

Chapter 2

New Urbanisms: From Neo-Traditional Neighbourhoods to New Regionalism

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New urbanists have developed and propagated a formula for planning the good community, and have gained international attention in the process. Beauty is arguably a necessary condition for the good community, but is it sufficient?
(Grant 2006, Introduction)

2.1 Introduction

New Urbanism (NU) came from the belief that there was something drastically wrong with the way in which modern cities have developed in the past century. Many had evolved as suburban, automobile-dominated residential environments with few employment opportunities, characterized by urban sprawl, inefficiency, and placelessness, with a demise of the public realm and a failed realization of true or authentic neighbourhoods and communities. Instead of just criticizing suburbanization, and advocating the advantages of inner city life in the manner of Jane Jacobs's (1961) trenchant book, NU became a movement that sought to remedy the situation. Most accept that its basic ideas stem from the building of the new community of Seaside in Florida (Brooke 1995), and the subsequent popularization and extension of the ideas used in this town. In 1991 some of the key thinkers of New Urbanism were brought together at the Ahwahnee hotel in Yosemite National Park to identify common features in their approaches, leading to a core set of principles referred to as the Ahwanee Principles. However, the movement became more formally established when these ideas crystallized through the establishment of the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU) in 1993 and the creation of the subse-

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quent Charter of the New Urbanism in 1996 (Congress for the New Urbanism 1999; Murrain 1996).

Basic to the Charter were what were portrayed as ‘new’ forms of towns and neighbourhoods that paid attention to various scales of development from regional setting to streets and buildings. Many of the ideas evolved from modern critiques of suburban design, with concepts from works such as Alexander’s pattern language (Alexander et al. 1977; Alexander 1979). However, students of the history of urbanism will know that many of the components are actually a return to those promulgated a century earlier. So NU frequently involves the desire to rediscover neighbourhood and a sense of community through more human-scale developments that also reclaim the public realm. In addition, the approach envisages more walkable communities and better public transit connectivity as well as a more integrated approach to metropolitan or city-regional growth. However as Hall (1988, p. 24) observed

[its] widespread appeal emanates from its all-enabling invocation of ‘community’, a term that provides little practical or ideological direction, yet which is vague enough to embody everybody’s hopes.

Indeed, the NU term has become more diffuse in recent years, becoming somewhat of an umbrella term to cover a set of related or extended ideas, initially mainly linked to Neo-Traditional Design (NTD) or Traditional Neighbourhood Design (TND), but which has extended into Smart Growth (SG), Urban Villages (UV), and more recently into Transit Oriented Development (TOD), while New Regionalism (NR) ideas also seem relevant, although they have developed from different sources. Hence it seemed appropriate to use the term ‘New Urbanisms’, in the plural, to draw attention to the many types within the movement. Space limitations mean that this review cannot provide a comprehensive review of all the details of these various approaches. Rather, it will provide an overview of the problems that led to the New Urbanism movement, its basic ideas and associated developments, using examples from many cities. Subsequent sections will review its utility and impact on current development, as well as ask questions about how new many of the ideas really are.

2.2 Background to the New Urbanism

New Urbanism has grown out of a reaction to some of the perceived ills of the contemporary industrial-commercial city. The overarching issue here is urban sprawl (Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1992; Grant 2006). New Urbanists argue that the modern metropolis, particularly the American one, is inherently dysfunctional, and its sprawl is the spatial expression of this problem (Krier 1991; Audirac and Shermyen 1994). The Fordist industrial regime and increasing affluence spawned almost universal car ownership in the developed world by the mid-twentieth century, accompanied by planning and land development practices that were biased toward the supremacy of the automobile. This resulted in cities characterized by endless ex-

pansion of various types of suburbs, often varieties of planned neighbourhood units (Perry 1929). These units were zoned as mainly residential, except for a small row of shops, so the main commercial development from the 1950s occurred in strips along arterial roads or in increasingly large suburban shopping centres, which were mainly accessed by cars. Such developments have been incrementally added on to the edge of urban places, with limited thought of the spatial consequences of these successive additions (Langdon 1994; Kunstler 1993; Knox 1992; McCann 1995; Thompson-Fawcett 1996). Hence, the resultant auto-oriented and increasingly low density suburbs of the last half of the twentieth century led to the problems of urban sprawl. It led to distinctive separation between places of work, residence, shopping, and public gathering—resulting in a spatial disjuncture between the private and the public realm, and between the geography of domesticity and that of production and consumption (Grant 2006). The sprawling suburbs that developed also required considerable infrastructure investment to access them and to supply utilities, were too far removed from the city centre, and are considered wasteful of space. The resultant sprawl produced traffic congestion, gridlock, poor air quality, and necessitates automobile usage to access every key urban function, whether employment, shopping or leisure activities, even within decentralized concentrations of employment and retail in the so-called ‘edge cities’ that seem like small downtowns on the outskirts of the built up area (Garreau 1991). The result has been that suburban sprawl, even of planned communities, has produced automotive-dependent lifestyles with negative health consequences because people lacked exercise—leading New Urbanists to argue for the need for new approaches, in particular to reduce the excessive use of the car (Duane and Plater-Zyberk 1992, p. 44).

There are also problems of the morphology of suburbs. They are typically comprised of low density single family housing, with substantial lots, large setbacks for the dwelling unit, curvilinear streets and cul-de-sacs that are wider than necessary and lined with large homes with snout-like front garages, such that people move from workplace to house within their vehicles with little human contact with neighbours in their daily commutes. Their internal morphology is low-rise and expansive—characterized by excessive “horizontal” infrastructure (Duane and Plater-Zyberk 1992, p. 44). Given their similarity, these places are seen to have little sense of identity and few architecturally redeeming qualities. As Jacobs (1961) observed, this development is the antithesis of urban, as suburbs lack the heterogeneity, interaction and facilities of urban places, creating a “geography of nowhere” (Kunstler 1993).

For New Urbanists the social problems of the suburbs are equally worrying. They are primarily relatively homogeneous places, principally defined by income or socioeconomic status characteristics. Few are socially inclusive, although Duane and Plater-Zyberk (1992), perhaps naively in the light of past history, claim that the economic segregation found in suburbs is not the American way. In addition, they point to the problems of isolation in these areas, even though many paid lip service to Perry’s 1920s ideas that his planned neighbourhoods would create cohesion and togetherness. Like Putnam (2001), who entitled his book on contemporary life as *‘Bowling Alone’*, New Urbanists generally argue that the social experience of com-

munity and social capital is lacking in the contemporary suburb. Some go even further to suggest that the contemporary suburb means the end of authentic civic life (Duane and Plater-Zyberk 1992). So in such suburbs, private space is celebrated, while public space is often all but abandoned. Moreover, walkability is minimal, as pedestrian movement is secondary to automobile travel. Neighbouring and casual social interaction is limited, reducing the development of social capital, and all are discouraged by the physical structure of the community. Hence the desire to counteract the supposed demise of community in suburban developments is at the very heart of the TND variant of new urbanism. Indeed, as Talen (1999, p. 1363) has pointed out, the overarching social doctrine behind NU is the creation of a sense of community. So New Urbanists have argued that new designs—if done right—can address this issue and create more socially diverse neighbourhoods.

2.3 Principles of the New Urbanism

Table 2.1 lists the basic principles of the New Urbanism Charter. It specifies a number of different scales at which NU principles need to be implemented, from regional setting to streets and buildings, making it clear that NU is not simply concerned with small-scale neighbourhood features and community, although this is

Table 2.1 Charter of the New Urbanism. (Source: adapted from <http://www.cnu.org/charter>)

<i>A. The region: metropolis, city, and town</i>
(1) Metropolitan regions are finite places with geographic boundaries derived from topography, watersheds, coastlines, farmlands, regional parks, and river basins. The metropolis is made of multiple centers that are cities, towns, and villages, each with its own identifiable center and edges
(2) The metropolitan region is a fundamental economic unit of the contemporary world. Governmental cooperation, public policy, physical planning, and economic strategies must reflect this new reality
(3) The metropolis has a necessary and fragile relationship to its agrarian hinterland and natural landscapes. The relationship is environmental, economic, and cultural. Farmland and nature are as important to the metropolis as the garden is to the house
(4) Development patterns should not blur or eradicate the edges of the metropolis. Infill development within existing urban areas conserves environmental resources, economic investment, and social fabric, while reclaiming marginal and abandoned areas. Metropolitan regions should develop strategies to encourage such infill development over peripheral expansion
(5) Where appropriate, new development contiguous to urban boundaries should be organized as neighborhoods and districts, and be integrated with the existing urban pattern. Noncontiguous development should be organized as towns and villages with their own urban edges, and planned for a jobs/housing balance, not as bedroom suburbs
(6) The development and redevelopment of towns and cities should respect historical patterns, precedents, and boundaries
(7) Cities and towns should bring into proximity a broad spectrum of public and private uses to support a regional economy that benefits people of all incomes. Affordable housing should be distributed throughout the region to match job opportunities and to avoid concentrations of poverty

Table 2.1 (continued)

(8) The physical organization of the region should be supported by a framework of transportation alternatives. Transit, pedestrian, and bicycle systems should maximize access and mobility throughout the region while reducing dependence upon the automobile
(9) Revenues and resources can be shared more cooperatively among the municipalities and centers within regions to avoid destructive competition for tax base and to promote rational coordination of transportation, recreation, public services, housing, and community institutions
<i>B. The neighborhood, the district, and the corridor</i>
(10) 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
(11) Neighborhoods should be compact, pedestrian friendly, and mixed-use. Districts generally emphasize a special single use, and should follow the principles of neighborhood design when possible. Corridors are regional connectors of neighborhoods and districts; they range from boulevards and rail lines to rivers and parkways
(12) Many activities of daily living should occur within walking distance, allowing independence to those who do not drive, especially the elderly and the young. Interconnected networks of streets should be designed to encourage walking, reduce the number and length of automobile trips, and conserve energy
(13) Within neighborhoods, a broad range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community
(14) Transit corridors, when properly planned and coordinated, can help organize metropolitan structure and revitalize urban centers. In contrast, highway corridors should not displace investment from existing centers
(15) Appropriate building densities and land uses should be within walking distance of transit stops, permitting public transit to become a viable alternative to the automobile
(16) Concentrations of civic, institutional and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes. Schools should be sized and located to enable children to walk or bicycle to them
(17) The economic health and harmonious evolution of neighborhoods, districts, and corridors can be improved through graphic urban design codes that serve as predictable guides for change
(18) A range of parks, from tot-lots and village greens to ballfields and community gardens, should be distributed within neighborhoods. Conservation areas and open lands should be used to define and connect different neighborhoods and districts
<i>C. The block, the street, and the building</i>
(19) A primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use
(20) Individual architectural projects should be seamlessly linked to their surroundings. This issue transcends style
(21) The revitalization of urban places depends on safety and security. The design of streets and buildings should reinforce safe environments, but not at the expense of accessibility and openness
(22) In the contemporary metropolis, development must adequately accommodate automobiles. It should do so in ways that respect the pedestrian and the form of public space
(23) Streets and squares should be safe, comfortable, and interesting to the pedestrian. Properly configured, they encourage walking and enable neighbors to know each other and protect their communities

Table 2.1 (continued)

(24) Architecture and landscape design should grow from local climate, topography, history, and building practice
(25) 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
(26) All buildings should provide their inhabitants with a clear sense of location, weather and time. Natural methods of heating and cooling can be more resource-efficient than mechanical systems
(27) Preservation and renewal of historic buildings, districts, and landscapes affirm the continuity and evolution of urban society

often seen as its emphasis. At a macro scale, nine of these principles concern the region, including the relationships between the metropolis, the city, and the town. Nine others specify meso-scale principles associated with the neighbourhood, the district, and the corridor—the essential building blocks of new urbanism. The last nine provide additional micro-scale specificity for individual building and other architectural and landscape design features. What is clear from the principles is the need to plan for the metropolitan region not just little parts, in which governance and economies are based on the region, although there are no guides of how to do this. Within the various urban units it is stressed that there is a need for a range of housing, social housing, park space and an emphasis upon walkability, mixed uses and local employment, as well as anticipating transit corridors to improve transport flows and the need to preserve historical heritage.

2.4 What Does New Urbanism Hope to Achieve?

Many planners have recognized that inappropriate planning tools of the past, including poor rules for land management, have generated sprawl, poor design, exclusionary zoning and a demise of authentic community (Grant 2006), but they also recognize that urban growth or expansion is inevitable (Calthorpe 2001). So the key issue for New Urbanists is the question of managing future growth without sprawl, or at least in such a way that attenuates its negative impacts. The NU approach to sprawl is to consider it within a broader urbanization and development context. It attempts to refocus our planning approaches to think about the regional contexts of sprawl, and to consider what has been called the ‘urbanization of the whole, not the urbanization of the pieces’ (Calthorpe 1994). It is here that TOD and SG approaches, which focus more on urban or macro scale planning than the other approaches, combine to address issues of sprawl. These approaches stress the need for more integrative public transit systems that link neighbourhoods with cities, and cities within regions, thereby reducing reliance on private automobiles. Their plans call for more transit-oriented satellite towns, pedestrian pockets, and an increase

in the walkability of areas surrounding these nodes as well as more attention to sustainability.

NU also hopes to reverse the twentieth century trend of poor suburban design and land use planning, to develop a new architecture of community (Scully 1994), and to bring about a complete paradigm shift in community building (Katz 1994; Al-Hindi 2001). The goals here are really about rethinking the internal design of neighbourhoods, the homes within them, and the land use mixes within them. Major proponents of TND, such as Duane and Plater-Zyberk who are often lauded as the 'evangelists' of NU (Knox 1992), envision communities that have several key features, namely: they are more compact; have higher population densities; have narrower streets; are more pedestrianized; are designed at a more human scale; have greater social and socioeconomic diversity; have more zoning flexibility to produce a greater mix of residential, commercial, and public spaces; and provide a design foundation for a more 'authentic' urban life. A key feature of this rediscovery of a more 'authentic' urban life is the need to re-assert public space as a critical element in communities. New Urbanists believe that exemplar communities of the past provide the reference point for these types of places (Hall 2000). So this approach, which is heavily design oriented, seeks to include elements of vernacular and classical architecture from 'exemplar' older towns. This strand of NU, usually referred to as Neo-Traditional Neighbourhood Design, is about reviving those elements of historic towns that worked well, ones that provided people with a sense of identity, a human scale, and public engagement, although these ideas have been labelled as 'old fangled New Towns' (Anderson 1991), or a 'Brave Old World' (Knox 1992, p. 221). Yet Bressi (1994) cautioned that NU should not be seen as some kind of Romantic Movement; rather, it is a deceptively simple response to the problems of contemporary suburban development based on one principle, namely that community planning and design must assert the importance of public over private space.

As opposed to the contemporary suburb, in which NU argue that 'community' has met its demise, the overarching aim of NU developments is to rediscover what is called 'authentic' community, although many dispute the term 'authentic' as being too vague. Indeed there have been few attempts by New Urbanists to explore the community dimensions, which have been shown to be complex (Davies and Herbert 1993; Townshend and Davies 1999). However, the key idea for NU is that the right architecture, the right planning, the right mix of land uses, and the right integration of public space will bring about the right kinds of social interaction, neighbourliness, sense of belonging, and identity through which people will rediscover community, within appropriate socially heterogeneous neighbourhoods. In short, the desire is to create a 'geography of somewhere' (Axhausen 2000). While there are elements of social utopianism in these aims, just as the NU have drawn on architecture and design principles from old towns, in North America as well as Europe, they have also looked to older urban social commentators for inspiration. For example, Jane Jacobs (1961) in the *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, heavily criticized suburban planning practice and was instrumental in beginning the critiques that led to the NU ideas that revived the idea of community, the need for social variety and spontaneity, as well as the use of public spaces for social interaction.

As McCann (1995) noted, many New Urbanists hope to achieve the kind of ‘exuberant diversity’ found in cities that was lauded by Jacobs. Hence many reviewers have argued that the creation of what is often called the ‘good community’ and a ‘sense of community’ seem to be the essence of New Urbanist design theory (Katz 1994; Talen 1999, 2002; Grant 2006). Perhaps it is ironic that this search for ‘community’, in the sense of more local social interaction, lay behind the designs in the first Garden City and Perry’s neighbourhood units, which were the inspiration behind many contemporary suburbs that actually ended up as only distorted examples of these original concepts.

2.5 Various Types of New Urbanism Ideas

These New Urban ideas have progressed considerably from their origins. It cannot be considered a singular approach today. A range of related but different NU approaches have extended many of the ideas since the original Charter, often promoted by influential and charismatic proponents. Several somewhat distinctive approaches can now be identified within the general rubric of the plural New Urbanisms and are summarized in subsequent sections, namely: Neo-Traditional Neighbourhood Design (TND); Smart Growth (SG); Urban Villages (UV); and Transit Oriented Developments (TOD), while New Regionalism (NR) seems to be a necessary complement to implement some of the principles.

2.5.1 *Traditional Neighbourhood Design*

Traditional Neighbourhood Design (TND) and Neo-Traditional Design (NTD) are essentially different labels applied to the same approach within NU, and the term TND will be used here to refer to either. TND is probably the approach that most people associate with NU. It is the approach that has gained the most media attention, the most celebration, and the most intense planning and academic debate. The ideas of TND developed largely through the influential work of the architects and planners, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (Krieger 1991), as well as Krier’s influence on their own ideas, with heavy reference to Alexander’s ideas of ‘timeless ways of building’ and what he called the ‘*pattern language*’ of good urbanism (Alexander 1979; Alexander et al. 1977). TND is very much design-focused. It espouses the use of a ‘design code’ for each community, and strives to include strong references to local and vernacular architectural traditions. The Town Centre is a crucial central point to these designs—not as an economic centre, as in a traditional central business district, but as a focal point of mixed activity that includes commercial, civic, residential, public and recreational functions. In essence, TND attempts to design new neighbourhoods (as well as infill redevelopments) based on traditional town planning principles, to achieve an ‘authentic urbanism’ (Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1992; Katz 1994). This is all about creating a distinctive

‘place’, as well as ‘the design code’—the guiding principles and design references that are the all-important place-makers (Scully 1994, p. 227).

Lennertz (1991) has suggested that there are seven design principles in NTD. The community must be based on a comprehensive master plan which lays out the core geometry and hierarchy of places within the development. In addition the designed street network should provide appropriate connectivity and is able to accept orderly future growth. There should also be a pedestrian network design that separates pedestrians from automobiles, and which ensures flows through parks, squares, and alleys. Also, street section designs ought to ensure human scale, appropriate building proportions. There should also be orderly parking and vegetative areas. In addition, a regulating plan must outline the zoning of building types and provide for integration, rather than separation, of different uses. The TND approach also specifically includes attention to public buildings and squares to ensure they are distributed throughout the neighbourhoods and to coordinate civic and open spaces. Finally, the planning codes are a central principle, paying particular attention to both architectural controls (materials, building configurations, reference to historic style, vernacular elements, etc.), and urban regulations that control how separate developments coordinate with the broader public spaces of the design. In Lennertz’s (1991, p. 22) words, the design codes should “*encourage variety while ensuring the harmony required to give character to the community.*”

One of the most cited applications of this type of design framework can be seen in what is commonly recognized as the first TND in the U.S.A.—that of Seaside (Mohney and Easterling 1991). Figure 2.1 shows the plan of Seaside, which was built on an 80 acre (32 ha) site on Florida’s northwest Gulf Coast between Panama City Beach and Destin, 150 km from Mobile. It was designed by Duane and Plater-Zyberk and has just celebrated its 30th anniversary. This project quickly became the coffee-table-book icon of NU (Brooke 1995). It is considered by many to be beautiful, cute, and appealing, and gained notoriety when it was used as the set location of the film ‘*The Truman Show*’. The building code of Seaside established an overriding rubric of building types and functions, and laid down how they are to be integrated into the final form of the town. For example, the rubric defined eight building types, including Retail, Residential, Workshop, functions etc., and then specified how different features of the building must be coordinated and integrated into the plan, establishing detailed restrictions on the design of yards, porches, outbuildings, parking facilities, and building heights, with further details shown in Brooke (1995, p. 31). The idea was to create a ‘beach town’ using examples from all over the southern states, with houses of different styles, colours, and picket fences, together with porches to see the setting sun, as well as a desire to increase sociability. The settlement’s motto is ‘A Simple, Beautiful Life’, suggesting the rationale for a slower pace of life, a concept more completely expressed in the later Italian movement called *Cittaslow* (Chap. 15). Yet although attractive, the area is really a resort community, and like the old neighbourhood units, contains very limited employment opportunities. Politically it is an unincorporated unit in the county of Walton, so has no formal government, and only built its first school, one of the new charter schools, in 1996. Functionally it is hardly a town, so apart from its design, it

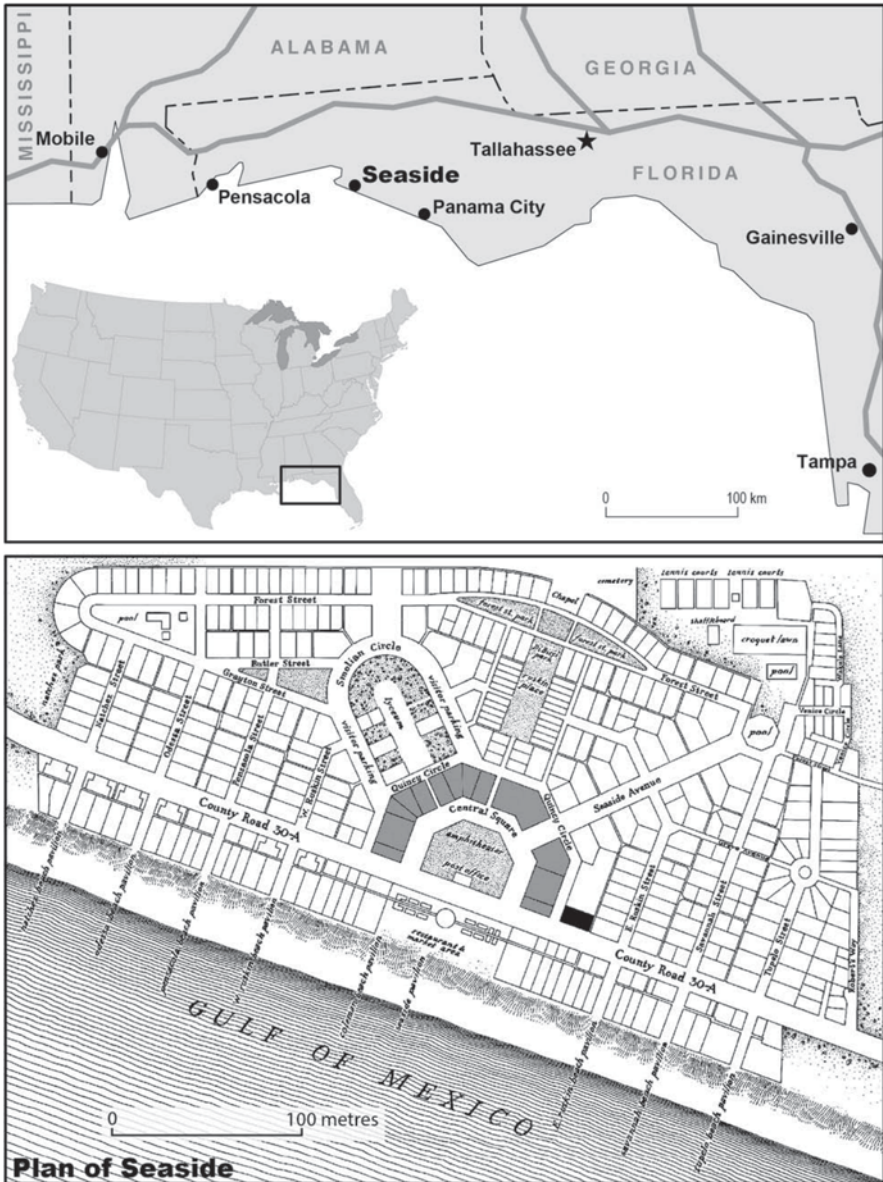


Fig. 2.1 Seaside, Florida. (Source: compiled from road maps and <http://www.dpz.com/Practice/7903>)

it surely contributes little that is new to the urban literature. Nevertheless it stimulated a new approach to urban ideas.

The town of Kentlands, in Gaithersburg, Maryland is another famous U.S. example of TND, and was the first application of TND principles to a real, year-round working town (Katz 1994, p. 31). The town was also designed by Duane



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