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What's wrong with best practice? Questioning the typification of New Urbanism

Abstract

Best practice is most often perceived as a powerful heuristic tool for the dissemination of innovation and knowledge. As such, its formation and acceptance is seldom questioned. The unquestioned compliance with practices labelled as 'best' however obscures the processes of typification that enable it – that is to say the cultural struggles, tensions, conflicts, collaborations, alliances and personal/professional justifications that prefigure it. This paper uses the proliferation of New Urbanism in Toronto to theoretically unpack the typification of best practice in order to demonstrate how the universal abstraction of this principle-based movement is underpinned by deeper, highly situated, constructions of aligned interests and emergent socio-political rationalities.

Key words: New Urbanism, best practice, typification, rationalities

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Introduction

More often than not 'best practice' in the form of demonstration projects, checklists and toolkits for optimum ways of designing, planning, and building is positively perceived as a heuristic tool for the formulation and dissemination of new knowledge and innovation. In other words, best practice is generally perceived as good in itself; that is, 'it has become a social practice in itself, a process that has to a certain degree been taken for granted' (Vettoretto 2009, p. 1069). Best practices, are nonetheless, discursive truth claims conceived in context; presumed transplantable, replicable and adoptable.. In this way, the notion of 'best practice' decontextualises forms, ideas and processes from the cultural conditions that give rise to it. Moreover, the unquestioned acceptance, of conventions and principles of 'best practice' obscures the processes of normalisation and *typification* that enable it; the presence or absence of contestations, conflicts, collaborations and alliances, and the consideration of alternatives that prefigure the translation of ideas, materials, techniques and approaches into qualified categories of 'good' or indeed 'best' by aligned interests.

Very little to date has been written about 'best practice' from this critical perspective. In geography, Bulkeley's (2006) application of the governmentality approach to understanding the rationalities and governmental technologies through which urban sustainability policy is formulated and enacted remains one of the few treatments of the creation, dissemination and use of best practice. In her work, best practice is understood as 'a discursive process, in which not only is new knowledge created about a policy problem, but the nature and interpretation of the problem itself are challenged and reframed' (2006, p. 1029). The focus of *this* paper however is not on a policy issue per se, but rather on a movement or formation (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Allen 2011) of actors, practices and principles commonly referred to as the *New Urbanism*. Popularly known for its design codes and principles the movement is characterised by the revival of 'traditionalist' architecture and design which seeks to promote 'compact, mixed-use, walkable, and reasonably self-contained communities' (Grant 2006, p. 3). This paper uses the proliferation of New Urbanism in Toronto, the largest concentration of New Urbanist projects in the world (Steuteville 2000; Gordon and Taminga 2002; Skaburskis 2006), to illustrate the typification (through representation or exemplification) of New Urbanismas a best practice in urban development. It demonstrates how the label 'best' lends an ethical or moral responsibility of development actors to conform to particular ways of doing things and in the process stunts creative expression, alternative visioning, debate, and

ultimately perhaps, innovation in the built environment. The argument put forth identifies the associated risks of New Urbanism (or any other dominant form of development) becoming a matter of social and political indifference and the negative consequences of adopting universalistic (context-denying) checklists of 'best practice' in planning and urban development policy.

Theorising Best Practice

Conceptually, this paper positions itself within a relational materialist perspective and draws on the established frames of *rationalities* from governmentality literature (Foucault (1991); Miller and Rose (2008), Murdoch (2004) and *assemblage* and *translation* from contemporary social-spatial theory, such as Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) ((Callon 1986; Latour (2005); Deleuze and Guattari (1987); DeLanda 2006; McFarlane 2011a) and other practice-based theory (e.g. Schatzki, 2001)). Relational materialism, as an umbrella framework can be perceived, following Law 1994 (p. 100) as a 'recursive sociology of process', which emphasises the material character of society and the social. It offers a grounded, iterative approach to research and theorisation by highlighting the significance of discourse, practice, human and non-human interaction, power and conduct without making *a priori* assumptions about agency or structure. It does not adopt a single epistemological standpoint but allows research to look conceptually deeper, to engage with wider social networks through which spatial practices, including planning and design, become normalised within physical arrangements (Murdoch 2004). Theories and approaches under this umbrella (most notably ANT) stress the understanding of the built environment as a socio-material configuration (Murdoch 1997) – the composite of continuous heterogeneous associations (DeLanda 2006; Murdoch 1997) and exchanges between the social and material practices of place making and governing at the local scale.

This paper is an application of some of these common conceptual frames in the articulation of New Urbanist social-material constructions as norms of accepted practice for how to build new residential communities. In this vein, the paper positions itself within the wider debates on the analytic of assemblage (MacFarlane 2011b; Brenner 2011; McCann and Ward 2011; McGuirk and Dowling 2009; Jacobs 2011) but does not purport to have followed an ANT method of tracing the network or following the thing. Rather it connects with questions posed in a recent special issue of *Area* edited by Ben Anderson and Colin MacFarlane (2011), and more particularly, with the objective of understanding 'specific ways in which heterogeneous elements are gathered into some form of provisional whole (through concepts such as articulation, translation/transduction or in terms of alliances or co-functionings)' (p. 126). This engenders a focus on the practices of a range of development actors and an empirical grounding in how they 'mobilize, enrol, translate, channel, broker and bridge'(Allen and Cochrane 2007, p. 1171) in ways that have prioritised the typification of New Urbanism as the exemplar (McCann 2011) of 'good' planning and development.

New Urbanism as a form of best practice, like Bulkeley's conceptualisation of urban sustainability, can be seen as a governmental programme, based on the emergence of socio-political rationalities that enable the identification of perceived policy, practice and/or governmental failures, the identification of possible solutions and the grounds for prescriptive reform (Rose and Miller 1992). New Urbanismhas not proliferated in Toronto just because its principles embody a commonality of interests in society, but rather because actors who hold these common interests recognize (even if unconsciously) that by converging, they constitute a socio-political force for achieving specific ends. This is similar again to Bulkeley's assertion that best practice represents 'at once a political rationality and a governmental technology through which networks and coalitions seek to promote particular urban futures' (2006, p. 1029). The contextual significance of Toronto is herein introduced to further articulate how the 'abstractions of best practice become enmeshed in the particularities of the places from which they are derived, and in the political struggles (over issues) [sic] in the locales where best practice is deployed' (ibid). The Toronto case exemplifies the extent to which the valorisation of New Urbanism as a 'good' or 'best' practice conveniently meshes with local conditions underlying the rationalisation of practices and mentalities already emerging in a society in conjunction with new alignments of actors. In Toronto, this emergent rationality is one of improving urban efficiency and with it a desire to reform mainstream development practice to respond to the identified need to urbanise the suburbs and revitalise the de-industrializing urban core. Thus, the abstraction of New Urbanism's principles into 'best practice' further stabilises the social actions necessary to recursively reproduce and frame local urban 'problems' and appropriate 'solutions'.

So far, Bulkeley's treatment of best practice has been used to support the central argument for problematising the typification process in the context of where it is formulated and deployed. However, the implications of this paper extend beyond the policy transfer and learning issues which concerned Bulkeley to the emergent debates around the territorialisation of global flows (McCann and Ward 2010). Of particular saliency is the argument that the territorialisation and deterritorialisation of policy relevant knowledge and practice are discursively framed as successes and best practices promoted for insertion into other cities, a process which empowers some but disadvantages others 'putting alternative visions of the future outside the bounds of policy discussion' (McCann and Ward 2010, p. 177). New Urbanism is a global movement – a design-oriented philosophy of normative principles and prescriptive urban forms that has circulated throughout the globe – but it can only be 'operationalized or valorized when it is territorialized' (p.181). Toronto is used, therefore, to demonstrate the extent to which such valorization is highly contingent upon local conditions (e.g. market acceptability, historical precedence and technocratic planning considerations). Yet, as Vettoretto (2009) explains, best practice is a practice in itself[1], so theories of policy transfer may tell us little about how and why a best practice is selected and codified, who decides what a best practice is and for whom (p. 1068). The study of policy transfer and global flows is therefore much more than understanding the experimentations of policies

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[1] Wherein practices are 'recurrent processes governed by specifiable schemata of preferences and prescriptions' (Knorr-Cetina 2001, p. 174)

from one context to another, it is also about understanding the generation of a new governmental instrument – best practice (Vettoretto 2009, p. 1068).

As a governmental instrument, the promotion of best practice, and more specifically of the New Urbanism as best practice in the current culture of evidence-based policy formulation isdubious. . Housing provision and community development processes are recast as technical exercises in design product delivery, the likes of which are often exhibited in exemplar schemes in relatively disconnected geographical locations and/or codified into formulaic design checklists and toolkits for ease of adoption and replication in different contexts. Morever, the political nature of contestation and negotiation of public and private interests involved in development processes easily become obscured by a politics of consensus (Swyngedouw 2011). The formation of consensus on what should be done as a response to a given issue (such as sprawl or urban decline) may in turn overshadow the situated identification and debate of the 'problem' or issue itself; the focus turning solely to the minutia (such as design features) of the *response* (Rancière 2003) (e.g construction of 'traditional' neighbourhoods). As such, one could argue that New Urbanism in practice is another manifestation of the post-political condition (Swyngedouw 2009; 2010; 2011). This perspective however undermines Bulkeley's assertion of the discursive power of best practice to challenge and reframe the nature and interpretation of the problem itself (2006, p. 1029), crucially at both the point of formulation and deployment. New Urbanism is a consensus-based movement built around the naturalistic affinities of its context-neutral principles that are to a large extent 'beyond dispute' (Swyngedouw 2010, p. 217). Rather than the absence of political rationality, the abstraction of New Urbanist principles into 'matter of fact' default practices valorised within particular territories implicates a powerful political force in typifying *the way things are done* in a given development culture, possibly at the expense of democratic debate on local urban futures.

The remainder of this paper is structured in three parts. Part 1 overviews the conditions supporting the proliferation of New Urbanism in Toronto. This is based on the empirical analysis (described indetail in Author 2010) of four master-planned communities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA); two located on urban brownfield sites in the City of Toronto; and two located on greenfield sites in the suburban fringe. Fifty-seven semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key development actors (public and private) involved in the conception, planning and delivery of each of the project sites. The empirical study fuelled the interpretative and conceptual analysis which constitute this paper's critique of the typification of New Urbanism as a best practice. It is worthwhile noting that the original methodology for the research was to 'map' out the 'structures of building provision' (SoBP) (Ball 1986) for New Urbanist development in Toronto. Empirical investigation of the practices of those involved in producing such schemes quickly revealed the inability of this institutional model to do more than offer deep description of the key interactions; it did not adequately support the theorisation of how and why New Urbanism was proliferating in Toronto. A grounded approach yielded a strong orientation to 'governmentality in action' (Murdoch 2004) leading to the theorisation of New Urbanism in Toronto as a regime of practice (Dean 1999). That is to say, a coherent set of ways of going about doing things. Regimes of practice, as institutional practices, 'routinised and ritualised in certain places and times' (Dean 1999,

p. 21) constitute rationalities defined as changing discursive fields, moral justifications and normative notions for the most appropriate divisions of responsibility for various sectors of society (Rose and Miller 1992). Such divisions are based on perceived problems and associative prescriptions for change through the mobilisation and organisation of social life. Thus the problematization of the typification of New Urbanism as best practice entails a fine grained empirical examination of how the practices of producers were unified, rationalised and routinized via their relation to sets of objectives, diagnoses of existing social, economic and political shortcomings, and declarations of prescriptions for necessary reform and change. The postulation of New Urbanism as a form of best practice is an observation which supports Allen's (2011) assertion that empirical detail in the construction of heterogenous assemblages does not remove the need for thoughtful conceptualisation' (p. 156). In other words, the original orientation towards the SoBP allowed for the 'apprehension' of disparate co-existing logics underpinning the valorisation of New Urbanism in Toronto. The conceptual framing of it as a formation of best practice engendered the 'comprehension' of relational logics and the modes of ordering that 'hold assemblages in place' in specified ways in order 'for us to grasp their looming shape and wider potential significance' (Allen 2011, p. 156).

Part 2 theoretically unpacks this process oftypification, through representation and exemplification in the local context, and illustrates the extent to which local practices and urban rationalities meshed to support the ideological and practical 'engagement' (Thévenot 2001) of New Urbanism over and above other alternative urbanisms. This section draws on the empirical analysis outlined above but emphasis is placed on proposing a new way of conceptualising the normalisation of a dominant development culture. A detailed account of the development profile for each project is undertaken elsewhere (Author 2010) wherein the elaboration of key tensions, contradictions, and collaborations is unpacked in detail. What is significant to note for the purposes of this paper is in fact the *lack of* empirical knowledge of if and how alternative urbanisms were considered precisely because of the institutionalisation of pro-New Urbanism practices in contemporary Toronto. Part 3 reflects on the implications of New Urbanism as best practice and concludes on the basis of the need to pay as much attention to what is *not* taken up in local contexts as to what is, and to turn critical attention towards the practices of local interpretative communities and development cultures in cities where New Urbanism is proliferating in order to better understand and question its universalism.

New Urbanism Comes to Toronto

Toronto's experimentation with New Urbanism began in the late 1980s and early 1990s against the backdrop of growing political consensus around the need to address three cross-cutting but not necessarily mutually supportive issues: the lack of affordable family housing; the inefficiency of decaying urban infrastructure and service delivery; and the detrimental impacts of suburban sprawl. At this point in time, a new approach to community development, then referred to as 'neo-traditional' town planning was gaining notoriety in the United States (particularly those communities planned by Duany Plater-Zyberk and Associates (DPZ)). These communities favoured compact, higher-density

layouts with early 20th century design features. In the GTA a few developers took notice and put forward proposals to 'pilot' or 'experiment' with the concept of neo-traditionalism in the greenfield context. More significant than the actions of a few entrepreneurial developers was the promotional position taken by the Ontario Provincial Government (Grant and Bohdanow 2008) when it spearheaded perhaps the best-known New Urbanist project in Canada – Cornell, located in the suburban municipality of Markham.

This particular project was originally conceived in 1988 as an affordable housing demonstration project on land made redundant from the shelved proposal for a second major international airport. The early plans did not include 'neo-traditional' town features nor was New Urbanism a commonplace term in local policy and planning circles. However, in 1992 after shelving earlier conceptual visions for the demonstration project, the Province initiated an international design competition and eventually hired Miami-based DPZ. This introduced New Urbanist principles and form-based design codes into the draft plan approval process which aimed to ultimately produce 10,000 units and house an anticipated population of 30,000 people. Other projects taking on the New Urbanism label actually preceded Cornell in their completion, but Cornell was the original test-bed for New Urbanist housing products (e.g. town houses with detached garages on rear lanes) for many on-looking developers and builders, and it was the precedent-setting experiment that introduced alternative development standards into the formalised zoning system for cautious local and regional policy-makers. Cornell, it was acknowledged by mainstream and New Urbanist homebuilders alike 'had the power to in part influence everything else that gets built in the Greater Toronto Area' (Interview, Homebuilder). Thus, by the early 2000s the proliferation of housing developments taking cues from the early prototypes like Cornell had burgeoned. Whilst the actual number of 'comprehensively developed new urbanism communities remains relatively small' (Grant and Bohdanow 2008, p. 109) the influence of the movement on new residential development was and is still considerable in terms of community layout and design (Grant 2002; 2003). This has lead some to critique Toronto's suburban residential landscape for the creation of a new form of 'cookie-cutter' tract housing, a 'new suburbanism' (Lehrer and Milgrom 1996), wherein the superficial design treatments (such as porches and neo-Victorian trimmings) associated with New Urbanism (but not the conceptual vision or ideologically aligned principles) have been replicated en masse. This is what Grant (2006, p. 168) refers to as 'faux' New Urbanism and what Author (2010) has discussed elsewhere as facsimile or hybrid forms. Boiling this down to pure market dynamics, these stylistic features have been replicated in this way because market actors have been convinced that they will sell – Cornell (and the other early flagship projects) reinforced this through the premiums achieved for this particular market niche. .

New Urbanism in Toronto has not just been a suburban phenomenon. Large tracts of under-utilized and derelict urban land in former industrial areas of the city centre and its inner suburbs have also become popular sites for New Urbanism-inspired projects, (notably outstripped in prevalence by the development of high-rise condominium towers and loft conversions (Lehrer and Wieditz 2009)). Unlike the outlying suburban context,

where it was a political and market risk to introduce a new approach to compact urban living (with higher density products) and complicate the mainstream rules of engagement between local planners and residential developers (with the introduction of alternative design standards), the city proved a welcoming if not unconscious receptor for the New Urbanism. Whilst one design consultant remarked of the climate of acceptance for New Urbanism in the outer reaches of the suburban fringe 'that a developer would have to have rocks in their head to go there to make a New Urbanist project', another consultant for a developer building a prominent New Urbanist community in the heart of downtown Toronto stated that 'it was really a no brainer, you could put a chimpanzee in a cage to design that plan'. The difference in acceptance is largely attributable to the nature of development and the urban future it prefigured. For the City of Toronto planners and policy-makers, their main aspiration was to attract new development (residential or mixed use) that would 'replicate the existing context of Toronto' and 'reconnect the urban fabric' (Interview, Policy Planner) interrupted by pockets of derelict and disused industrial lands. Downtown Toronto was also already characterised by Victorian row and semi-detached housing and pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods, often complete with rear laneways and detached garages – so the neo-traditional architectural styles of the popularised New Urbanist vision fit in relatively seamlessly with the existing dominant urban form and layout. So much so that proponents of projects in the city more often than not reject the label of New Urbanism, in deference to the claim that it is 'simply more Toronto' (Author 2010).

Twinned political efforts focused on the importance of managing suburban growth, while intensifying and redeveloping disused urban land have supported a valorisation of New Urbanism in suburb and city[2]. Underpinning both the urbanisation of the suburbs and the revitalisation of the urban is a shared rationality for promoting improved urban efficiency through 'smarter' growth policies and development practice in the GTA. New Urbanism has therefore gained institutional and political power via its direct influence on planning, housing, and other social policy frameworks in and around Toronto largely through its ability to align previously antagonistic relations of individuals and groups (e.g. pro-development and anti-sprawl advocates). But more impressive is that it has won over many practitioners in the development industry as well (in large part due to the profit margins enabled by increasing the density of otherwise conventional suburban housing tracts). The ability to do so is not purely down to the profoundness of the twenty-seven espoused principles popularised through the Charter of the New Urbanism (CNU 1996), but to the universalising appeal of the movement's unspoken ideals, what Grant (2006, p. 192) refers to as 'hidden values'. New Urbanism seeks to ensure wide-ranging appeal across existing cultural, political, economic and social categories with as little sacrifice as possible, actualised via reforms that are largely tenable from within the existing structural parameters of the dominant institutional and urban development paradigm. Thus, supporting Grant's claim that: 'New Urbanists build communities that essentially serve the needs of an urban elite and the segment of the economy that depends on urban

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[2] But not to the exclusion of 'other' forms of dominant private development (such as point tower condominiums or conventional suburban tract housing). See Blais (2010), Boudreau et al (2009); Sewell (2009) and Desfor et al (2006)).

development. In some ways, then, New Urbanism reproduces and reinforces existing power structures' (Grant 2006, p. 193).

In addition, New Urbanism's emphasis on appropriating the best of the usable past (Duany *et al* 2000) to justify intended actions and plans provides a 'common sense' confidence boost to those more sceptical actors who are persuaded by the fact that 'it' (i.e. traditional neighbourhood) worked before. In the process, the proponents of the movement have implicitly (perhaps unintentionally) promoted a formulaic applicability of the endorsed principles regardless of geographical, cultural or temporal externalities whilst simultaneously qualifying a dubious grafting of sociological (physical determinism) and ecological (transect) theory onto practical (i.e. knowable) and technocratic (i.e. doable) solutions through a select set of truth claims (Beauregard 2002). But universal appeal and common sense principles alone do not fully explain the territorialised valorisation of New Urbanism as 'best practice'. This involves a much more complex process of typification and abstraction. The following section unpacks this process, and in particular, stresses the need to question what gets filtered out (Vettoretto 2009) in the social process of normalising New Urbanism as 'best practice'.

Typification of New Urbanism as 'best practice'

Understanding how and why New Urbanism has become so prolific in the particular context of Toronto involves accounting for how urban problems are identified and then embodied in built forms. New Urbanism has proliferated in relation to the situated complexity of Toronto's planning, development and building culture and its response to emergent rationalities for problematizing urban efficiency and (economic) sustainability of the city-region. This should not suggest however that the physical outcomes on the ground (i.e. those communities labelled as New Urbanist or facsimile/faux New Urbanism) mirror a unified conceptual intent of the producers involved. Rather, such development outcomes were formulated from a hybrid of rationalities – the product of compromise between several, often conflicting conceptions of good design or planning and 'best practice' by various actors within a given network of relations. Nevertheless, the attraction of New Urbanism is the common sense nature of its trademark principles which enables divergent actors with their own proprietary repertoire of accepted practices, professional responsibilities and reputations to adhere to the universal message, if not all of the instruments and tools (e.g. design codes and restrictive covenants) that have come to be associated with the movement. This recognizes as Adams *et al* (2001, p. 219) contend that 'the strategies, interests and actions of individuals and organizations are not automatically determined by dominant social and economic forces'. People still have the choice to accept, be indifferent, or respond to such forces and the ability to challenge and transform them. Yet on the surface, New Urbanism appears to have indoctrinated the residential development culture of Toronto, with little evidence of challenge and transformation.

The influence of New Urbanism's principles is strong because it offers a coherent doctrine. Beauregard (2002) postulates that principles are truths that specifically 'attempt to capture basic values and relationships whose validity is unassailable whose desirability

is universal. They are embodiments of the essential elements of the 'good city' (2002, p. 188).

> *New Urbanism in the mind of some is about no driveways and no garages on the street... but it is about the public spaces and the presence in and around the public spaces and it is about neighbourhood centres, where there is an identifiable centre where people can go to and relate to, and none of those things – I can't argue with any of them, they are all components of good urban design* (Interview, Planning Consultant).

The universalism of the principles (and the uncanny way in which 'any one leads to the others' (Beauregard 2002, p. 189)), and the 'hidden values' ideologically supporting them is enabled by shared vocabularies, theories and explanations. These identify and link New Urbanism with other prescriptions for urban and suburban change through the organisation of social life into a networked force enabling certain rationalities about ideal urbanisms to be prioritized.That is to say, they securely establish a clear alternative to competing rationalities, or more likely the perceived outcomes of alternative rationalities, such as unchecked growth, environmental decline and social disaffection.

These overlapping interests in Toronto havesought to regain the lost attribute of 'urban efficiency' and fashioned from this a view of current and past residential planning and development control as a problem, objectified in the material conceptualisation of 'sprawl' and automobile-dependent 'suburbia'. From the identification of these 'problems' in Toronto emerged the promotion of twinned responses: the urbanisation of the suburbs and the revitalization of the urban (cf. Boudreau et al 2009). Yet, these network-based forces are not just the aggregate of practices and technologies, nor merely the mutual legitimisation of similar movements consciously undertaken in order to gain new adherents. The co-dependence across discourses occurs because within and between them, sets of actors have convinced others that their problems or goals are closely linked and that each can achieve their perceived vision by working together. So it is not merely that social associations and movements have come together as a group of like-minded individuals or organisations with similar or mutual interests under the umbrella of New Urbanism. The convergence is a much deeper *construction* of allied interests and shared rationalities. This construction of interests is enabled through a process of translation (Callon and Latour 1981) through which a 'delicate affiliation of loose assemblages of agents and agencies forms into a functioning network' (Miller and Rose 1990: 9-10). Here, Schatzki's conceptualisation of 'practice' helps us understand how translation occurs. Practice is 'a temporarily unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings' (1996, p. 89), but it is also a performance. The first conceptualisation of practice-as-entity is therefore 'performed' via the everyday 'sayings and doings' of actors or practitioners. In turn, this process is shaped by and constitutive of the complex relations of materials, knowledges, norms and meanings that sustain, reproduce and potentially change the practice (Shove *et al* 2007). For translation to happen successfully, tools and resources are often required. Shared vocabularies, theories and explanations have thus promoted the identification and linked association in Toronto of New Urbanism and other movements (e.g. environmentalism and smart growth) into a networked force to enable certain forms of social, economic and political rationalities to be brought about

in both a direct (e.g. policy formulation such as the *Places to Grow* initiative) and indirect manner (e.g. emergence of 'community-builders' as opposed to 'housebuilders' within industry lexicon). Shared vocabularies consisting of such terms as sprawl, community, sustainability and mixed use, have the ability of transforming individual and group concerns into matter of fact or taken-for-granted everyday 'realities' or problems that form linkages with other claims of policy, industry or governmental failure or shortcomings elsewhere. 'Hence, persons, organisations, entities and locales which remain differentiated by space, time and formal boundaries can be brought into a loose and approximate, and always mobile and indeterminate alignment' (Miller and Rose 1990 p.10).

Toronto's prescriptive response to sprawl and urban inefficiency and decline has by and large been to tighten controls on suburban development and look to new forms of residential design employed elsewhere (yet consistent with the local vernacular). These prescriptions manifest themselves in the new forms of building provision encouraged on suburban greenfields and urban brownfields. Compact form (preferably vertical), efficient lot layouts, grid street patterns, pedestrian-orientation and transport-supportive design and planning have become the cornerstones of all new development. The initial 'strangeness' (cf. Author 2010) of these concepts to suburban mentalities was softened by the treatment of the early developments (such as Cornell) as 'test sites' and 'experiments' for new housing products and layouts. By contrast, in the urban context, de-industrialisation had left behind large parcels of prime development land in various states of remediation and dereliction. The production of compact 'city' homes on these cleaned-up sites was received as a natural continuation of the urban fabric or character that the interim industrial land use had interrupted (Interview, Policy Planner).

The reasoning behind the self-reinforcing promotion of New Urbanism's way of doing things as 'best' fits with Guy and Shove's (2000) account of a similar logic for the promotion of building for energy efficiency. This being 'the technology exists, the knowledge is there, it is easy to demonstrate and show, and if adopted by all those involved in producing homes it would lead to a significant improvement' (p. 94). In this sense *understanding,* 'sometimes helps determine what specifically makes sense for people to do' (Schatzki 2001, p. 51). This being said each actor involved in the production of the new residential environments calls upon his or her own repertoire of practices in judging the utility or value of each promoted 'best practice'. This point was underscored in interviews with Toronto housing producers and policy makers by the way New Urbanism was conceptualised and referred to. By public officials it was largely presented as a social good and by industry representatives as a series of technical design elements; but more specifically as enabling or constraining the work and reputation that each individual actor needed to perform and maintain.

Actors according to Vettoretto:

...collectively define what is 'good' (pragmatically and ethically) and in doing so they also define their collective identity. The process of production of 'good practices' is at once regulative (influencing cognitive frames, rules and collective representations) and constitutive (producing social relations and identities). Actors belong to a world (or club) of 'good practitioners', which gives them opportunities in terms of learning, networking and professional status (2009, p.1079).

So whether or not a particular practice or innovation is taken up by other actors working on other projects and replicated widely depends on whether or not it is perceived as having advantages in terms of one's own desired outcomes, by those who have the power to choose it over any alternatives which might be available (Bentley 1999, p.64). In the Toronto interviews it was evident that some developers and builders assessed their taking up or dismissal of New Urbanism's ideas and practices based on economic factors (i.e. design v. product price points), whilst many design professionals weighted the advantages and disadvantages associated with undertaking a particular 'type' of project based on their professional reputation and desire to be known for doing innovative work. Schatzki (2001) refers to actions that a person intentionally and knowingly seeks to carry out at a given moment as those which 'make sense to them to perform'; this he conceives of as 'practical intelligibility' (p. 47). A state of being that requires the institution of meaning (i.e. the mental phenomenon of rules(-of-thumb), teleology and affectivity) by which actors orientate themselves to specific ends and rationalise how things matter to them and conceive of specific and contextually appropriate responses (Schatzki 2001).

Bentley (1999) suggests that the process of getting others to adopt a particular way of doing things (or engaging their practical intelligibility) is a process of typification. But he stresses that the agency of each actor and that of a collective, (in this instance housing producers) is not an automatic machine, but rather a cultural power struggle that incites early adopters, late adopters, partial adopters and non-adopters. A cultural struggle, 'whose outcome depends on the particular strategies and tactics deployed by the parties involved, and on the alliances that develop between them' (1999, p. 64). This has been a key factor in the rise of New Urbanism in Toronto, as it illustrates that those whose interests have aligned in favour of New Urbanism have won out in this cultural struggle and as a consequence their preferred practices have been adopted and replicated and transformed into reinforcing strategies of 'best practice' more so than the available alternatives. This process of typificaiton via the representation of particular practices as 'best' needs also to be accompanied by ideological supports which allow those who are constrained to take up these practices to rationalise them as 'good' within their own repertoire of acknowledged ways of doing things. Thus shaping what Thévenot (2001, p. 67) refers to as 'pragmatic regimes' of familiarity, regular planned action, and justification; the social devices which govern actors' engagement with their contextual environment (or culture) and articulate an orientation to some kind of 'good' and the mode of accessing a particular 'reality' or establishing a social order.

The translation of aligned interests into stabilised norms of 'best practice' depends on affirming the ideological supports of certain strategies over and above others, and in so

doing depends on the crushing of those ideological supports favouring competing rationalities. This entertains then a degree of creative-destruction in the case of New Urbanism. The destructive process occurs via the problematization of current or mainstream development and design practice as being fundamentally flawed; the root of social, environmental, economic and political concerns with suburban sprawl. The constructive process in turn initiates the postulation of preferred responses and prescriptions which lead towards the promotion of development and building practices which are 'good' in the mainstream culture's own acknowledged terms (Bentley 1999, p. 206). Through this typification of building practices and their deployment into real material artefacts (housing tracts) the social actions involved in the creative-destruction are concealed behind what Gieryn (2002, p. 42) describes as 'interpretive registers that focus on instrumental efficiency, cost or possibly aesthetics'. The formulation of 'best practice' reinforces the context-neutral objectification of houses as 'products' with functional attributes and aesthetic trimmings whilst promotional material connotes houses and communities as interchangeable technical products, broadly comparable in terms of function, form and design. This lulls producers and consumers into accepting housing provision as a matter of indifference (Gieryn 2002) reinforced and perpetuated by the labelling of techniques, materials and approaches as 'best' to establish a moral responsibility of producers to conform to this 'way of doing things'.

This process of typification can be summarised another way. First, the acceptance of particular definitions of problems is determined by the relative power of certain interest groups to draw attention to a set of material circumstances that adversely affect 'society'. Second, a dominant narrative comes to occupy the discursive space; and third, the narrative is reflected within institutional practices (Jacobs et al 2003, p. 442). At which point it becomes more or less taken for granted as 'good' in itself.

Implications of New Urbanism as best practice

The potential implications of promoting or unproblematically accepting New Urbanism as 'best practice' are those of turning toward a formalistic even ritualistic set of norms, practices and policies for achieving the planning and urban development vision.. Beauregard warned that the principles of New Urbanism 'represent a self-delusion and a dangerous political ploy that stifles alternative urbanisms' (2002, p. 188). Whilst harsh, this accusation was meant as 'a caution regarding the application of codes and principles to community development. It reveals the difficulties of capturing local variation and history and points to the importance of who plans and what point of view they espouse' (ibid). The danger with the abstraction of New Urbanist thinking into universal principles and the codification into more explicit checklists, tool kits, codes and covenants is that 'once we accept a specific formula as the way to the vision, there is little room for the free play of ideas, for competition between concepts, or for vigorous debate that should be as diverse, broad and complex as the problems that face us' (Young 2001, p. 29). The interdependency of the principles of New Urbanism, despite what its adherents promote, may not encourage choice. Rather it could be argued that they are stifling it through the naturalisation of middle-way solutions. That is to say, a solution or response, equally palatable to public and private interests, prescribed through the reduction of planning and development interactions to a checklist of 'best practices' designed to implement a

formula. To a large extent this has occurred because the scope for debate has been rationalized by state-instituted policies, which have adopted the same use of language and rhetoric as the private sector design-led New Urbanism discourse. In Toronto, and elsewhere, terms like 'community' and 'sustainability' have now become part of the commercial branding and marketing of not only the housing products but the producers themselves, and government-sponsored policy documents routinely profile New Urbanist projects as exemplars for the future of (sub)urban growth in the Greater Toronto Area (cf. CMHC 2010).

The reliance on formalistic and ritualistic checklists needs to be questioned, however, on the basis of what these inscriptions cannot prescribe and predict. These guides cannot be expected to account for the situated complexities and dynamics intrinsic to the social interactions, interventions and constraints which actively constitute the practices producing and reproducing built environments, and as such do not provide the scope for honest debate about alternative forms of urban development appropriate to local contextual conditions. So the policy implication of not questioning New Urbanism as 'best practice' is that ignoring the contextual dynamics of a given time and place effectively reifies a select set of truth claims via the unspoken validation of certain social and political values. Thus the abstraction of New Urbanist (or other) principles and into 'best practice' indicators, standards, checklists or codes for industry actors and policymakers deserves closer scrutiny each time they are proposed. Or as Adams et al (2005) forewarn, 'while new ideas will ultimately be tested in the marketplace, because of entrenched culture perspectives and attitudes, they may never get to the market to be tested' (p. 71). In short, a non-reflexive urban framework curtails the multiplicity of urbanisms that might challenge, rather than secure current matter-of-fact rationalities of what constitutes 'good planning' and the 'way things should be done'. The more New Urbanism is talked about the more it is reproduced and normalised. The real power of the movement does not therefore lie in the specifics of its land management reforms or its claims of community design superiority rooted in traditional neighbourhood ideals, rather it lies in the ubiquitous way in which 'it carries forces as an informing idea, permeating the mentalities and identities of city-dwellers as they imagine who they are, where they are, and what they might do' (Healey 2002, p. 1789).

Conclusion

Less than twenty-five years ago the discussion, let alone production, of new build, mixed use, medium-to-high density, pedestrian-friendly developments in the suburban fringe of Toronto was seen as a novel or quaint idea; a short time later such developments have been 'made normative, if not yet dominant' (Branch 2003, p. 27). This has happened due to the alignments of rationalities or the overlapping of self-interests amongst actors involved in the processes of urban development, including governing and regulating authorities, the development and construction industries, financial institutions and lenders, sales and marketing agents, local groups and associations and new housing consumers.

In acknowledging the nexus of urbantransformations associated with New Urbanism, there is a need to shift empirical and theoretical attention away from the fixed or imaginary spaces of New Urbanism ideal form. Research on New Urbanism is best focused on the real life dynamism embodied in the spatializations of the contexts of daily and institutional social practices that constitute it, rather than transfixed on the transplantation and universalization of these practices divorced from the situatedness of their emergence and application. Empirical accounts need to focus on more than the physical outcomes of New Urbanist development projects by paying closer attention to the existence and/or absence of contestations, conflict, collaboration and alliances and the alternative development ideas that have played a role in constituting the pragmatic regimes of the dominant local development culture. This underscores the value of identifying the development pathways not taken, as much as those that are. Thus highlighting the ways in which the problematization of issues in a given society, such as suburban sprawl in Toronto, are constructed as much to conceal the negative impacts of proceeding down a certain pathway (i.e. disruption of the status quo) as to reveal the positive aspects of the favoured prescription for reform (i.e. mixed use, neighbourhood and community or sense of place).

In other words, in order to understand the circulation of New Urbanism as a global movement, it is necessary to first de-universalize the processes; to view it as a globally circulated, abstract idea that crucially is co-constituted by the practices of situated interpretative communities (Lee and LiPuma 2002). By attempting to focus on what development actors and policymakers do and do not do, or how their practical intelligence is engaged by New Urbanism, this paper is suggesting that New Urbanism is a matter of local interpretative work rather than the intentional or conscious adoption of universal goals or truth claims.

> *It is hard to know whether things are happening and someone gives it a name, or if it is a name and therefore things are happening (Interview Councillor City of Toronto).*

Much more attention should therefore be paid to the practices, contexts and professional rationalizations of the interpretative community of producers of New Urbanism (or any distinctive built form); thus acknowledging Fischler's (1995) contention that local development cultures predispose development actors to 'frame situations and problems in particular ways; that is to analyse them according to specific categories and synthesise them into specific structures and to represent them in specific verbal, graphic or numerical ways' (p. 21). Planning and development actors in the context of Toronto were not simply indoctrinated into ideological definitions of universal problems and solutions. Such ideological constructs were part and parcel of the active context of constraints these actors experienced in their daily practice (Ligget and Perry 1995). Thus New Urbanism in Toronto emerged as part of a messy social process in which the simultaneous nature of creative-destruction in the realm of the dominant development culture conveniently meshed with the local conditions underlying the emergent rationality of urban efficiency, and with it the desire to reform mainstream practice to respond to the identified need to urbanise the suburbs and revitalise the urban. The abstraction of New Urbanist principles

into 'best practice' must therefore be understood as the discursive process of stabilizing social actions and conduct necessary to reproduce the values and norms of the most powerful alignments of development interests which have (thus far) won out in the cultural struggle for the typification of 'the way things are done' in Toronto's residential community development.

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