

Is New Urbanism the new environmentalism?



Environmentalists are dumb. That's the message from Andres Duany, one of the world's most prominent urban planners. He uses the more eloquent term of "lobotomized."

"They are intellectually deformed. Half of their brains are gone," says Duany, based in Miami. He doesn't say "stupid" or "dumb," but they are implied. His contention is that environmental leaders fail to put humans first and only care about nature, preferably sans humans.

Is this guy trying to pick a fight? Actually, yes. I know this because he asked me to gather my environmental gang into a room so that our side and his side could "have it out." I foresee another Miami-based reality show in the making: *Zoning Wars*.

Duany is a founder of New Urbanism, a 30-year-old movement based on walkable communities, and he runs a firm called DPZ alongside his wife, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, the dean of the University of Miami's School of Architecture. While their books and opinions ring loudly in the world of architecture and urban planning, Duany says he never gets invited to speak to American environmentalists. (Our gang could change that.)

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Instead he speaks in Vienna and Frankfurt about how cities can save the planet. Last month in West Palm Beach, he addressed the 20th Congress of New Urbanism, which he founded. "The real way to save nature is to make cities that people really love," he stated at that event. "Everybody's trying to prevent us from doing it. New urbanists are heroes."

Duany's vision of perfection is a European plaza, a paved place where everyone gathers, but cars are not allowed. The New Urbanism movement looks to the past for inspiration, and it makes a distinction between towns developed before 1945 and after, when the highway became popularized and suburbs became possible.

Well-dressed and articulate, Duany vents his anger at Americans and, especially, American environmental regulators. They make his job impossible, he says, because they only think about nature and ignore human culture, which results in failure for both.

His solution to save the planet, including humanity, is to create cities where people love to walk and love to live, like Manhattan. In Florida, South Beach is his best example, but the rest of the county is unloved. "Miami-Dade has such horrible places, and people are always trying to escape to the suburbs," he says.

Today's environmental regulations would prevent the creation of another Manhattan or South Beach because such places were originally wetlands. According to Duany, by protecting native habitats, the environmental movement has sabotaged itself, saving roads and cars instead. "What gets built are suburban places, saving the wetlands, but low in density and everybody driving," he laments.

"Until environmentalists become urbanists, Americans won't be able to tell the difference between Miami Beach and greenwash suburban sprawl," he says. The term "greenwash" refers to the growing tendency to call things "green" for the sake of popularity, although they may cause more harm than good to the environment.

Duany argues that cities allow people to live healthy, low-impact lifestyles. "Manhattan is the greenest city in the U.S. because most people are using transit and walking," he says. But he notes that underneath its streets are 1700 pipes that have diverted natural streams, with no special allowances for former rivers or wetlands. Such destruction of natural habitats would be

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illegal today. Hence, no new Manhattans.

At the other end of Duany's green-city spectrum are young suburban towns such as Weston in Broward County, where laws favor wide, grassy swales while preventing compact neighborhoods. He says that Portland, Oregon, is full of suburban sprawl, owing to planning and zoning legislation instituted in recent decades.

"Portlandians" or "Evergladians" are Duany's dumb environmentalists -- the ones who fight for and create zoning laws to protect nature while ignoring human needs. Duany says they did not support him as a lead consultant for Miami 21, the City of Miami's master planning guide approved in 2010. As a result, the level of density approved is "not as high as it should be," he says.

The Urban Development Boundary in Miami-Dade County is a sham, Duany maintains, because it has been moved repeatedly and has allowed for suburban sprawl. "The basic situation," he says, "is that the environmental movement only has half the tools. They only fight for the urban boundary. The permanent and long-range solution is making cities that people love and willingly live in."

As for American environmentalists, he predicts their reaction to this article: "I have no hope that they will know what I'm talking about. They'll think I'm a fascist maniac. It's futile. They only see themselves through the green lens. Their green is visual."

Is Duany's color of green -- a tight urban grid -- the better choice? Call me dumb, but I say yes.

Send your tips and clever ideas to: goinggreen@biscaynetimes.com.

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