Everyday urbanism can help in this regard, since it emphasizes the experience of place and, therefore, works to replace abstract modernist notions of infinite and uniform space with "immediate, concrete [and] particular" notions of place (Walter 1988). The goal of planning should be to work through these concrete notions of place, seeking ways to integrate, where possible, theoretically robust principles of good urban form.

It is also important to emphasize that the application of normative principles does not mean that democratic processes are supplanted. Normative theorizing is meant to be useful to the process of making cities better places. Planning exists to serve the public interest, and normative theorizing plays a critical role in that service by helping to direct public power and resources toward the creation of cities that really are good by comprehensive and durable criteria (Lynch 1981). We would argue that the task of articulating a theory of good city form would actually increase accountability and democratic participation by bringing crucial debates into the open. This is superior to planning processes in which critical spatial issues are dealt with in a confusing, ad hoc, incremental manner, providing multiple openings for the public interest to be sabotaged by private power. Standards for good planning are harder to evade when they are clearly stated, illustrated, and anchored in supportive institutions.

As a consequence of the idea that normative planning is controlling, theories of good urban form are not deemed important enough to occupy the same plane with planning process theories. The result is that planners cannot find adequate support for their prescriptions about good urban form in the existing planning theory literature. Different facets of this literature emphasize critical theory, positivist social science, humanistic understanding, structuralist analysis, and

political economy, but none of these is a substitute for a theory of good city form (Poulton 1991). Planners are left to cobble together their own ad hoc theories out of eclectic reading, common sense, on-the-job experience, and personal predilections. In short, we lack a proper critical method and syntax for evaluating theories of good city form, and therefore we fill this void with inappropriate theoretical perspectives.

▶ The Current Normative Basis: Supporting Theories

We do not have to start from scratch in our search for good city form. There are already compelling texts advancing principles for the functional and beautiful organization of urban space. In this section, we merely highlight a sample of key theorists: Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, Christopher Alexander, Lewis Mumford, and Leon Krier, each of whom offers, in our assessment, a piece of the puzzle. The fine-grain and density requirements of Jacobs, the wide-ranging performance standards of Lynch and his pioneering concern with imageability, Mumford's vision of the Regional City, Alexander's richly woven hierarchy of patterns, and the multiplication of small urban units proposed by Krier form a significant, if unorganized, theoretical basis for good urban form. Each has written from a different perspective, and there have even been squabbles between members of this list, but in the longer view each provides an essential ingredient to the mix.

Well-known to planners through her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs (1961) emphasized "the city as a problem of organized complexity" in a manner presaging radical center theorists. "Zoning for diversity" would encourage the mixing of land uses at a fine grain of activity. Diversity is achieved through mixing primary land uses, small blocks, buildings of different ages, and concentration or high density. Innovative economic activity is supported by and takes place within a public realm: streets, squares, and other public spaces (Hill 1988).

Kevin Lynch's great work, *Good City Form* (1981), identifies him as an obvious source for normative planning theory. Lynch arrived at a set of specific "dimensions of performance": vitality—the support of biological requirements; sense—mental perception and differentiation of a settlement; fit—the match between pattern and behavior; access—being able to reach resources; control of the use of the settlement; and the "meta-criteria" of efficiency (cost) and justice (equity). These were viewed as sliding scales, with different cultures and communities free to choose their preferred settings along each of the criteria. Lynch admitted that his normative theory "seems to lack a vivid, positive affirmation about the good city" (p.

320), but in fact he did provide a more spirited image of the good city in his "Place Utopia" chapter in *Good City Form*. However, Lynch held back from prescribing his own "utopia" as a theory for universal application. Although he knew that in practice, planners have to make use of a cache of preferred spatial patterns—"life rafts for those who are caught in those frantic whirlpools of decision" (p. 322)—he preferred to segregate his own urban vision from his more general exploration of the connections between form and value.

By contrast, Christopher Alexander has been quite willing to define the core patterns of a cross-cultural, "timeless way of building" (Alexander et al. 1977; Alexander 1979). Like the radical center theorists, he has been on the trail of that elusive balance of order and disorder that seems to characterize great cities and great works of art. In his well-known article "A City Is Not a Tree" (1965), he critiqued tree-like patterns of hierarchy in city design, arguing that they lack the structural complexity of traditional cities and lead to dysfunctional plans such as those of Le Corbusier, Hilbersheimer, and other modernists. During the 1970s and 1980s, Alexander's research burst forth in a series of ambitious and intriguing works, the most famous of which was *A Pattern Language* (Alexander et al. 1977), which specified in great detail an interconnected web of spatial patterns for the creation of good city form and humane architecture, beginning with the regional scale and working down to doors and window sills. Alexander hoped that the pattern language would be continually improved by new insights and experience and that it would serve as a kind of DNA for the production of great buildings and urban landscapes. He illustrated the method in a hypothetical project to redesign a portion of San Francisco in *A New Theory of Urban Design* (Alexander et al. 1987).

Another basis for normative, aesthetic principles found in current planning practice is in the work and writing of Leon Krier. As one of the main architectural theorists behind the New Urbanism, Krier relies on the principles of organicism: the view that urbanization should occur by multiplication of integrated, multiple-use, finite urban entities (or "quarters"), not through random, low-density diffusion at the periphery (Krier 1998). Krier emphasizes the pattern of buildings and spaces inherent in organic urban forms and the way organic principles produce cities of much greater urban quality. Anticities, which expand by mechanically fragmenting into separate zones, are to be rejected in favor of the replication of complete urban quarters (Krier 1984). Critical, too, is the notion of scale, since cities can be seriously damaged, according to Krier, by unnatural, unlimited expansion. While the organic metaphor is used by Krier to support both sustainability and aesthetic ideals (Thompson-Fawcett 1998), clearly one of Krier's main concerns is with the theorization of

space (directly influenced by Camillo Sitte) and the resulting urban aesthetics produced (Krier 1992).

Finally, we must mention Lewis Mumford, not as an urban designer or professional planner but as a representative of the Garden City movement and its later American permutations in the work of the Regional Planning Association of America, Clarence Stein and Henry Wright in particular (Sussman 1976; Parsons 1994; Luccarelli 1995; Wojtowicz 1998). This strand forms an essential and integral part of the existing theoretical basis for good city form (Hill 1985).

While not forming a singular school of thought, aspects of the work of Jacobs, Lynch, Alexander, Krier, and Mumford form at least a partial theoretical basis for good urban form and the aesthetics of spatial organization. In fact, recent scholarship has attempted to link these theories and others into a normative statement for urban design. Sternberg (2000), for example, develops an "integrative" theory of urban design in which he ties together the artistic principles of Sitte, the legibility of Lynch, and the vitality of Jacobs, among others, on the basis of the degree to which these principles defy commodification and seek coherence in the public realm. In another instance, John Montgomery's (1998) detailed examination of how to make a good city relies to a large extent on tying together Jacobs and Lynch.

▶ Planning in the Radical Center: Adding to Planning's Normative Base

The field of urban planning is fortunate to have some exemplary urban theorists from whom to derive a theory of good city form. This is bolstered by a large literature associated with architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design. But we believe that normative theory can draw on an even larger body of thought, extending beyond physical planning per se into the domains of philosophy, science, aesthetics, ethics, cultural theory, and political philosophy. In this section, we describe a body of thought, loosely described as the *radical center*, which poses the following question: Are there "classical" ideas of value that endure through time because of their deep grounding in the very structure of human consciousness, and if so, what are the implications of this for urban planning?

The term *radical center* was coined by cultural philosopher Frederick Turner (1995) to describe the relatively recent emergence of a new paradigm in contemporary culture ranging across a wide range of fields such as evolutionary biology, linguistics, mathematics, neurobiology, anthropology, cosmology, physics, political philosophy, and literary criticism. The bibliography for Turner's *The Culture of Hope* provides a sense of the breadth and eclectic nature of this body of thought. The overarching theme uniting these ideas is that "high" or "avant-garde" (including academic) culture currently finds itself in a state of crisis. This is the crisis of postmodern subjectivity, extreme multiculturalism, hyperindividualism in politics, emotivism in ethics, and the rejection of beauty as merely subjective.

In the radical center paradigm, quite the opposite occurs. To introduce the main organizing principles, we list below parts of a radical centrist manifesto organized by Turner (1995, 225-28):

- Art should grow from and speak to the common roots and universal principles of human nature in all cultures.
- Certain forms, genres, and techniques of art are culturally universal, natural, and classical. . . . They are not limitations or constraints but enfranchising instruments and infinitely generative feedback systems.
- Art is the natural ally, interpreter, and guide of the sciences.
- Art is the missing element in environmentalism.
- We have a nature; that nature is cultural; that culture is classical.

It should seem obvious that the radical center is critical of modernism. To paraphrase Turner (1995, 228), sometimes the present creates the future by breaking the shackles of the past—the Enlightenment and modernism are examples; but sometimes the past creates the future by breaking the shackles of the present—the Renaissance, and perhaps our time, are examples.

Turner (1995) makes the case that the assumptions on which academic, avant-garde, leftist culture are based fail when evaluated against recent developments in science and philosophy. The first assumption is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This can be challenged head on by research that has shown remarkable cross-cultural consistency in aesthetic viewpoints (Rentschler, Herzberger, and Epstein 1988). What is particularly interesting is that this phenomenon has surfaced in urban planning in the work of Nelessen (1994) and his studies of visual preferences and Nasar's (1998) related studies of urban images. Lynch and Alexander made cottage industries out of uncovering the consistency with which people migrate toward certain patterns that are legible and unified, patterned and complex.

This is essentially the classical position—that beauty is a reality in and of itself—and it is this premise that the radical center explores and advances. At present, the ruling class supports the avant-garde and not classicism. Therefore, the old avant-garde adage that classical standards are elitist no longer holds. Instead, a large majority of ordinary people desire the classical notions of "beauty, meaning and craftsmanship" (Turner 1995, 20). Even the avant-garde has recently begun to use terms like *beauty* in its description of modern art, prompt-

ing Turner (2000) to comment that "things must really be getting desperate down at postmodern headquarters."

The new paradigm maintains that behaviorism has collapsed as an explanation of human nature, and that, similar to the idea that beauty has intrinsic value, human nature shows surprising cross-cultural commonalities. Certain values in the arts—classical forms such as poetic meter, tonal scale, and pictorial representation—have emerged as a sort of shared structure embedded in human nature. This constitutes the emergence of a *natural classicism*, implying the existence of "genuine canons of value in the arts" (Turner 1995, 21). Therefore, in light of these findings, it is becoming more difficult to base ideals about beauty and value on shifting, socially constructed premises.

The failures of the avant-garde have translated into the loss of one critical value in contemporary culture, that of beauty. In its absence, our civilization has attempted to make due with cognitive values, dispatching beauty to the realm of the subjective: "Aesthetic value has become a leisure activity, a decorative hobby, a status symbol, a narcotic form of entertainment to keep the masses quiet" (Turner 1995, 191). In a similar fashion, ethical values have been denatured into personal preferences and lifestyle choices within the context of "consumerist liberalism" (Beiner 1992, 1997), which abstains from any serious, principled quest to define substantive goods.

One of the most important discoveries made by the radical centrists is that the order-disorder dualism prominent in current discussions about art, beauty, and value needs to be dissolved (Argyros 1991). From the perspective of the art world, this dualism means that the avant-garde has rejected order (associated with determinism) in favor of disorder (randomness) because order involves hierarchies, foundational principles, and norms, all of which constrain freedom. On the other hand, the conservative Right tends to embrace excessively rigid and narrow forms of order, translating into such events as the attempt to disembody the National Endowment for the Arts.

The breakdown in the old order-disorder dualism was precipitated, in part, by discoveries such as "chaos theory," which is something of a misnomer since it really refers to the discovery of unexpected forms of order within phenomena that superficially appear to be random (Gleick 1987; Waldrop 1992). Turner (1995) finds it an "an astonishing stroke of good luck": that there exists a nonrepressive, nondeterministic kind of order that leaves a place in the world for creativity and freedom. Fitting within this paradigm is an incredible range of different types of discoveries:

> the problem of how to describe catastrophic changes and singularities by means of a continuous mathematics; the problem of how to predict the future states of positive feed-

back processes; Gödel's paradox, which detaches the true from the provable; the description of phase-changes in crystallography and electrochemistry; the phenomenon of turbulence; the dynamics of open systems and nonlinear processes; the observer problem in a variety of disciplines; the failure of sociological and economic predictive models because of the rational expectations and second-guessing of real human subjects; etc. (P. 65)

How is urban planning related to this new kind of order, this breakup of the order-disorder dualism? We propose that this same dualism has haunted planning in the constant push and pull between technocratic modes of planning that mandate rigid, simplistic, monotonous forms of order (orthodox modernism; large, master-planned tracts of single-use suburban pods; urban megastructures) and the various modes of laissez-faire, which reject the very idea of durable city planning principles and emphasize the escape from codes and standards (deconstructionism, everyday urbanism, the disorder of the commercial strip, and the spatial disorder—at the metropolitan and regional scales—of sprawl land use patterns, even though their individual parts may be rigidly planned).

New Urbanism, in our view, tries to stake out some of the terrain opened up by the new conception of order/disorder advanced by the radical center. Perhaps it is a mode of natural classicism in the realm of urban form, encompassing a renewed appreciation for beauty, meaning, and craftsmanship in keeping with deep historical traditions anchored in human nature. The interpretation of principles in this way has been made by Kunstler (1997) in *Home from Nowhere*, Greenberg (1995) in *The Poetics of Cities*, Alexander et al. (1987) in *A New Theory of Urban Design*, and articles such as "Theory of the Urban Web" (Salingaros 1998) and "A Universal Rule for the Distribution of Sizes" (Salingaros and West 1999). Each of these explores the rules for building an urban fabric that is based on complexity theory and follows specific principles governing form, proportion, and urban organization. In these explorations, ideas about the objective, essential truths of beauty and spatial form make up an underlying foundation.

Professions that revert to relativism do so because they have lost the ability to judge one idea as better than another. Urban design theorists have been less hesitant than planners to declare the aesthetic superiority of particular spatial forms. Greene (1992, 177), for example, developed a taxonomy of city shape "to help counteract the view that community design decisions are merely expressions of subjective opinion." The taxonomy could have been conceived by Lynch: the main principles being function, order, identity, and appeal; and the qualities that measure them including linkages, continuity, vitality, and harmony.

Current planning theories really have very little to say about beauty or the underlying formal characteristics of great cities.

Again, the fundamental problem is that these concepts have been exiled to urban design and demoted to the level of the subjective. It will not be easy to bring them back as respected elements in the planning theory pantheon. Thus, we do not make this call lightly. We are proposing an agenda for research and reflection, not announcing a finished product. In this effort, there are many fascinating questions that radical center theory may be able to illuminate. For example, in what way is Christopher Alexander's "timeless way of building" universally applicable (as he claims) to all people, places, and times (Alexander et al. 1977; Alexander 1979)? How does it relate to the quest for "dynamic structures of the city that change to remain valid and stay alive" (Frey 1999, 46)? Do timeless patterns only apply to urban form at a particular scale? How do larger, macro-structures of urban form reflect these timeless qualities?

The radical center paradigm has significant potential to both elevate and inform a renewed exploration of good city form. Yet the specifics of how the model can be applied to urban planning remain to be more fully specified. Turner has offered these, admittedly brief, suggestions as a starting point:

> There should be a multileveled scaling hierarchy of detail-frequency without too-large gaps, loose consistency of style and scale at any given level, and more or less subtle and varied correspondences—visual, functional, and ideational—between the content of different detail-frequency levels, so there's a pleasingly fractal and natural feel. (Frederick Turner, personal communication, 6 January 2000)

These are the general principles of an aesthetic organization of space that planning theorists need to invigorate and advance. Yet this endeavor will certainly encounter resistance, and critics will argue that it is impossible to find one set of planning principles that work for the good of all people. We contend that the notion that the planning profession can hold back from a firmer commitment is, in the end, illusory. Our argument parallels Ronald Beiner's (1992) critique of liberal political theory. Liberalism purports to remain neutral with respect to the relative superiority of different conceptions of the good. But in fact, it instantiates a particular vision of the good, one that privileges choice itself over all other goods:

> Every society has an ethos. One that didn't would not just fail to be a moral community, it would fail to be a society at all. So liberal society does have an ethos. Under the liberal dispensation, the ethos is—lack of an ethos; individuals in this society are habituated to being insufficiently habituated. That is the liberal paradox. (P. 22)

In practice, this leads to a culture devoted to the single-minded pursuit of efficiency, extreme individual mobility, relentless consumerism, uncritical worship of economic growth—all sustained by a strange complacency about the superiority of this particular conception of the good society (Lasch 1991). It is an open question whether such a society, purged of criteria to ascertain substantive goods, can support the character formation and meaningful political involvement necessary for a healthy polity (Arendt 1958; Frampton 1979; Sandel 1996).

Similarly, attempts by planners to play an agnostic role in the city building process, or to simply improvise as one goes along, concede the field to other actors with strong normative visions and to the vagaries of the marketplace, where individual consumers make their immediate choices with little concern for larger public purposes and the long-term future. If planners wish to strengthen their professional stature and practical efficacy, they need to engage the search for good city form with more seriousness, thoroughness, and urgency. They should lead, not just react.

► Conclusion

This article has explored the need to elevate the search for good city form beyond the realm of urban design while at the same time broadening its theoretical base to encompass recent developments in fields outside of planning and design. One of the more interesting and fertile of these sources is the body of theory known as the radical center. We are calling on the planning academies, particularly those concerned with theoretical development, to pursue and strengthen this occupation at least to the same extent that planning theorists devote themselves to procedural, instrumental, communicative, and other planning theory genres.

The need for theoretical development to support and nurture normative prescription is critical if we want to have any hope of promoting true beauty in city planning rather than allowing half-solutions and disingenuous proposals to proceed. This is the much needed task. Relying on planners to step in to resolve externality problems when the market fails is hardly a theoretical basis for a dynamic profession. We need to take advantage of recent intellectual developments, along with the already rich body of literature on the structure of great urban places, to launch a renewed quest for good city form.

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