

# A New Urbanist Perspective on Regionalism

**Peter Katz**

Though many in planning and government have come to consensus around the idea of regionalism, few believe that the sort of strong and effective regional framework that exists in Portland, Oregon and some parts of Canada and Europe could ever be broadly replicated in most U. S. metropolitan areas. Naysayers typically point to certain “political realities” that are all but hard-wired into the American system. A 1994 article on Chicago’s sprawl in *The Economist*, cites very real barriers at both the federal and local levels:

Subsidies for home ownership are well guarded by lobbyists in Washington, and local governments are rightly jealous of their self-determination. For the time being, metropolitan areas like Chicago will just keep expanding.

Though such obstacles are formidable, I believe that an even greater challenge—and one that has largely gone unmet—is the lack of a popular constituency for regional planning. Furthermore, as long as the discussion is focused solely at the regional scale and issues are framed in policy, rather than physical, terms, I believe the dream of coherent, well-planned metropolitan regions will remain just that.

## **Regionalism: A Complex Issue**

My sense is that the concept of regionalism has become too complex for most citi-

zens to “get their arms around.” Also, the promised benefits of regional cooperation, such as increased global competitiveness, tend to be rather abstract and far off in the future, while the costs connected with regional cooperation are immediate, local in their impacts, and most often politically unpopular.

Seen from the vantage point of John and Mary Q. Public, it’s a case of too much stick and not enough carrot. Issues such as the provision of affordable housing (read: d-e-n-s-i-t-y) and funding for public transportation (read: bringing in “the wrong sort” of people) will generate considerable emotion and hostility among citizens in many suburban areas.

Yes, those same people may want to see their region thrive in the international arena, but not at the expense of quality of life in their own community or higher taxes. Global competitiveness may mean a lot to a big-city mayor or port commissioner, but to a soccer mom in the suburbs, such “big-picture” concepts will certainly take a back seat to more immediate, neighborhood-based concerns.

So just what does regionalism look like to the average citizen? The only coherent vision many of us have of our home region is from 20,000 feet when we’re taking off or landing at the airport. It’s an image that, to me, most closely resembles a mold growth in a petri dish—hardly something

that I'm going to work up a lot of emotion over.

From 20,000 feet up, I find it hard to see the garbage piled up on an inner city street corner, or the recent failure of a mom and pop store in an older suburban neighborhood. Ironically, I can clearly see the shiny new "big box" store that may have triggered the mom and pop store's failure from that height. But I certainly cannot see the citywide decline of school SAT scores or the increased bills for water and sewer services, both far more subtle, yet unmistakable signals of a region's decline.

Motivating citizens to support regional planning initiatives, while difficult, is not impossible. Conventional wisdom suggests that a first step would be to link the negative impacts of sprawl growth—traffic congestion foremost among them—to a lack of regional structure or governance. But this is a hard sell because when most citizens see a traffic problem, they expect a traffic solution: more lanes, or if they're a bit more sophisticated, light rail. But invoking discussions of land use, jobs/housing balance, higher density around rail corridors? Whoa! That's another story! Planners, on the other hand, upon seeing a traffic problem, are likely to propose a planning solution, and a regional one at that.

Further complicating this perception gap, is the reality that many who live in and around the newest growth areas have great affection for the private domain they occupy—their home and immediate surroundings. They like their cul-de-sac location primarily because it does provide a haven from the increasingly hostile world that exists just beyond the subdivision gates. Also, such households are often the primary beneficiaries of certain well-documented regional inequities including disproportionately low tax and utility rates, new schools, safer streets, and greater access to high paying jobs.

## **Putting a Human Face on the Region**

My contention is that the arena where one can most effectively "sell" the regionalist agenda is at the neighborhood scale. It's where the benefits of a coherent region can be most effectively showcased. But to do so, we need to communicate in a way that makes regional issues "visible" within the physical and social fabric of our individual neighborhoods.

If you could telescope down from that height of 20,000 feet into the neighborhoods of a strong and viable region, instead of seeing garbage on the street corner and shuttered stores, you would see people leading happy, productive lives. Because such neighborhoods exist within a sound regional context, citizens are able to use an up-to-date transportation system to commute to jobs downtown. On the weekend, those same people use transit to shop and visit friends. Since each neighborhood provides a broad mix of uses and housing types, many more individuals are able to meet most of their daily needs within a short distance of their home, usually on foot. Most important, citizens within the neighborhood are becoming familiar with one another through their daily interactions; thus creating a foundation for the sort of face-to-face democracy that is critical to people taking "ownership" of their neighborhoods.

By carefully observing the life of a healthy, functioning neighborhood, one can see how the process of telescoping from the regional scale down to the neighborhood is essential to understanding and communicating the benefits of a strong regional framework. In so doing, one is able to put a human face on a set of issues that many people find complex at best, and mind-numbing at worst.

Rather than incorporating into the neighborhood scale solely for marketing

purposes, it may be useful to consider a larger taxonomy that would help us better understand the region in a number of ways: social, political, economic, and physical. This is a notion first advanced some years ago by William Dodge and more recently popularized by Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson of the Citistates Group as part of a “new civic DNA.”

## New Order

Peirce and Johnson believe that the familiar government-based hierarchy of “federal, state, municipal” will be of little value in addressing the challenges of tomorrow. Instead, they propose a “new order” focused at the global, regional, and neighborhood levels. *Global* because critical impacts are worldwide—global warming, for example. *Regional* because metropolitan areas—we call them citistates—are the true cities of our time. They are the real labor markets, the functioning economic communities, the commute sheds, the environmental basins. And *neighborhood* because that is where people live, where place and relationships matter more than politics. Neighborhoods are the building blocks of a successful region; if they are weak and socially unstable, a dark shadow is thrown across the entire citistate future.

The idea of promoting strong neighborhoods (which should be compact, pedestrian friendly, and mixed use), both in existing urbanized locations and in new growth areas has become a central theme as well for the New Urbanists, an emerging group of planners and architects that challenge many long-accepted notions about the shaping of the built environment. The Congress for the New Urbanism, an organization of the movement’s leaders, frames the relationship between region and neighborhood in the second sentence of their charter, writing: “We stand for the restoration of existing

urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy.”

Though the primary focus of most New Urbanists is at the neighborhood level, some are equally passionate about the importance of a sound regional structure. Peter Calthorpe, one of the leaders of the New Urbanism, discusses the connection he sees between the design of the region and that of the neighborhood in this excerpt from his upcoming book. He observes:

Seen as a whole, the region can be designed with much the same attitude as we design a healthy neighborhood: it should have a clear identity and defined edges (i.e., Urban Growth Boundaries), its circulation system should function for the pedestrian as well as the car (i.e., regional transit systems), its public space should be central and shared (i.e., regional open space networks), and its population as well as uses should be well located and diverse (i.e., regional fair-share housing and a jobs/housing balance).

## Two Scales

But while the two scales—region and neighborhood—offer intriguing parallels from the standpoint of physical design, a critical question remains: How does one create an effective link between the two scales so that ordinary citizens can engage in the process of region building? My short answer to this question: One neighborhood at a time.

A longer and more considered answer would incorporate New Urbanist methodology to, first, address the region as a whole, and second, address each neighborhood on an individual basis. The program I suggest consists of several steps, presented here in highly abbreviated form. Each step should be carried out with the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders and the stew-

ardship of an organization that acts as an "honest broker" between business, government, and special interest groups. I'm thinking of the many recently-formed planning advocacy groups around the country whose names often begin with "1,000 Friends..."

The first step is the formation of a *regional strategic plan* that in its first phase inventories elements of significance, both natural and man made. This would include rivers, lakes, rail yards, freeways, regional serving institutions/facilities, ecological corridors, and productive agricultural areas. The inventory would also identify neighborhoods and districts of "regional significance" (downtowns, university campuses, airports). In addition the plan would attempt to identify (edges and centers) of all the individual neighborhoods which comprise the region. This latter step is greatly aided by the input of residents who usually have expert knowledge of their own neighborhood, particularly if they experience it on foot, rather than by car.

(One word of caution related to the survey of neighborhoods: New Urbanists are fairly rigorous about the physical dimension of a neighborhood being pegged to about five minute walk, or a distance of approximately one quarter mile from center to edge. Lumping two or more neighborhoods together may make the process of analysis seemingly more "efficient" at the front end, but it will hamper later phases of design, and frustrate citizen participation throughout the process.)

Once the larger regional framework has been addressed, the second phase of the strategic plan proposes *physical design recommendations* for the neighborhoods and districts determined to be of regional significance. A further step may include a series of *catalytic projects* aimed at "jump-starting" revitalization within those areas. In some situations, plans and catalytic projects may span larger areas encompassing multiple

neighborhoods (such as a greenbelt or street corridor improvement). In this process, it is not be unusual to find suggestions of a fairly detailed nature (for example, suggestions concerning street direction and alignment).

Once the larger framework has been addressed, each of the region's neighborhoods should be encouraged to develop their own *detailed neighborhood plan*. It is vital that the neighborhoods take ownership of the planning process as they go forward. One goal of such a plan should be to "complete" the mix of uses within each neighborhood, thus enhancing its viability among a broad range of ages and income groups.

## **Arsenal of Tools**

Though conflicts between neighborhood desires and regional goals are inevitable, there is an arsenal of innovative new tools and techniques aimed at helping citizens understand and discuss various options for growth in and around their neighborhoods.

One such example is the visual preference survey pioneered by A. Nelessen Associates, Inc. of Princeton, New Jersey. Ranking pairs of photos according to their desirability, citizens vote on images that describe the kind of neighborhood where they would like to live and work. Issues of density take a back seat to the "feelings" evoked by each photo. Later, the type of streets and buildings admired in the survey are incorporated into that community's urban plan and design guidelines.

Another technique is the use of computers to create before/after video images that illustrate the potential impact of a community's proposed urban design changes. Steve Price, a citizen activist turned consultant, created a four-step sequence to show fellow citizens in El Cerrito, California how a nearby suburban strip could be redeveloped, with the addition of light rail, into a more pedestrian friendly

# Figure 1



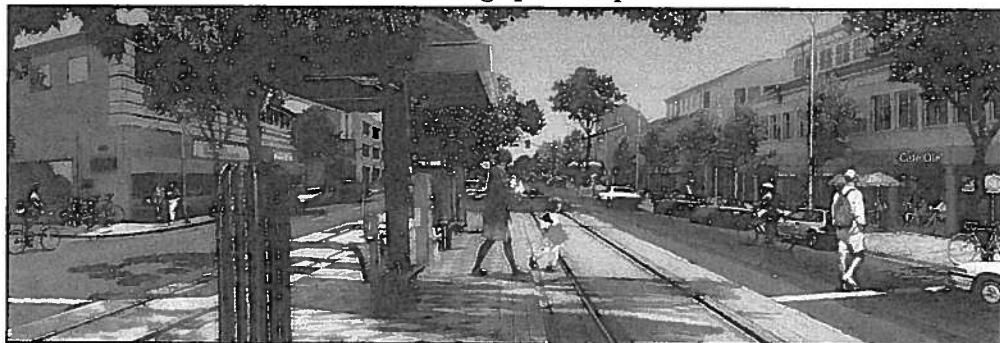
Existing conditions



Envisioned with trees



Envisioned with buildings pulled up to the sidewalk



Envisioned with light rail

streetscape (Figure 1). By moving the discussion away from technical issues such as density and land use, toward an "alternative reality" that people can clearly visualize and relate to on a more emotional basis, we can get past the sort of "not in my backyard" attitudes that frequently inhibit regional planning efforts and have the effect of pushing growth out ever further.

## **Conclusion**

Regionalism has become something of a "holy grail" in American planning circles. No one can deny its benefits; yet putting regional planning into practice has proved to be more than a little problematic. Some wonder if it even exists; perhaps Portland, Oregon is just a mirage.

Though the viability of regional strategies will continue to be debated, I'm quite certain that the holy grail will never be found if we continue to search solely at the regional

scale. Only by considering issues of municipal structure at *both* the regional and neighborhood levels simultaneously, can one make a persuasive case for regional planning.

What I'm talking about here is Marketing 101: To make a product or idea compelling, you must be able to articulate clearly its features and benefits, and show why there is a commensurate or even greater return in benefits over costs. The neighborhood is where the benefits of regionalism can be observed and experienced; most important, it's where the voters live. ■

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