



New Urbanism and the rebuilding of Mississippi

Posted by [Yankee](#) on May 23, 2006 - 9:30pm

Topic: [Miscellaneous](#)

Tags: [biloxi](#), [hurricane katrina](#), [mississippi](#), [new urbanism](#) [[list all tags](#)]

In this week's New York Times magazine, there's an [interesting article](#) on plans for rebuilding the Mississippi coast towns that were devastated by Katrina. According to the article, unlike New Orleans, Mississippi has been more successful in jump-starting the plans to rebuild, partly because of better planning and political leadership, and partly because private companies have infused the initiative with a little cash.

When it came time to draw up a plan for Biloxi and surrounding towns, the people in charge decided to call on the [Congress for New Urbanism](#). What happened then was a real study in how American values can clash.

The article touches on a number of issues demonstrating why the ideal (at least, the New Urbanists' ideal) is hard to achieve. As many of you know, the idea behind New Urbanism is that many amenities, such as the post office, shops, food, and the town center, should all be within walking distance of people's residences. So the first issue this raises, of course, has to do with poverty. Part of the plan involves building new houses, and in fact, the issue of affordability was addressed, but the question of "affordable to whom" still remained. [Andres Duany](#), one of the main architects of New Urbanism and the man contacted for the Mississippi job, projected that "affordable" houses could be built for \$145,000. The problem was that the lower working class is only able to afford houses between \$65,000-\$95,000. Said one person from the poor, black community—which was not consulted about the plans—

"A poor lady like me, what the hell am I going to do with that? Walk by it and admire it? We can't buy it. The white man will always have us pushed to where we have to just...go by and admire it and then go home somewhere and eat them old beans and bread and be thankful."

Another problem has to do with individuality. The building codes for New Urbanist homes are much more restrictive than general zoning laws, and leave little room for personal preference.

Similar to this idea of personal preference, but one which truly embodies the whole issue, was raised in regard to the Vietnamese immigrant community in Biloxi. With these Biloxi residents, it might also have been the case that they were shut out for being poor shrimpers who could not afford the new properties. But that's apparently not what they were worried about. Instead, as a spokesperson for the Vietnamese community put it:

many of them left behind a world where only poor people walk everywhere and a car is

a sign of success. "That's the American dream: you get your own lot, and you get your own little house, and you get your own car," she explained. "And now you're talking about these walkable neighborhoods, and some people will say, 'I came to America so I could drive.' Some of these New Urbanist ideas don't really match up for this area."

In the end, Biloxi and surroundings have entirely given up on the New Urbanist plan. No one could agree on it, and most pressing, they could not meet the FEMA specifications for the elevations of the homes. Oh, and of course, many people see the casinos as the future of Biloxi, and they didn't really fit into a New Urbanist plan.

I will be interested to see whether, and how long it will take, for a preference for urban or semi-urban landscapes to come around. I'm not arguing that New Urbanism per se is the way to design these towns, but the traditional "town center" model reigned supreme before the Oil Age, and I would venture to say that there was a reason for it. Furthermore, when it is put as bluntly as it is in this article—people come to the US to chase a high energy lifestyle that reigns as a status symbol—it becomes ever clearer that before major changes are made, the initiative to undertake them will have to come from the people. Not only is it unlikely that planning boards or governments will be able to impose such lifestyle changes on people, but until the small town model is seen by everyone as a sustainable living arrangement, it will continue to be treated as an ideal but unattainable living arrangement for the rich.

(See also earlier TOD posts on [New Urbanism](#).)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License](#).