Studying the New Town Movement for the Benefit of New Urbanism

Analysis and Application

Research Essay

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Abstract:
America is statistically diversifying on the large scale. Yet, simultaneously there is documented racial and socioeconomic homogenization on the micro level. Recently, this has led to tensions and conflicts between differing socioeconomic and racial groups, as exhibited in Baltimore, Maryland, Oakland, California, and Ferguson, Missouri. Some community planners have suggested New Urbanism as a possible solution to homogenization. A half century ago the New Town movement also attempted to address the issue. This paper will evaluate two prime examples of the New Town movement: Reston, Virginia and Columbia, Maryland. It will consider how each community approached homogenization differently and the affects of said approaches on the population. Then the evaluation will be applied to New Urbanism, to see what can be learned from the New Town Movement.
One hundred forty-four vehicle fires. Five hundred National Guardsmen deployed. Over two hundred arrests (Morton). Such were the results of racial tensions and resident dissatisfaction concerning the death of Freddie Grey whilst in police custody. Peaceful protests first conveyed a feeling of confused anger amongst residents while also highlighting tensions between the racial groups of Baltimore. Anger, confusion, and dissatisfaction transpired into rioting that heightened the instability in an already suffering Baltimore community. These tensions were likely incubated by a lack of interaction between residents of differing diversities. It was not by chance that the “bulk of the riots that rocked the city occurred” at the intersection of West North and Pennsylvania avenues, an intersection where racial demographics changeover (Peralta). The riots in Baltimore were resultant of homogenization, as they were in Ferguson following the death of Michael Brown, as they were in Oakland during the Occupy Wall Street movement. There is a common theme occurring throughout America, community homogenization followed by citizen unrest.

Statistically the population is racially diversifying, more so than ever. Consider that in 2011 the proportion of racial minority births, 50.4% surpassed those of majority births for the first time in history (Cauchon). This indicates a coming increase of total racial minority population in the near future. The Census Bureau has gone so far as to declare that the term minority is likely to become irrelevant by the end of the decade, as the United States becomes a racially plural nation (Cooper). It is expected that the United States will become a majority-minority nation as early as 2043, a date within the lifetime of many living today (Demographics Are Not Destiny). Presently, many urban centers are already majority minority in racial demographic terms. Minority populations are increasing. Logically this should translate to greater diversity and heterization.
Yet there is a paradox occurring. While America is statistically diversifying on the large scale, it is meanwhile homogenizing in the micro community level. Even as diversity statistics hit record highs, there is less and less interaction between the diverse groups of subject. Slowly but surely, America is becoming more stratified. Separated by race and economic class. Racial homogenization is illustrated through the Cooper Center dot map of Biltmore From afar; the map appears as a mix of various colors, similar in appearance to a Pollack painting. But, as one zooms in, the mix separates, and it becomes obvious that the dots are clustered in groups based on color. There is a clear separation of racial groups to particular geographic areas and neighborhoods.

Economically, America is experiencing an even clearer wealth gap, that widens daily. In 2014, the Los Angeles Times announced that the “wealth gap between middle-and upper-income households has widened to the highest level on record” (Lee). This economic separation is seeping into community demographics, which are becoming more and more stratified, based on wealth. Gentrification is whipping through city neighborhoods, supposedly revitalizing diverse areas, while pricing out low-income residents as property values and rents rise exorbitantly. According to urban expert David Harvey, “we increasingly live in divided and conflict-prone urban areas” (Harvey 10). Clearly, there is evidence that communities are homogenizing socioeconomically and racially all across America. The current environment of homogenization
does not lend itself well to interaction between groups of diversity, which as exhibited by recent events is becoming problematic.

In light of recent socioeconomic and racial diversity dilemmas, there has arisen the latest solution movement in urban development, New Urbanism. These New Urbanism projects all attempt to increase socioeconomic diversity through urban planning, aspiring solve the societal issue of homogenization. They often explicitly aim to “create a new community of socially and economically diverse residents” a clear response to recent incidents (Principles of New Urbanism). Given that New Urbanism is a relatively new movement and that many projects are in the midst of development it is too early to draw any solid conjectures on the overall success of New Urbanism in facilitating its goals of socioeconomic and racial heterization.

Thus, the primary focus of this essay is not the New Urbanism movement. Rather, this paper will focus on the prior urban development of the New Town. By analyzing two instances of the New Town movement, specifically Reston, Virginia and Columbia, Maryland, evaluations will be made on the effectiveness of policies in relation to socioeconomic and racial diversity. This will then be reconnected to New Urbanism. The overall purpose of this essay is to provide New Urbanism a method by which to benefit from the past.

New Town Movement

A response to the social unrest of the 1960’s, the New Town movement lasted from the sixties through the seventies. It subsided out of popularity in the early 1980’s as economic prosperity returned and social unrest was quelled. Its legacy today is developments that according to Donald Klein, aimed to “integrate the economics of the capitalist system with the magnificent dream of a total city designed to provide a high quality of life.” Importantly, some
of the developments “sought to create a community that could be more than a single class, uniracial entity” indicating an obvious attempt to solve issue of homogenization (Klein xiii). The federal government became involved with the passage of the Urban Growth and New Community Development Act in 1970. The act encouraged “the orderly development of well-planned, diversified, and economically sound new communities” along with “desirable innovation in meeting domestic problems whether physical, economic, or social” (Langford). This was allegedly implemented by offering private developers “benefits from expanded credit and lower interest rates” thereby creating an environment encouraging the New Town movement (Langford). Resultantly, there were subsequent New Town developments that attempted to address socioeconomic diversity. These developments provide an ideal setting for evaluation of urban planning methods.

There are a number of parallels between the movements of New Town and New Urbanism. Both were direct responses to social issues of homogenization. Both were designed to increase socioeconomic and racial heterization throughout American communities. Both were undertaken mostly through private development, with limited government supported, and both established unique communities across the country. Many urban planning scholars such as Michael Vanderbeek and Clara Irazábel view New Urbanism as a later continuation of the New Town Movement (Vanderbeek 43). Undoubtedly, a clear connection exists between the two movements.

**Reston, Virginia**

The oldest of the communities to be analyzed, Reston could be considered the start of the American New Town movement. Planned and developed beginning in 1962, Reston is the
brainchild of real estate broker Robert E. Simon. The current resident population as of 2010 numbers about 58,000, making it a small scale city (City Data). Its location, between Washington, D.C. and Dulles International Airport makes it an ideal setting for residency. Its design has served as “a model for later plans and projects elsewhere” (Kelly). Reston was the precursor and inspiration to many other New Town developments. Its intended goals were as follows:

“economic viability; ecological preservation; self-containment in retail facilities, recreation, and employment; a socioeconomic and racial mix of residents; community participation and identity; and a vaguely defined new leisure lifestyle. Further, many of the planners hoped that Reston would become a model for new housing around the world.” (Kelly)

To achieve these goals, Simon designed Reston as a community to be “residential, commercial, industrial, cultural, and civic” in function; mixed used development (Clapson). Simon’s desired not to recreate the Levittown suburbs of the 1950’s, which he saw as detrimental to socioeconomic and racial diversity. He viewed suburban developments as “relatively homogenous in social composition” in comparison to high-density urban cities (Clapson). At the same time, Simon recognized that in the 1960’s there was an American preference for suburban life, particularly the attractiveness of the suburbs to families. He could not feasibly create an urban environment with the expectation of economic success, because at the time their citizens desired suburban living. As such he embarked to establish a nuanced community that blended suburb and urban characteristics. The reasoning being that such a community would promote socioeconomic and racial diversity.
This was done by creating a “new zoning category which allowed for more flexible mixed-use” along with higher density development (Clapson). The original plan called for seven villages of mixed-development and medium density housing cluster that were to serve as social centers (Reston Master Plan). Only 15 percent of the proposed homes were to be “detached, single family homes in the suburban mold” and the proposed population was “75,000 people by 1980” (Breckenfel 135). The emphasis on medium density village developments was likely made with the intention of facilitating heterization.

But, the present population of Reston is only 58,000, significantly short of the proposed 75,000. Evidently, Reston has not yet reached its objective population density. Why is this so? The explanation to this discrepancy is that Simon lost control of planning and development. Early on Reston faced issues with attracting commuters, appealing to high-income homebuyers, and the funding development (Breckenfel 139). Reston did not initially attract a sufficient number of residents, for two main reasons: the commute to Washington, D.C. and the desire of homebuyers at the time for a suburban setting. Compounding this, Simon did not bother to secure a loan for development or create an economic plan (Breckenfel 141).

Consequently, when Simon’s project became financially troubled and investor Gulf Oil assumed control of operations in September, 1967, leading to a critical design change as the new
development plan strategy became “listen to the market” above all else (Breckenfel 140). Post
takeover many more detached single family homes were built than originally planned, in
response home buyer desires (Clapson). In turn, less high-density town homes were constructed.
Detached family homes are often less attractive to lower income citizens due to their usually
high initial purchase and upkeep cost. A clear diversion was made from Simon’s original plan for
socioeconomic and racial diversity.

The reemphasis on suburban design ultimately increased homogenization in Reston, in a
manner that would have disappointed Simon. “In 1973, only 6 percent of the Reston population
was black” exhibiting an overall lack of racial diversity (Kelly). Even forty years later in the
2010, census the African American population had only improved to 9.7 percent, noticeably low
considering that African Americans amount to 19.4 percent of the total Virginia population
(2010 Census). Reston has a proportionally lower African American population than the state in
which it is located, indicating a lack of racially diversity. Certainly, the proposed racial
heterization of residents has not been achieved.

Socioeconomically, Reston has fared no better. At present, it is almost impossible to rent
anything for a monthly rate lower than $1,300 (Zillow). Consider a family household that earns
less than $46,566 annually is deemed low income (NCCP). If such family is to pay $1,300 per
month in rent, then rent payment will compose 34.24 percent of their total income. It is popularly
agreed that rent payments should compose no more than 30 percent of total income (Toarabi).
Following this reasoning lower-income families are effectively unable to afford residence in
Reston. Furthermore, the median household income is $44,055 greater than that of Virginia,
suggesting that Reston is much wealthier than its neighboring Virginia communities (2010
Census).
Most telling, are the education rates, that 66 percent of Reston residents hold a bachelor’s degree compared to 32 percent of Virginia residents indicates clear socioeconomic homogenization (2010 Census). If it is agreed that college educated residents tend to earn higher salaries than their non-collegiate counter-parts, then it is probable that the residents of Reston of whom the majority received a collegiate education, thereby earn substantially higher salaries than their fellow Virginian citizens. In truth, Reston should be categorized as slightly socioeconomically diverse. Yes, it is not entirely homogenous, yet it is by no means a laudable example of heterization as was originally intended.

The inability to meet original goals of socioeconomic and racial mix can be attributed to the design shift that followed the Gulf Oil ownership takeover. This was characterized Gulf Oil’s desire to create a more suburban environment (Breckenfel 140). The construction suburban style detached homes out priced low-income residents while also creating a environment of less interaction between residents. As physical space increases between residents interaction decreases. As interaction decreases, separation increases, making it difficult for a community to become anything but homogenous. Ultimately, the suburbanization of Reston led to the death of its heterization.

Had Gulf Oil not suburbanized the design, maybe Reston would have facilitated greater socioeconomic and racial heterization. Perhaps, the shift away from Simon’s original plan is best illustrated in a statement by the Gulf Oil chairman Robert Ryan in reference to Reston, “The America ethic for two hundred years has been for income levels to live with their own kind” (Breckenfel 140). Such statement clarifies that following the takeover of Gulf Oil, Reston was no longer a community meant to promote homogenization.
Columbia, Maryland

Probably the most discussed and infamous New Town community, Columbia was designed to exceed the shortcomings Reston. Founded in 1967, on a 18,000 acre parcel between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. the community has easy access to one of the largest metropolitan areas in America (Breckenfel 172). With a present population of 99,615 Columbia has not encountered the problems of attracting residents that afflicted Reston (Census Bureau). Similar to Reston, Columbia is the product of a private developer, James Rouse who “envisioned the planned community of Columbia as a socially responsible, environmentally-friendly and financially successful place in which people of all ages, incomes, and backgrounds could grow as individuals, neighbors and citizens.” (Downtown Columbia).

Like Reston and other New Town developments, Columbia was designed with a village layout of nine concentrated community centers coupled to a central Columbia town center. The nine villages were meant to “produce a sense of place…to which a person felt a sense of belonging” thereby facilitating interaction, thus promoting good relations between groups of diversity (Klein 53). Additionally, the implementation of a village allowed for a nuance environment that was neither suburban nor urban, but rather a balance. Homes were clustered together, in medium densities as, to facilitate neighborhood interaction. Yet, the clusters were slightly spread out, which kept Columbia appealing to families. The graphic on the right illustrates the difference between subdivision and cluster development.
By implementing the village design Rouse meant to create a community that “In place, of the monotonous sprawling suburbs” would offer “vitality and a scale of living” that would allow for prosperity (Columbia: A New Town for Howard County). Given earlier stated goals, it can be assumed that vitality refers to socioeconomic and racial heterization.

Within the village system, clear efforts were made to foster a diversity of home prices, with emphasis on providing “decent housing for low- and moderate-income families” (Brooks 93). This was facilitated through thoughtfully planned subsidized housing. It became Columbia development policy to establish subsidized housing “in as small complexes as possible to prevent ghetto-izing”, this meant placing no more than subsidized “60-70 units… in the same geographic area” that were specifically not all adjacent to one another (Brooks 103). The purpose of such policy was to prevent communities from manifesting themselves on the basis of housing levels. Ideally, if housing price levels were interspersed, then there would be greater interaction between citizens of differing socioeconomic status.

To further the quest for socioeconomic diversity, Rouse employed a variety of experts from outside academic fields. As part of the planning process, he assembled “a core team of outside experts and staff” to “work through the social planning of the area” (Forsyth). The diversity of input illustrates a clear effort towards a multi-disciplinary development approach. Rouse likely reasoned that solutions to socioeconomic diversity could be best achieved through the collaboration of disciplines. Columbia further attempted to establish socioeconomic and racial heterogeneity through deliberate advertisement and curation of its image by actively advertising itself as the “Next America” and a community open to all races (Klein 111). In turn, this increased minority interest in moving to Columbia (Klein 113). Such advertisement made
clear to the public that Columbia intended to be a heterogeneous community. Without a doubt Columbia was designed with a most fervent desire to facilitate diversity.

Statistically, this fervent desire has translated Columbia into a model community for racial diversity. Minorities total 44.5 percent of Columbia’s population, a larger proportion than the state of Maryland indicating a clearly diverse community (Census Bureau). Columbia population is 24.4 percent African American clearly exhibiting success in attracting minorities into the community, especially considering that African Americans only comprise 18.4 percent of Howard County’s total population (Census Bureau). Statistically, Columbia is conclusively more racially diverse than the areas, which surround it. It is impressive that Columbia has maintained such racial diversity for over 40 years, a testament to the sustainability of the master design plan.

Socioeconomically, Columbia has only been relatively successful in maintaining a diversity of housing options. Unfortunately obstacles of development and community opposition have “prevented any real and full attempt at securing considerable low-and moderate-income housing for Columbia.” (Brooks 121). Upper-income homeowners inevitably desire for their home values to increase, which is more likely to occur if there is a dearth of low-income housing. Thus, microeconomics and concern for property values manifests a situation where upper-income homeowners are encouraged to oppose low-income development. (Brooks 91). In
terms of goals, Columbia has yet to achieve its 10 percent lower income-housing objective (Brooks 90). Columbia has been less than successful in implementing socioeconomic diversity.

Still, the community of Columbia is by no means majority upper-income, or for that matter, an extremely stratified community. Indeed, 21.8 percent of households in Columbia make less than $50,000 annually, neither low income, nor upper income (Characteristics of Columbia). This is particularly impressive considering that the median household income is $73,538 annually (Census Bureau). That about a fifth of the population is well below the Maryland median indicates that Columbia possesses a certain threshold of socioeconomic diversity. Whereas in Reston the cheapest available apartment cost $1,300 per month, there are apartments as cheap as $800 a month in Columbia (Zillow). Logically, a low-income family of four with an annual income of $46,566 would only have to devote 20 percent of their total income towards rent payment in Columbia. Following earlier reasoning, this makes Columbia possibly affordable to low-income residents. Undeniably, Columbia resident enjoy more affordable rents than Reston. It is obvious that despite not meeting its own heterization goals, Columbia has experienced greater success in facilitating socioeconomic diversity than Reston.

So it seems that Columbia has achieved a threshold socioeconomic and racial diversity, at least statistically. However, as discussed earlier, statistics do not always reveal the entire picture of community demographics. In truth, there exist numerous accounts revealing issues of homogenization on the micro-level throughout Columbia. Citizen Jean Toomer has observed “conscious and even more harmful unconscious racism the permeated…schools” exhibited by the “disproportionate suspension of black pupils” (Klein 115). There are complaints by black students that the Columbia Association is skewed to “fund white sports” such as swimming instead of sports such as boxing (Burkhart 68). Opposingly, many white students at Wilde Lake
High School complain of reverse discrimination (Burkhart 69). According to social relations expert Lynne Burkhart, Columbia has not solved the racial issues, rather “Racism has gone underground” thereby implying that racial homogenization is ever-present throughout Columbia. It may be then, that urban planning does not provide an all-encompassing solution to the trend of socioeconomic and racial homogenization. Recognizably, it has not been the full solution in the case of Columbia.

**Application to New Urbanism**

It would be incorrect to say that there is nothing that urban planning can contribute to the movement against homogenization. While it may not be able to entirely solve the issue, it can certainly contribute to a solution. As exhibited by Reston and Columbia, it is feasible for communities to make specific design actions to facilitate heterization. The question then becomes, what actions are most effective?

After evaluating Reston and Columbia there seem to be two major components that affect socioeconomic and racial diversity. The first component is the avoidance of suburbanization. This translates to cluster housing densities that in theory encourage interaction between citizens of different diversity groups. As discussed earlier, suburbanization often translates into “relatively homogenous in social composition” creating a environment less welcoming to diversity (Clapson). This is vividly evidenced in the case of Reston. Once Gulf Oil imposed a design switch towards suburbanization through the construction of more single family detached homes and less town homes. This had a direct effect on the community’s level of heterization. The dominance of single family detached homes decreased levels of socioeconomic diversity while the de-emphasis on medium density created a environment with less resident interaction,
an environment unfriendly to racial diversity. Ultimately, the design changes have prevented Reston from achieving its original goal of “a socioeconomic and racial mix of residents” (Kelly).

Whereas Reston fell victim to suburbanization, Columbia has largely avoided such dominance of suburbanization. Columbia’s development followed original designs by constructing a system of nine villages, each with dense centers that promote interaction amongst citizens, and create an environment friendly to racial diversity (Burkhart 152). In keeping with a cluster based community design, Columbia has only further increased citizen interaction. Avoiding suburbanization includes the establishing a community with mixed-income housing. In the instance of Columbia this was achieved with the inclusion of subsidized housing that was strategically scattered throughout the overall community. By including subsidized housing communities can like Columbia create more socioeconomic diversity. As noted earlier in the paper, Columbia has achieved its goal of racial diversity and has proved itself more socioeconomically diverse than its counterparts such as Reston.

The other main component effecting heterization in relationship to community development is financial funding. As illustrated in Reston, solid financial backing is necessary to carry out any plan aiming to promote socioeconomic and racial diversity. Simon’s initial failures to establish a financial plan prevented Reston from reaching its goals. Inadequate financial funding led to the eventual takeover of the development by Gulf Oil (Brekenfel 137). After the change in ownership there was a subsequent change in motivation from humanitarian to profit seeking. The profit seeking was the result of a need to fund the Reston development. Profit seeking enterprises tend not to lend themselves to increasing heterization. It is important that developments acquire funding from organizations that support heterization.
By contrast, Columbia was able to successfully achieve many of its original goals thanks to adequate initial financial funding. Immediately following the acquisition of land, “Rouse set out to arrange enough long term financing so Columbia would withstand financial reverses” a clear deviation from the lack of planning present in Reston (Breckenfel 307). This was accomplished by enlisting the financial backing of three prominent financial institutions: Connecticut General, Teachers Insurance, and Chase Manhattan Bank (Breckenfel 307). Through strong financial backing, Rouse gave Columbia adequate funding as evidenced, by Columbia’s success in achieving original goals

Seemingly socioeconomic and racial heterization has occurred in Columbia where there was avoidance of full suburbanization and adequate financial funding. Oppositely heterization has occurred less in Reston were suburbanization was embraced and financial funding has been lacking. Thus, it is recommended that New Urbanism projects, which intend to increase socioeconomic and racial heterization, should be sure to avoid suburbanization and acquire adequate financial funding from appropriate sources. It is possible that government involvement could assist in the application of said recommendations.
There exists a community outside Austin, Texas that has avoided suburbanization and acquired adequate funding. Only halfway through development it is too early to declare it a full success. Still, the Mueller Community is noteworthy because it has experienced relative success in establishing socioeconomic and racial diversity. Through careful and deliberate planning, Mueller has consciously avoided suburbanization, instead becoming a medium density environment. Specifically, its planners called for “a density of these neighborhoods will be greater than the existing ones that surround them” indicating a conscious effort to avoid suburbanization (Mueller Design Book 17). According to the planners they purposefully constructed

“mixture of small-lot single-family homes (“yard houses”), row houses, mixed-use “shop houses”, multi-unit “Mueller Houses”, and mixed-use apartment houses are carefully configured to promote a diverse and inter-generational population.” (Mueller Design Book 17)

It is explicit that Mueller has purposefully avoided suburbanization with the intended goal of facilitating a socioeconomic and racially diverse population.

For financial funding Mueller has successfully established a solid backing. A pact with the City of Austin guarantees that the “City will defer its land-sale proceeds and issue debt that is supported by project-generated tax revenues for the first few years of the development.” This has allowed Mueller to achieve financial stability in the critical early stages of development (City of
Austin). Additionally, Mueller has been very successful in attracting numerous businesses such as Dell Children’s Medical Center and Strictly Pediatrics. These high profile businesses have not only provided Mueller’s citizens with employment, but also have provided income to the Mueller project in the form of rent payments.

As it stands, Mueller seems to be relatively successful in its implementation. Undoubtedly, Mueller has avoided suburbanization, and has created a situation that “minimize[d] the supremacy of the automobile and shape[d] the environment around pedestrians” (Burnett). Socioeconomically, Mueller is on track for diversity. The Mueller Foundation serves to “sustain affordable housing at Mueller and to support the social goals of the Mueller neighborhood.” The presence of such foundation demonstrates a long-term commitment socioeconomic diversity (Mueller Foundation). As of 2013, “215 affordable homes had been completed and sold” along with “216 affordable apartments leased” putting Mueller on course to achieve its objective of 25 percent proportion affordable housing (It’s Happening At Mueller 10).

Currently, the community of Mueller has reached the levels of racial diversity that match Columbia, with minorities comprising 34 percent of the population (ACS Profile Report). Granted there have been documented anecdotes of underground racism, as conveyed in the recent NPR article “A Texas Community Takes On Racial Tensions Once Hidden Under The Surface” Mueller like its counterparts is not immune to racism. However, focus should be placed on the community’s response to said issues. Following incidents, Mueller commissioned “two neighborhood meetings…to open a frank dialogue about race in their community” (Burnett). The motion to create neighborhood discussion exhibits that Mueller is both willing and capable of improving of racial diversity. This capability is illustrated in one resident’s statement that
citizens share a “collective sense of ownership, that this is our community, that we're not going to tolerate this, and we're going to do what we can to make this right” (Burnett).

It appears possible that urban planning can assist communities in reaching higher levels of heterization. By analyzing previous New Town communities, planners can learn lessons from the past concerning heterization goals. Hopefully, more research will commence on such comparative analysis. Perhaps, if more developments follow the lead of Mueller, in avoiding suburbanization and acquiring appropriate financial funding; our society will become less homogenous. And, if our society becomes less homogenous, perhaps there will be less socioeconomic and racial tension.
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