

Article

## Disparate Projects, Coherent Practices: Constructing New Urbanism through the *Charter Awards*

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### Abstract

The Congress for the New Urbanism's (CNU) annual *Charter Awards* offers a rich set of documents with which to understand the discursive construction of the New Urbanism movement in the world. Every year, since 2001, developers and designers submit work representing their plans and projects to CNU for consideration of an award. In each case, a collection of urban design practitioners with expertise in New Urbanism comes together as jurors to evaluate the submissions. A handful of projects are recognized with an award and profiled in the *Charter Awards* booklet. This booklet offers a snapshot of what the movement's awards program jurors in a given year see as its exemplary work and most innovative accomplishments. Using a framework for understanding the discursive labor that design award programs perform, I examine two decades worth of *Charter Awards* and analyze narratives and messages presented therein concerning how New Urbanism exists in the world. I advance three claims through this analysis. First, the *Charter Awards* as a text discursively constructs disparate projects and plans as part of a singular movement. Second, the *Charter Awards* narrate New Urbanism as a worldwide movement that transcends particularities of place, culture, and history. Finally, CNU uses the *Charter Awards* to effectively claim universal relevance to urban development despite the particularities of places and the divergence of development contexts.

### Keywords

awards; charrette; Congress for the New Urbanism; urban design; worlding practices

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The principles articulated in the *Charter of the New Urbanism* (Talen, 2013) offer a set of norms for urban design and planning. Ratified in 1996, the *Charter of the New Urbanism* articulated 27 principles that reflect the New Urbanism movement's vision for designing and developing environmentally-sensitive, mixed-income, mixed land-use, and pedestrian- and transit-oriented human settlements (Congress for the New Urbanism [CNU], 1996). The principles are a set of normative statements that public policy makers, developers, and urban designers and planners ought to follow in their practice in order realize the vision of the New Urbanism (Talen, 2013) and have become influential in the broader field of urban planning and development (Garde & Kim,

2017; Haas, 2008; Tachieva, 2010; Talen, 2015). The principles are especially focused on influencing how development practice shapes the built environment and promotes urbanism (Hebbert, 2003). The *Charter of the New Urbanism* (Talen, 2013) outlines a comprehensive vision, yet this has been put into development practice in highly differentiated ways such that several observers argue there are multiple New Urbanisms in practice.

Grant (2006) introduced the notion that there are multiple New Urbanisms in her comprehensive discussion of the movement's spread across the world. Others have illustrated how different formations are evident within and across single metropolitan areas and countries (Dierwechter, 2014; Trudeau, 2013). Some of the early appraisals of how New Urbanism informed urban redevelopment in brownfield and greyfield contexts

understood that the principles were implemented differently in divergent contexts, and ultimately produced distinct products that, nevertheless, were identified as part of the same movement (Bohl, 2000; Deitrick & Ellis, 2004; González & Lejano, 2009; McCann, 2009). Other researchers have noted the propensity of developers to engage some, but not all, of the principles (Mayo & Ellis, 2009; Moore, 2010; Sohmer & Lang, 2000). Such selective or partial uptake of the movement's principles, particularly by differently situated development interests and ideologies, has yielded a highly differentiated movement in practice.

How is this diversity apprehended in the official narratives of the movement? I engage this question in this article by examining how CNU, the world's foremost organization promoting the New Urbanism movement, represents and frames the variegated ways that the principles are put into practice. I focus specifically on the discourse about the movement in practice as it is constructed through the award citations that the CNU has issued annually since 2001 in its *Charter Awards*. Following Foucauldian discourse analysis, I approach the *Charter Awards* as a *dispositif*, that is, a collection of materials that may be analyzed to understand an institution's attempt to produce authoritative knowledge. Focusing on the *Charter Awards* is admittedly incomplete as there are additional forms through which official narratives about the movement are disseminated. Nonetheless, this is a strategic choice for this article's inquiry. The awards program represents an ongoing effort to delineate the movement, describe its currency, and promulgate its core ideas. Moreover, the *Charter Awards* pursues this work by considering scores of submissions—descriptions of how individual projects engage the movement's principles—each year. The award citations are prepared by a jury of experts, who are aligned with New Urbanism, but not employees of CNU, that changes each year. Consequently, much can be learnt about the official narratives of the New Urbanism through a critical reading of the *Charter Awards*. I trace the narratives about New Urbanism in the *Charter Awards* in order to discern the ongoing construction of the movement, truth claims about its existence in the world, and its relevance to a variety of circumstances.

I argue that over the past twenty years, the increasing differentiation of the movement in practice has been subordinated or over overlooked in official narratives in order to project a view emphasizing New Urbanism's utility and versatility to address a variety of development around the world. In conjunction, the core principles of New Urbanism have been framed as a fundamental element that binds disparate projects into a coherent movement that is universally applicable and transcends the particularities of place. This article thus specifically responds to the call for examining the efforts to promote a singular New Urbanism over multiple new urbanisms and understand the attempt to promote the movement's widespread appeal and global reach. To this point, this

article can be read as an exploration of how proponents position New Urbanism as globally relevant and conferring a premiere distinction to the places that puts its principles into practice.

## 2. How Multiple New Urbanisms are Overlooked

The notion that there are multiple New Urbanisms is significantly understated or even overlooked in the broader literature. This is supported in popular and academic writing. Proponents have labored to represent New Urbanism as a straightforward fix for sprawl. A variety of texts published in the movement's formative years cemented a view of New Urbanism as an antidote to the ills of unchecked growth and suburban sprawl. *Suburban Nation* (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Speck, 2000), *Home from Nowhere* (Kuntsler, 1996), and *The Regional City* (Calthorpe & Fulton, 2001), to name a few examples, construct sprawl as a singular problem and identify how the principles of New Urbanism offer a solution. The same view appears in later works proposing the use of New Urbanism's principles to correct problems associated with sprawl (e.g., Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2009; Talen, 2015). Such efforts represent sprawl as the same phenomenon wherever it appears. The design principles of New Urbanism are, by association, framed as a set of tools that can be deployed anywhere in response with some customization. Hence, the CNU and its allies have advocated for seeing different approaches in the movement, such as Traditional Neighborhood Design and Transit-Oriented Development, as distinct tools useful for the goal of building cities that are “walkable, mixed in use, socially diverse, and transit-served” (Talen, 2019a, p. 1). This is evident especially in CNU's promotion of the Transect Model.

Duany and Talen (2002) first proposed the Transect Model, which offers a theoretical framework to guide how New Urbanism's principles may be applied in specific ways and in different combinations in order to fit with a particular development context. This model provides a way to explain how and why implementation of New Urbanism's principles will manifest differently in development that is located in a built-up city center context compared to a low-density suburban context. The Transect Model theorizes a development continuum. It identifies a series of distinct zones that transition from a dense urban center to dispersed rural landscape bordering wilderness. The Transect Model further prescribes development of specific built forms that enable and enhance a mix of land uses, housing types, and transportation options. This model thus frames how different combinations of principles and strategies described in the *Charter of the New Urbanism* (Talen, 2013) ought to come into play depending on the development context of a place. Under this rubric, Traditional Neighborhood Design may be most appropriate for suburban districts whereas Transit-Oriented Development may be more appropriate for development at nodes in a transporta-

tion networks. The Transect Model casts these distinct approaches as different facets of the same die. Moreover, the CNU promotes the model's use (CNU, n.d.), advocates have operationalized the model for use in urban planning through the Smartcode design tool (Duany & Sorlien, 2008), and the model is frequently referenced in the texts of CNU's *Charter Awards* in ways that present different projects as parts of a whole (e.g., CNU, 2004).

The representation of New Urbanism as a singular phenomenon is likewise reinforced in three threads of scholarly literature. One thread investigates how well specific projects associated with the movement succeed in achieving New Urbanism's goals, be it for walking, travel behavior, sociability, generating a social mix, or creating real alternatives to sprawl (e.g., du Toit, Cerin, Leslie, & Owen, 2007; Gordon & Vipond, 2005; Greenwald, 2003; Kim & Larsen, 2017; Nasar, 2003; Skaburskis, 2006; Song, Stevens, Gao, Berke, & Chen, 2017; Stevens, Berke, & Song, 2010; Talen, 2010; Trudeau & Malloy, 2011). This effectively imagines New Urbanism as a unified movement, a view that analysts promulgate when they generalize limited case studies to the entire movement (Ellis, 2002). This is reinforced in a second thread critiquing New Urbanism for failing to deliver on its claims, creating new problems through its application, or having run its course as an influential idea in urban planning (e.g., Clarke, 2005; Fulton, 2017; Harvey, 1997; Marcuse, 2000). Such work overlooks the variation that New Urbanism takes in practice and instead frames disparate projects as points in a larger pattern. This tendency is carried over in a third thread either calling for or providing appraisals of the movement's impact, historical origins, and relationship to other paradigms of urban planning (e.g., Hirt, 2009; Kelbaugh, 2007; Talen, 2019b). In sum, scholarly debates about the New Urbanism have likewise contributed to the representation of New Urbanism as singular, coherent, and universal, thus overlooking the movement's on-the-ground variation and contingency.

Why is the diverse implementation of New Urbanism overlooked in the literature? One potential contributing factor is the influence of advocacy organizations, like the CNU, to frame the New Urbanism movement in a particular manner and circulate language and frameworks that direct a specific way of seeing the movement's operations. I examine one instance of framing New Urbanism, tracing how different projects are conceptualized and related by examining the discursive work performed through the CNU's annual awards program, the *Charter Awards*. Accordingly, I draw on design awards literature to analyze the discursive construction of New Urbanism.

### 3. Understanding the Communicative Effects of Awards Programs

Design awards serve to promote the sponsor's agenda and regulate practice. Carmona (2017) emphasizes that awards programs are fundamentally part of a campaign

to define and disseminate what counts as good design. Biddulph, Hooper, and Punter (2006) highlight the different ways awards regulate practice through a discussion of two award types: 'industry' and 'public sector/professional.' Industry awards identify state-of-the-art products in the marketplace and are sought after by firms aiming to increase their appeal to consumers or establish their credentials as a competitive player in the market. Public sector/professional awards are professionally judged and identify innovative and exemplary work and are sought out by designers looking to achieve distinction among their peers. Reflecting on the award-giving process for both types, Biddulph et al. (2006) note that awards competitions are not value-free; rather they reflect ongoing and evolving efforts to discursively construct the markers of design quality and identify how design relates to specific problems that it is called upon to confront.

Kim and Forester's (2012) remarks about design review provide insight about the associative aspects of award programs. They observe how such programs enable a ritualized convening of experts to administer judgment about the merits of an applicants' work. These convenings lend to the ongoing construction defining standards and venerating best practice as well as signaling encouragement to particular approaches. Lehrer (2011) explicates the communicative roles of award programs discussing how organized competition, through its announcement, definition of eligibility, jury selection, and promotion of winners among relevant audiences produces a public narrative about design, its standards, and application.

This work shows that awards programs are part of a campaign to advance a design agenda and associate it with exemplary work. Awards programs provide a narrative about the sponsor's values, goals, and principles. The cyclical nature of awards programs enables an evolving construction of the agenda as relevant to specific issues and enables sponsors' association with particular experts (e.g., jurors) and exemplars (i.e., award recipients). The intended audience for such programs may range from laypersons to experts, yet the effort to align a sponsor's agenda with particular moments and places is apparent in either case. Conceptualizing design awards programs as a campaign to advance an agenda and ensure its currency and continuation, I turn to consider the narratives regarding the connections among different projects associated with New Urbanism as they appear in the discourse of CNU's *Charter Awards*.

### 4. Analyzing CNU's *Charter Awards*

CNU's *Charter Awards* offers a rich set of documents with which to understand the discursive construction of the New Urbanism. This award program began in 2001 and has run annually since. CNU solicits applications for projects and plans that demonstrate work in accordance with the principles of New Urbanism, convenes a jury

of experts, and then offers a mix of industrial and professional awards. The results are published in a *Charter Awards* booklet, which features a description of each winning submission as well as a brief explanation justifying its particular award. The booklet also includes framing material about CNU, its mission, and the purpose of the awards program. Such framing also features a preamble from each jury chair that offers behind-the-scenes insight on the competition, summary of the results, and commentary on the movement's state of play.

Each individual *Charter Award* booklet documents what the proponents of the New Urbanism see as exemplary work, best practices, and innovative accomplishments. Each booklet contributes to the literal production of the movement. Taken together, the series of booklets offer a corpus of work to examine the discursive construction of New Urbanism and discern proponents' narratives about how the movement relates to the wider world. An honorable mention award citation for the Luhe City Center project in Jiangshu province, China, from the 2015 *Charter Awards* (CNU, 2015) is displayed in Figure 1 as an illustrative reference for how the awards read.

I treat two decades of *Charter Awards*, 2001–2020 as a dispositif that I examine to understand the production of knowledge about New Urbanisms that emerges in the discourse that these texts generate. Following Foucauldian discourse analysis, as described by Rose (2001), I read each *Charter Awards* booklet and flagged passages wherein statements were offered about values, goals and best practices, the status of the New Urbanism movement, and the relevance of its principles to different circumstances in the world. Using Atlas.ti, a software package for qualitative data analysis, I produced descriptive codes to organize the statements and then generated thematic codes to identify the ways in which projects were related to the movement and to each other. Following this, I analyzed the thematic codes to interpret the truth claims and knowledge production about New Urbanism vis-à-vis the content of the *Charter Awards*. Discourse analysis provides a way to understand the communicative effects of the CNU's awards program and examine closely the frames and narratives that are deployed in these texts to relate the 326 projects that have received awards through 2020. These projects reflect a diverse array of applications of New Urbanism and run the entire continuum of rural to urban development, as identified in the Transect Model. Similarly, awards were given to projects in a variety of contexts—greenfield, greyfield, and brownfield—and covered a range of scales, from singular buildings to regional plans.


It is important to recognize that I use discourse analysis to focus on the textual representation of what the projects mean to the New Urbanism movement and what they signify for its engagement with the wider world, not on the implementation of New Urbanism principles in specific projects. Through this approach, I found that the narratives deployed in the *Charter Awards*, in each booklet and across the corpus, emphasize coher-

ence amidst a disparate set of projects. The thematic codes acknowledge the breadth of goals to which New Urbanism's principles have been directed: disaster recovery, economic stabilization, environmental sustainability, historic preservation, infrastructure modernization, correcting problems of rapid urbanization and sprawl, and the development of transit and walkable environments. The multiple aims are, I argue, constructed in the texts of the *Charter Awards* in ways that identify and promote relations of symmetry and equivalence between different projects and frame them as part of a unified whole.

The *Charter Awards* represent just one effort to narrate the New Urbanism. This awards program nevertheless represents a noteworthy medium and so it is important to acknowledge its underlying logic. Above all, the awards highlight the application of key ideas from the *Charter of the New Urbanism* (Talen, 2013) and relate fundamental values and specific agendas through the identification of exemplary work. For the most part, the awards draw from the *Charter of the New Urbanism's* statement of core principles. However, CNU's (2009) *Cannons of Sustainable Urbanism* and strategic plan (CNU, 2016a) also provide touchstones for the awards. Each year, the *Charter Awards* recognize a number of submissions, though the award categories change over time. Indeed, the awards consistently recognize achievement at the regional, neighborhood, and block scales as these are significant categories in the conceptualization of New Urbanism. In addition to these persistent award categories, juries have taken specific interest in recognizing emergent concerns in the movement in a given year. For example, in both 2013 and 2014 the *Charter Awards* recognized accomplishment for 'suburban retrofit' (CNU, 2013, 2014). Likewise, the *Charter Awards* for 2014 and 2015 celebrate best practices in 'tactical urbanism intervention' (CNU, 2014, 2015). These categories of interest have not continued beyond these dates. This mix of awards reveals that the program constructs New Urbanism as both a market product and a movement to achieve particular ends through urban design.

#### 4.1. Worlding New Urbanism

A discourse analysis of *Charter Awards* provides a way to understand how CNU and its proponents apprehend and narrate the extant diversity of New Urbanism in practice. The following discussion aims to examine some of the ways in which the multiple New Urbanisms are packaged as a stable and coherent movement and also interrogate the agendas that such claims seek to advance. My interpretation proceeds by seeing the *Charter Awards* as a set of what Ong (2011, p. 13) calls 'worlding practices.' Such practices serve to identify and narrate a place as novel and being on the cutting edge of a movement to usher alternative visions into practical existence. Worlding practices thus help visualize and thereby constitute new worlds envisioned in progressive projects or movements. Seen through this lens, the *Charter Awards*



Merit Award

## Luhe City Center

### A MODEL FOR MORE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH IN CHINA

**Firm:** Thadani Architects + Urbanists  
**Location:** Luhe, Jiangsu Province, China  
**Category:** The Region: Metropolis, City, and Town

No place on Earth is urbanizing more rapidly than China. In Luhe, one of the country's new urban expansion areas, Nanjing Urban Planning Bureau proposed to expand the city by developing a 60-mile corridor for 4.5 million people. The plan would have consumed vital land along Luhe's stretch of the Chuhe River, wiping out agriculture and phasing out industry.

"We successfully argued against this linear proposal in favor of maintaining green corridors that made several polycentric cities," writes designer Dhuru Thadani. "Each new autonomous city would be developed around an existing village or town and could accommodate 600,000 to a million inhabitants."

After shifting the region to a more sustainable growth pattern in 2013, Thadani was retained to design the city center of Luhe, one of the polycentric cities. The resulting plan calls for 5,500 residential units, 8.5 million square feet of commercial development, and millions of square feet of schools and cultural facilities like an opera house, library, museums, and exhibition hall.

Luhe is designed using classic city-building principles. A large central square, strongly defined by surrounding buildings, will provide a strong place for community events. The core, containing the tallest buildings, is bounded by three primary thoroughfares. These streets, each enhanced with a greenway, lead to bridges designed for pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular traffic crossing the Chuhe River and a canal.

A tree-lined boulevard encircles the entire central business district, connecting mixed-use neighborhoods adjacent to the downtown and residential neighborhoods beyond. The thoroughfare links a series of pocket parks and gardens that are planned within the development. The entire 875-acre city center is wrapped with a "ribbon drive" that links more parks.

Streets and a bridge are already under construction for this project, which includes affordable housing. In a part of the world where much of the current development is unsustainable, Luhe City Center provides a model for smarter growth.

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Figure 1. Merit Award Citation for Luhe City Center, from the 2015 *Charter Awards*. Source: CNU (2015).

literally brings to life the movement's vision for a different urbanism. Ong's framework of worlding practices helps me to situate the *Charter Awards'* discursive construction of New Urbanism as a singular movement that has worldwide relevance. Attending to three distinct types of worlding practices illustrates this point.

Above all, worlding practices are, for Ong (2005, 2011), a style of claiming global significance and rel-

evance. She outlines three styles: modelling, inter-referencing, and claiming world class status. Each is applicable to understanding the discursive construction of the New Urbanism as a singular movement based on principles that are universally applicable. Modelling refers to framing something an exemplar worthy of replication. Vincent Graham, jury chair for the 2010 *Charter Awards* (CNU, 2010), notes that the competitions iden-

tifies “state of the art exemplars to learn from and build upon” (p. 3) in each interaction. This takes shape in making professional awards for particular categories, such as ‘best city plan’ and ‘best suburban retrofit’ (e.g., CNU, 2014) and also in giving a grand prize award each year. Moreover, in the descriptions for some award recipients, we see that part of the rationale in selecting a particular project for the award is because of a belief that it can serve as a model for others to emulate. Referring again to Figure 1, the citation celebrates Luhe City Center as providing a model for environmentally sustainable growth for a broader region of China. Elizabeth Moule, jury chair for the 2011 *Charter Awards* (CNU, 2011) explains how the work to frame award winners as models for the rest of the world is a part of the calculus in the awards selection process:

This year, as jurors of the CNU Charter Awards, we decided unanimously to search for those paradigmatic projects which could serve as examples of good standards of practice for the future of the New Urbanism in America, and the rest of the world. (p. 2)

Inter-referencing refers to the practice of associating a project with a known and celebrated subject. While subtle and often supplementary to modeling, this entails a separate frame highlighting a project’s legitimacy amidst the simultaneous construction of the project as novel and on the cutting edge. Referring again to the 2010 *Charter Awards* (CNU, 2010), Vincent Graham’s reflections on the jury’s process of selecting award recipients point to the significance of inter-referencing:

Where would our imaginations be without the inspiration of the Acropolis, Trafalgar Square, or Piazza San Marco? Could we have advanced so rapidly if unable to experience the human scale of a Charleston, Santa Fe, or even the favorite main street of a small town? These questions came to mind when reflecting upon the process of selecting this year’s Charter Award winners. (p. 20)

Through this passage, we see that Graham associates the 2010 *Charter Award* recipients with world-renowned places. Inter-referencing is not always explicit. However, Graham’s disclosure shows how juries engage in this practice of inter-referencing when making decisions about awards.

Framing projects as a world-class approach to a particular problem serves as a way to celebrate an achievement, despite its controversy. For projects that represent a significant break from the status quo or an innovation that seems to buck tradition, naming it as world-class is a discursive move to legitimate the departure from the norm and situate the project as being on the brink of revolution, potentially ushering forth a new world (Ong, 2011; Roy, 2011). In the *Charter Awards*, there is recurring motif describing winning plans that represent a rad-

ical break from local precedent as world class, as seen, for instance in the award citation for Currie, in Calgary, Canada, in Figure 2. In cases like these, appeals are made to see such projects as acting to catapult the host city into global importance and create urban forms that will register the place as a peer among other world cities. The 2016 *Charter Awards* citation for Currie, in Calgary, Canada in Figure 2, shows world class framing at work. Such a framing is explicit in the award citation’s lede “from cowtown to world-class urbanism” (CNU, 2016b, p. 20). This citation goes on to construct Calgary’s built environment as outdated for its burgeoning needs and underserving the city’s potential. The citation further celebrates the plan for Currie as ‘courageous,’ signaling its break with local convention. The citation goes on to venerate Currie’s approach for solving challenges associated with rapid urbanization in ways that make it comparable to other globally significant places; in this case, places like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. Indeed, this particular example illustrates how constructing a world class frame can rely on other worlding practices of inter-referencing and modelling, which we see in the last paragraph of the award citation that frames Currie as a ‘big step forward’ to serving as a model of sophisticated urban development.

In sum, the *Charter Awards* uses worlding practices in the discursive work to frame the relevance and value of the New Urbanism. I discuss these narrative frames to delineate how the scores of projects that instantiate the movement are constructed as part of a coherent whole. Indeed, the *Charter Awards* can be read as an ontological story that is re-told and updated annually. This frame allows us to see that CNU, through the *Charter Awards*, makes claims about the worldwide relevance of the New Urbanism’s principles.

#### 4.2. *The Worldwide Relevance of New Urbanism*

As a matter of context, it is helpful to acknowledge how the *Charter Awards* narrate New Urbanism’s relevance to the wider world. One of the most explicit ways this occurs is through a framing statement, included in each awards booklet, that ties the awards to CNU. The first framing statement appeared in 2002 and has been a part of each subsequent awards booklet, though the content has shifted over time. These framing statements initially pitched the *Charter Awards* and New Urbanism as predominantly focused on the US. This framing of the organization and awards program is evident in an excerpt from the 2004 *Charter Awards* (CNU, 2004) framing statement: “The Congress for The New Urbanism...[has] helped shape a national conversation about the consequences of growth and helped bring to life an alternative vision for community development and regional sustainability based on the Charter of the New Urbanism” (p. 36).

By 2006, there is an effort to broaden the application of New Urbanism and show its global relevance. Dhru Thadani (CNU, 2006), as jury chair, proclaims that:

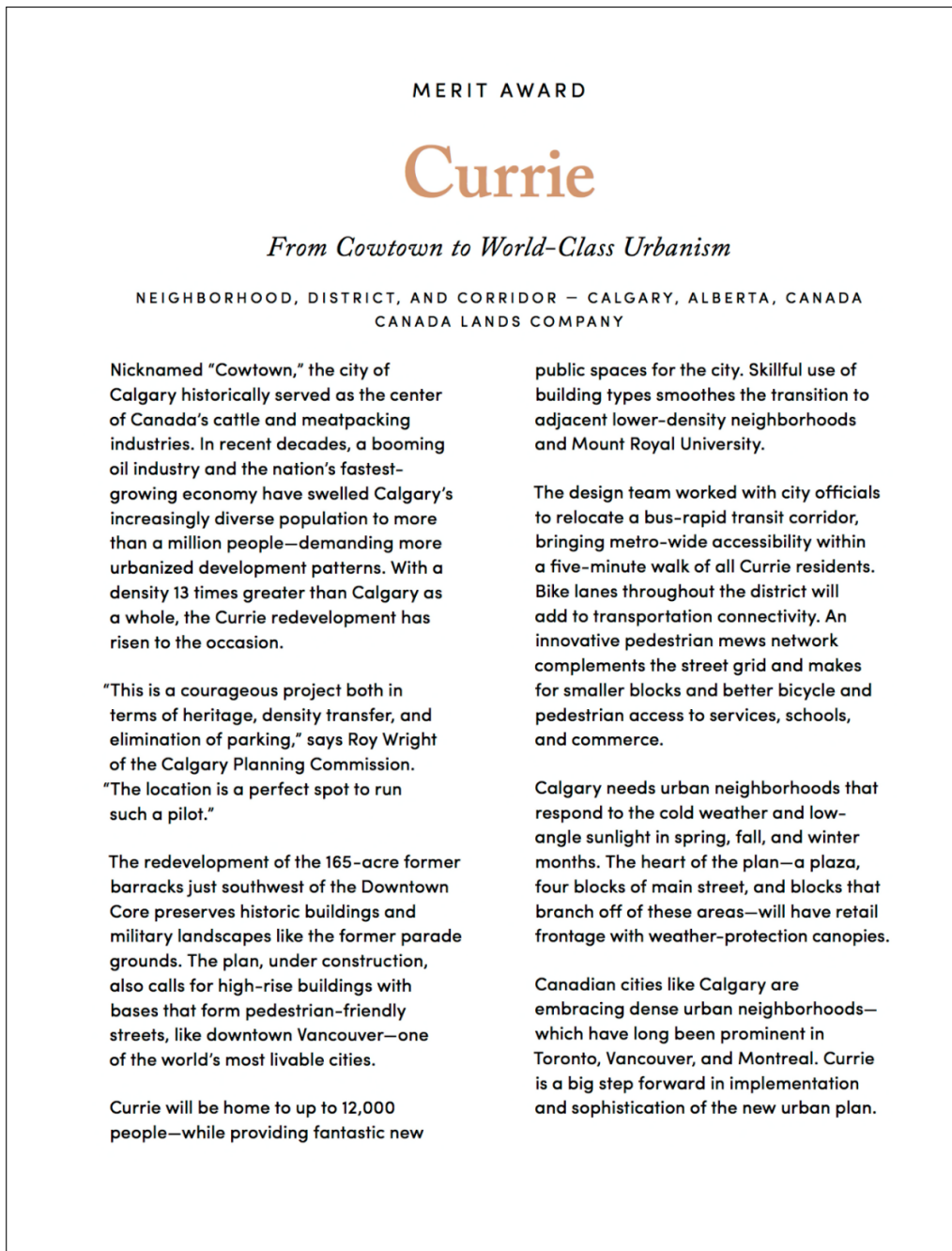


Figure 2. Merit Award Citation for Currie, from the 2016 *Charter Awards*. Source: CNU (2016b).

I had two goals for this year’s awards program. The first was to increase the number of international and student submissions, which I am happy to report we did. The second was to assemble a world-renowned group of jurors who would truly raise the level of discourse, the status, and the international recognition of the CNU Charter Awards. (p. 2)

This claim for worldwide relevance is certainly reflected in the narratives of the award citations located with the 2006 and later award booklets, but the claim framing CNU as helping to “shape a national conversation” (CNU, 2004, p. 36) persists in the descriptive statement of the

*Charter Awards* until 2013 when there is a definitive shift to again re-frame the awards as a form of global recognition of world class accomplishments in urbanism. The booklet’s framing statement in 2013 entirely rewrites that passage and provides one of the clearest illustrations of the *Charter Awards* (CNU, 2013) as a world class worlding practice:

Administered by the Congress for the New Urbanism, the *Charter Awards* program rewards the best work of the new era of placemaking. Annually since 2001, CNU has convened a jury of the highest caliber to review submissions and select winning entries

that best embody and advance the principles of the Charter of the New Urbanism....As the preeminent global award for excellence in urban design, CNU hopes the *Charter Awards* will set new benchmarks and new models for urbanism worldwide. (p. 3)

This claim of serving “as the preeminent global award for excellence in urban design” codifies the aspirations and work that Thadani described in 2006. At the same time, the 2013 framing statement represents a shift regarding the avowed significance of the awards. The 2013 framing statement describes CNU as the world’s leading authority on urban design, rendering all of its awards as markers of world class distinction. The grand framing of CNU’s *Charter Awards* has stuck in the years since 2013. But what do these awards say about the New Urbanism? I engage that question by focusing on the awards given to projects that are located outside of the movement’s heartland in the US.

As of 2020, the *Charter Awards* have given 326 awards and 67 of these have been given to projects located outside of the US. Though these represent a fifth of all the awards given, they have an outsized impact supporting the claim that the *Charter Awards* are a preeminent global awards program. Indeed, the awards show that the application of New Urbanism is widespread, acknowledging projects and plans for development in 33 different countries distributed across six continents. Such widespread distribution calls into question how all the projects are related, given their differences in time and place. Thus, focusing on the ways in which the relationships among these disparate projects are narrated provides insight into the logic, style, and patterns of thought regarding the ontological status of New Urbanism. I turn to discuss several themes that emerged through such focused examination.

#### 4.3. Unity amidst Diversity

A notion that the principles of New Urbanism are universally applicable and immutable for generating urbanism is a leitmotif of the *Charter Awards*. This is evident in the diverse array of contexts in which the awards recognize exemplary work. The *Charter Awards* celebrate projects associated with development across different zones of the urban-rural transect as well as at different scales throughout the world. Thus, when the same award is given to an addition to Beirut’s historic center, in 2002, to plans for an agricultural town in South Africa, in 2012, and to a high-rise housing redevelopment in Manhattan, in 2019, these quite different projects are rendered equivalent. Beyond the award winners, jurors remark how the geographically widespread application of New Urbanism principles are evidence of their universal relevance. Making this point explicit in the 2011 *Charter Awards*, jury chair Elizabeth Moule (CNU, 2011), wrote that:

Projects came from places quite far from the US and locales where one imagines the building atmosphere to be most challenging. Among these are Pakistan, Rwanda, Abu Dhabi, Haiti, and Iceland. It is heartening to think that in the face of political uncertainty, war, natural disaster, extreme climate, and financial meltdowns, that builders are turning to the New Urbanism for solutions to expansion and rebuilding alike. (p. 2)

Furthermore, the awards program’s jurors remark that the New Urbanism can go anywhere. Jury members, in their discussion of specific awards, and jury chairs, in their preambles, frequently applaud projects for exemplary application of the movement’s principles. For instance, as jury chair in the 2015 (CNU, 2015, p. 3) *Charter Awards*, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk’s proclaimed that “The Charter of the New Urbanism, signed 19 years ago, remains an inspiring blueprint for improving communities all over the world.” Related to this point, references to ‘Urban DNA’ appear in a number of awards booklets, including the citation for the grand prize winner, Cincinnati’s citywide code, in 2014 (CNU, 2014). This metaphor works to connect New Urbanism’s principles as something fundamental to urbanism everywhere, just like DNA is indispensable to living organisms on earth. The *Charter Awards* thus recognize exemplary efforts in individual award-winning projects, but also produce a narrative about the universal applicability of New Urbanism’s principles and their effects in the world. While the *Charter Awards* may construct New Urbanism as universal, it is not, however, described as uniform.

The *Charter of the New Urbanism* actually prescribes customization in order to relate the movement’s principles to regional circumstances. This position echoes across the different iterations of the *Charter Awards* as jurors praise projects that use New Urbanism’s principles to promote regionally specific traditions of building and living in cities. Doug Farr’s statement is a noteworthy illustration of this point (CNU, 2013):

For the second year in a row the top professional honoree is a project from Africa, specifically Kigali in Rwanda. This plan deployed the Charter principles to incrementally retrofit public space and infrastructure into an informal hillside settlement. This proposal to transform an inhumane situation into a healthy and habitable urban place captured the jury’s imagination. (p. 6)

Such commentary works to frame adaptation of New Urbanism’s principles as an integral part of the movement’s theoretical aspirations and on-the-ground practice. This is particularly apparent in the ways that the *Charter Awards* celebrates the charrette.

The charrette is a thread binding together the patchwork of diverse projects associated with New Urbanism. Although discussion of the charrette process is not a constant in the pages of the *Charter Awards*, it is nonetheless



framed as essential to relating New Urbanism's principles to on-the-ground practice. The citation for the Liveable Neighborhoods Community Design Code for Western Australia from the 2001 (CNU, 2001) awards booklet, for instance, describes how reliance on the charrette process helped to produce model projects:

Based on New Urbanist principles and the UK's Responsive Environments practices and developed through an extensive public process that included design charrettes for the entire Perth region [an] 'inclusive and holistic process has made this plan one of the most thorough and ambitious new urbanist efforts anywhere in the world. (p. 6)

Furthermore, discussion of the Liveable Neighborhoods Community Design Code underscores a related motif in the *Charter Awards*: The charrette is the trunk supporting the disparate applications of New Urbanist places. Considering the importance of the adaptation enabled by the charrette, how is the application of the movement's principles in contexts beyond the US framed?

The *Charter Awards* showcase the transferability of New Urbanist ideas to fix problems that arise outside of the US, but that still bear a resemblance to auto-centered sprawl. Indeed, many of these projects appear in Australia, Canada, Sweden, and the UK, all places that present development contexts that are similar to the US. The frame of New Urbanism as a design solution to the problem of suburban sprawl does not include all projects, however. Beyond framing New Urbanism as a countermove to sprawl, we see that the *Charter Awards* constructs the principles of New Urbanism as helping to solve development challenges associated with a number of issues: environmental contamination in brownfields, recovery from natural disasters, overtaxed transportation infrastructure, and historic preservation. In addition, since 2009, the *Charter Awards* have also focused on recognizing projects that offer models for sustainable development, from rural agricultural villages, to cutting-edge developments in the historic urban core. These frames are applied to projects located within or outside of the US. This certainly aids the discursive framing of the New Urbanism as coherent even though it extends to many different places. At the same time, there are differences in the ways that the principles of New Urbanism are thought to affect development outside of the US.

The *Charter Awards* press the claim that application of New Urbanism in areas of the global south offers a way toward an alternative modernity. We see in this corpus ongoing discussion of the movement's principles as providing a way for development to incorporate the logics of urbanism that existed in a place prior to automobile-centered growth. For instance, the 2011 *Charter Awards* lauds Pakistan's Aga Khan University plan because it "draws from Muslim city-building traditions and uses the traditional 'Medina' model that organizes neighborhoods around courtyards for communal security" (CNU,

2011, p. 14). This is similar to an award citation from a decade earlier, when the 2001 *Charter Awards* highlighted a comparable process in Nicaragua (CNU, 2001):

The new neighborhood of Managuita uses traditional planning and local architectural traditions to create an urban oasis true to its culture and people. "Many people think that New Urbanism is defined by traditional American building practices," says juror Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. "This exploration of a plan based on the Law of the Indies is a viable alternative for countries whose development patterns are based on this tradition." (p. 16)

Conceptualizing the principles of New Urbanism as compatible with specific non-Western cultural traditions further suggests that the principles are as timeless and offering an authentic way to develop in locally specific ways. Moreover, statements to this effect in the *Charter Awards* also suggest that incorporating principles of New Urbanism can put development onto a more sustainable trajectory, as seen in the citation for Luhe City Center, in Figure 1.

Finally, jurors' discussion in the *Charter Awards* emphasizes that New Urbanism helps to ensure that these alternative development patterns serve as models for others to follow. This point is illustrated in Hank Dittmar's preamble as jury chair, when discussing the 2016 *Charter Awards* (CNU, 2016b):

The jurors were also very taken with Nanhu New Country Village Master Plan, which sought to define a sustainable future for rural life and agriculture in China. The jury hoped that this excellent plan could be influential nationally, as there are signs that China's approach to urbanisation is changing for the better, under the influence of the New Urbanism. (p. 2)

The award citation for this project goes on to link New Urbanism with producing cutting edge approaches to sustainable development: "A large and growing emitter of greenhouse gas emissions, China desperately needs new and sustainable models like Nanhu New Country Village" (CNU, 2016b, p. 7). While the contexts vary and the processes shift from place to place, we see that the *Charter Awards* brings these otherwise divergent tendencies together into a unified movement that share a commitment to the creative application of the principles of New Urbanism.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I have examined discursive practices evident in the *Charter Awards* to help explain how narratives about the multiplicity and complexity of New Urbanism in practice are framed. This approach helps think through the work that institutions like CNU perform to argue for the movement's coherence amidst a

seemingly disparate collection of applications. Analysis of this awards program reveals a significant campaign to frame how many different projects throughout the world are part of a relatable whole. In this way, the *Charter Awards* narrates how individual projects are part of a broader constellation. At the same time, the awards program refracts a focus on the differences among individual projects to instead emphasize their underlying connections, highlighting the movement's principles, their transferability, and value for development. Furthermore, apparent differences among award winners are framed as reflecting the movement's sensitivity to local circumstances and showing the robustness of core techniques, such as the charrette, to translate the movement's principles in specific and meaningful ways. In this way, the *Charter Awards* constructs the disparate set of projects spread across the globe as part of a singular movement that has a range of applications that ultimately improve the divergent contexts where they are deployed. Accordingly, we see that the awards program conveys a bid for the continued and evolving relevance of the movement to addressing challenges of urban development or fixing problems in the urban condition. The cyclical rhythm of the awards program enables the movement's leading proponents to narrate how New Urbanism is responsive to emergent issues, like rapid urbanization and sustainable development. The use of modelling and inter-referencing practices as well as framing projects as a world-class approach to urban design problems in the communicative action of the *Charter Awards* further fortifies proponent's claims that principles are universal and create valuable solutions that are worthy of emulation by other communities both near and far away.

This reading of the *Charter Awards* helps understand one way that the New Urbanism continues to be framed as a singular movement despite the heterogeneity in practice that researchers have documented. Given the widely circulated and accepted view of New Urbanism's singularity, this article begins to show how this narrative is constructed and disseminated through CNU's awards program. This article supports a critical understanding of New Urbanism as heterogeneous and contingent, which many proponents omit or ignore. Researchers studying the movement should therefore look past the image of coherence projected by practitioners and see the contingent and specific assemblages in practice.

While this article focuses on how an image of coherence is presented, it has not considered the motivations and relationships that enable the discursive work of the awards program in the first place. On this matter, further research is needed to examine what motivates actors to seek recognition through the awards program, understand how award recipients value their recognition, the network of relationships among jurors and award recipients, and consider how each of these facets may evolve over time. Certainly, as New Urbanism is inextricably tied to processes of capital accumulation, inquiry ought to consider how the movement's awards campaign

works to generate surplus financial and social capital and broaden access of New Urbanism's particular brand to even more markets around the world.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

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