

large, difficult, “real” cities that are most hospitable to the creation of culture, as opposed to the consumption of it.

The new urban paradigm seems to celebrate consumption of culture, not creation. The Costa Mesa Performing Arts Center in Orange County may rival Los Angeles in the artistic events it presents, but it has spawned no community of artists and performers around it to challenge that of Los Angeles, any more than the new suburban cultural facilities around New York have made a dent on the role of New York City as a cultural incubator. The “festival marketplace” of the South Street Seaport may be an economic boon to the lower Manhattan neighborhood, but its shops and cafes are filled with consumers of culture, not with the makers and shapers of it.

Cities that have the capability of making culture—New York, Los Angeles, to a certain extent Seattle, San Francisco, perhaps Boston and Miami—have little to fear from the new urbanism. They are incubators, creators of culture, and as such possess what might be called the ultimate form of urban authenticity. They can make what the new urbanism can only imitate. Their economies will ebb and flow, but it is difficult to believe that the new urbanism can replace the essential role these cities, and others like them, play.

But many older cities, those not lucky enough to possess the power of shaping culture, are highly vulnerable to the lure of the new urban paradigm. They can offer little that the middle class truly wants, and thus they seek refuge in trying to save themselves by becoming ever more suburbanized. Atlanta, Charlotte, Dallas, Denver, Phoenix—these cities are already heavily suburban in feeling, and it

is hard to believe that they will develop in a different way over the next generation. And whatever happens to the cores of these older cities, it is all the more likely that more and more commercial business will be done in out-towns, those clusters of high-rise buildings that stand as the new urban paradigm’s alternative to the old commercial centers.

Intimately tied to consumerism, to entertainment, and to popular culture, the urbanism of today seeks to provide a measured, controlled, organized kind of city experience, which is the precise opposite of the rough-edged, somewhat disorganized reality of older streets and older cities. The new American urbanism is packaged for easy use; it disdains the randomness, the difficulty, and the inconsistency of real cities. It is without hard edges, without a past, and without a respect for the pain and complexity of authentic urban experience. It is suburban in its values, and middle class to its core. That it exists at all, for all its flaws, is probably a good thing, given how determined this country seemed at the peak of the frenzy of urban renewal in the 1960s to eschew any kind of urban life altogether. Yes, we seek an urbanism still. What we do not have—yet—is a true public realm.

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