Notes on the New Discourse

A new discussion is needed for traditional architecture and urbanism in the 21st century. By John Massengale

The New Discourse starts with the current situation by asking what’s wrong and how to fix it. It begins with the city and the neighborhood, rather than the individual building.

After 100 years of Modernism, traditional ideas and values are making a comeback in many areas of culture, the arts and politics. But as in so many other fields, the reasons for the dissatisfaction of some with the conservative, traditional architecture for practitioners not represented by the academic and conservative arguments usually heard today. Its roots are social, political, economic, aesthetic and even spiritual. Its goal is to broaden the discussion of traditional design so that all traditional architects and urbanists have a place in it.

Until now, the discussion of contemporary traditional design has been firmly rooted in pre-modern practice and theory: Let’s call this prevailing theory the Old Discourse. I realize that many practitioners fall between the Old and New Discourses and that these polar positions are perhaps oversimplified, but they’re useful for clarifying the real differences that exist, and thereby help understanding and debate.

That’s not always easy for architects. We’re trained in architecture school to develop our own positions and fight for them in the world (the Howard Roark disease). But after many years of working in different camps, traditional architects of all stripes and colors are coming together. That requires some tolerance for the opinions of others if the movement is going to continue to grow.

The contemporary practice of traditional architecture and urbanism started during the Postmodernism of the 1970s. Postmodernists like Robert Venturi and Michael Graves developed idiosyncratic personal styles and became the superstars of the time, but the personal nature of their work prevented it from becoming the basis of a tradition for other architects. At the same time, architects who relearned traditional skills received less notice and fewer awards, but the enduring movements of New Urbanism and the Classical revival grew from their more normative work.

Most traditional architects in the following decades became either New Urbanists or Classicists, and followed quite different paths. The New Urbanists tackled sprawl, aiming to do nothing less than reform American society and the way it builds. They had some success—at least one estimate says that 11% of American construction last year was in New Urban projects. That’s an achievement that required flexibility and compromise, as well as expertise in many fields never taught in architecture school. The results were not always pretty.

Most Classicists built individual houses for the rich rather than production housing. With high budgets and dedicated craftsmen, they rediscovered many of the fine points of traditional and Classical design and refined the quality of construction in America. They sometimes looked at New Urban developments and said the New Urbanists didn’t know how to design, while the New Urbanists looked at the work of the Classicists and questioned the value to society of another $25 million house.

Of course there were architects who straddled both worlds, or lived in one of their own, but at least some of the Classicists were social conservatives more interested in design for the rich (the Classicists might say “interested in design for its own sake”) than reforming society. And at least some of the early New Urbanists, who all went to Modernist architecture schools and lacked the budgets and workers of the Classicists, had a learning curve that included mistakes along the way. Working in the public market, New Urbanists had to deal with the biases of the planning profession, the strength of the traffic engineers, the economic formulas of developers and their lenders and clients who had become rich making bad buildings and places.

Today, the Classicists and the New Urbanists are increasingly coming together: at the University of Miami, at Notre Dame, at The Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America, in the Congress for the New Urbanism and even on the internet, at the TradArch discussion list. As they do, the reasons for the dissatisfaction of some with the conservative, academic and elite, if not elitist, discussion of contemporary Classical and traditional architecture become clearer.

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The 21st century has yet to be articulated. Kevin Kelly. The New Discourse synthesizes many sources. Books and precedent are used to organize thought, reflecting the desire to make better buildings, regardless of the intellectual climate of the time. Arthur Dworkin goes to the heart of the Old Discourse and complains about a lack of evolution in the Orders as they’re taught today. The Old Discourse admires the most elaborate houses of the Gilded Age, and builds houses like them for the new billionaires and multi-millionaires of the last two decades. High-end construction in the New Discourse is for smaller houses in new neighborhoods like Rosemary Beach and Windsor, which look to pre-industrial traditions. The New Discourse looks at post-industrial mansions, they tend to be at the singular ones such as Philip Schutte’s Swan House, which contrasts sharply with the conspicuous consumption of Newport or Palm Beach ‘cottages.’

The Old Discourse says, “Aristotle said X and therefore Y,” but in the New Discourse, books and precedent are used to organize thought. The New Discourse simultaneously imagines the world as its practitioners would like it to be, and as it is. It accepts that the world is a commercialized place, and asks how to make the commercial world live up to its demands.

The Old Discourse says, “Aristotle said X and therefore Y,” but in the New Discourse, books and precedent are used to organize thought, recognize patterns and truths and train the eye, rather than grant authority. Rules in the New Discourse are as likely to be new as ancient. The New Discourse looks to make the world a better place and is more concerned about the present and the future than the past. It is a characteristically American pragmatic idealism, and its sources are as much the Declaration of Independence as the Greeks and Romans. It also looks to contemporary work like Malcolm Gladwell’s Blink and New Rules of the New Economy by Kevin Kelly. The New Discourse synthesizes many sources.

Most designers are synthesizers, whose ideas come more from intuition and experience than from books. Traditional design by definition draws on models and precedents, and New Discourse architects can love the Orders as much as any Old Fogy, but there is more than one way to design tradition. Notre Dame professor and fellow Carroll William Westfall’s definition of Classicism – Classicism is the imitation of nature, Neoclassicism is the imitation of Classicism – makes explicit belief that Classicism is a natural phenomenon. The Orders, in this definition, can be highly refined reflections of qualities in nature, rather than the ultimate object in themselves. They can be used to train the hand, the eye and the mind, but one can expect that throughout time they can change, because our perception of the models behind them changes, just as the "self-evident" truths of the Declaration of Independence were not obvious before the 18th century. The emphasis on experience and intuition introduces changes to tradition (and tradition has always changed and evolved). The concept of "life" that Christopher Alexander discusses in The Nature of Order is a new contribution to tradition, perhaps unnecessary before Modernism killed tradition. It goes hand in hand with recent studies that show large samples of people will have consistent emotional responses to different urban streets and settings, or that driving to work through sprawl decreases efficiency in the workplace.

Prospect is a new Traditional Neighborhood Development under construction in Longmont, CO. The development features both traditional and Modernist buildings.