

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: America's New Urbanism*

### Participants:



#### Host

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### Links and References:

#### Online Resources:

<https://www.cnu.org/>

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Rod Hamilton "Enchanted Forest" [https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Rod\\_Hamilton/Enchanted\\_Forest\\_1014](https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Rod_Hamilton/Enchanted_Forest_1014)

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### Music

Crowander - Huge Steps

<https://freemusicarchive.org/music/crowander/commercial-30-seconds/huge-steps>

Jon Luc Hefferman - Upbeat

[https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Jon\\_Luc\\_Hefferman/20170730112628821/Upbeat](https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Jon_Luc_Hefferman/20170730112628821/Upbeat)

Rod Hamilton - Enchanted Forest

[https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Rod\\_Hamilton/Enchanted\\_Forest\\_1014](https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Rod_Hamilton/Enchanted_Forest_1014)

Victor Dance Orchestra - The Great One Step

[https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Antique\\_Phonograph\\_Music\\_Program\\_Various\\_Artists/Antique\\_Phonograph\\_Music\\_Program\\_01192016/The\\_Great\\_One\\_Step\\_Victor\\_Dance\\_Orchestra](https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Antique_Phonograph_Music_Program_Various_Artists/Antique_Phonograph_Music_Program_01192016/The_Great_One_Step_Victor_Dance_Orchestra)



the  
**RACE** &  
podcast

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### Script:

"Good morning! Oh and in case I don't see ya, Good afternoon, good evening and goodnight!" (Truman Show audio clip)

We've all seen in some way shape or form, hollywood's eutopic imagery of a suburban neighborhood, scenes with jogging mothers along tree-lined perfectly paved sidewalks, manicured lawns and hedges in front of well-behaving single family homes with white picket fences, and always well-dressed, well-groomed white neighbors. The weather is always a sunny 65 and the slogan might as well be "a nice place to live."  
You're listening to a podcast titled "Same old Suburbanism," a discussion that critiques New Urbanism through the lens of Settler colonialism. I am Mae-liosa Barstow, and with Helen Fialkowski, we are producing this as graduate students in collaboration with Professor Charles Davis in the School of Architecture at Princeton University. This is part of a larger project to reinterpret american architecture and whiteness as a settler colonialist history. In this episode, we will introduce the Charter for New Urbanism, how it fits within the larger context of settler colonialism, and what mechanisms New Urbanists have used to reframe the methods of modern urban planning, said to have produced placeless sprawl, towards reproducing the very world-building white capitalist agenda they claim to dismantle.

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It's 1999, city planners throughout the US can no longer ignore the consequences of the post-war building boom. The 1940's and 50's were characterized by the presence of the automobile. Highways were being constructed to expand outwards, and ownership of a car and home became the picture of the American Dream. All of this expansion was enabled by new land policies being put in place by the Federal Housing Administration to encourage white middle class families to buy a house outside of what was characterized as the dense, blighted, irreparable city center, and into the countryside. This caused what planners described as unchecked placeless suburban sprawl.

A group of architects, led by couple Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Andres Duany, set out to define a movement advocating for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments and the preservation of our built legacy. Sounds ok right? This they called New Urbanism. In response to what they saw as a fifty-year story of bad planning policies, the New Urbanists saw those that lived in the suburbs as victims - aka the soccer mom, cul-de-sac kid, grandma down the street, speaking primarily to white middle class families. Although sounding well-intentioned, advocating for buzzwords like walkability, diversity, sustainability and mixed-use development, the real goal of new urbanism was a retreat to and renewal of planned neighborhoods of the early 1900s - bringing the US back 100 years. We argue, that by retreating to this form of quote-on-quote "traditional" community design, of the 1900s, new urbanists really brought back romanticized notions of the earliest American colonies and by doing so reinforced settler colonial narratives of land acquisition and white placemaking. We argue, through the lens of Audrey Lorde as described in Ariela Azoulay's piece, "Potential Histories" where she says, "for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," that through using the very same tools that enabled exclusion and violence towards the Black body in a space constructed around whiteness it only perpetuates the same condition. With this, by returning and simply reusing the same pre-war design methods, urban planning only reinforces the quote on quote "racial patriarchy" just with a new name.

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Le Corbusier - a french architect with iconic circular black-framed glasses - is one of the most often heard names thrown around when describing early founders of architectural Modernism. In the 1920s architects and planners were seeking rationality and functional forms of world building. Urban planning became an institution of top-down control where a single white male architect had the ability to design an entire city. Countless images of famed architects standing by scaled miniature models of entire cities constructed with just paper and wood, can be seen from this time. Corbusier's hand hovering over his design for the Radiant City as one example, imply a god-like control over an entire population. Although New Urbanists were critiquing the lack of human-scale that Corb and his fellow modernist movement of CIAM were advocating for, they saw the potential in mirroring a top-down approach to solving large scale issues of development, specifically the suburb. This single developer vision only strengthens Patrick Wolf's argument, that the control of territory is central to the settler colonialist's agenda and is foundational to modernity. This is an entire structure rather than a single event. Even the notion of tabula rasa, (or blank slate) frequently referred to when describing these sites for New Urbanism, is assuming that any territory is able to just be claimed, and that what was there was blighted or unworthy of keeping. Thus just repeating the very same patterns of razing of entire spaces for a white agenda. Seaside, Florida, for example, New Urbanism's main example of the ideal model town, literally took over a swatch of land in Florida under the developer Robert Davis, removed from anything around it, it sits a 20 minute drive from any other neighborhood, as a small enclave eutopia as a testing ground for these charter tenets. Nothing about this community attempts to repair an existing fabric. This shows the motive of the charter as an important vision of an entire world into a seemingly blank location.

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Here is what they say about tradition and community in Chapter 6 of the Charter for New Urbanism:

"Throughout time, people have developed vernacular design and building practices in response to their needs, desires, and environments. Each community shared a local vision and language of how to build their world, as well as more universal principles about patterns, precedents, and boundaries. They shared common customs and culture that led them to create places that were part of a larger, coherent, ordered, and intrinsically beautiful whole. Christopher Alexander calls this intuitive knowledge "the timeless way of building" in his 1979 book of the same title." (p.65)

They continue by even saying,

"we should respect the historical patterns, precedents, and boundaries that made earlier settlements flourish." (p.65)

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### Script:

One of the main points within the charter for New Urbanism is a return to the planned communities of the beginning of the 20th century, using traditional principles, patterns and precedents. They believe older towns like Coral Gables, Shaker Heights and Forest Hills can serve as fundamental case studies that embody highly successful and as they say, enduring public and private realms. We argue that this framework is simply promoting the exact arrangements and control of land of the earliest colonial settlers in the US. Shaker Heights, for example, was one of the earliest planned communities in Ohio, where a group of property owners advocated to detach land from previous Shaker Village, advertised it as a suburban retreat from the inner industrial city of Cleveland. This was single-handedly developed by the Van Sweringen Brothers giving the impression that the town was built under a single vision and therefore reinforces a single history of living. If we are to take Shaker Heights as an example of the kind of traditional pattern of territory that New Urbanists seek to embody, then we are essentially looking for a replication of racist patriarchal ideals that date back to the founding of the first North American colonies whereby the Black body was excluded from any sense of "free space" and enslaved under capitalist regimes of labor. The charter is explicitly arguing for diversity but neglects to recognize the invisible privilege embedded in the whiteness by design of these spaces. Although well-intentioned to encourage anybody, if constructed through these colonialist patterns, Sarah Ahmed argues that there is an inherited whiteness within these spaces, and bodies are shaped by a world of colonialism.

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Celebrated by New Urbanist, Jacqueline Robertson, in the book "The Seaside Debates, she states:

"Williamsburg - gives us a clear american order of things, the main street town elegantly anodizing the format of our public buildings, streets, houses, trees, yards and natural terrain, a town pattern that can adapt and move westward."

The image of the original colonies in America are seen as forms to be embodied and emulated. Robertson even goes so far as to say that:

"Williamsburg, the capital of our largest and richest colony, remains one of the clearest and most important early models of our initial urban intentions and practices." (p46)

Williamsburg could easily be exchanged with other american colonies, but this gives a sense of how the New Urbanists speak of these traditional white enclaves. The New Urbanist's agenda is to reconstruct the image of the ideal city or neighborhood. But the question we keep asking is who is the "ideal city" for?

Later in the charter, they explicitly construct a Eurocentric image and white identity for ideal community building. Here is a quote from chapter Eight:

"We frequently look to Europe for inspiration on how to make public transit work in America. In fact, Europeans use transit only a bit more than Americans. What they do a lot more of every day is walk. By making our regions more walkable, we will take a huge step toward making them more livable, drivable, and friendly to bicycles and Pedestrians" (p.73)

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The new urbanists are trying to sell a vision for the future of development - a "new form of urbanism" that any and all architects and designers might be able to participate within. But in reality, new urbanists are working within the typical pre-existing mindset of a developer, client, a real estate management relationship, but at the scale of an entire town. In this structure, renderings, images, and master plans are produced, voted on, and eventually funded by a single body, for example Robert Davis in the case of Seaside or the Van Sweringen Brothers in the case of Shaker Heights, where the stakeholders expect the image to be implemented, leaving very little if any space for other voices and visions.

Sharon Zukin, a professor at CUNY in the sociology department, who focuses on modern urban life, presents the idea of symbolic economy as "the visible ability of the city to produce both symbols and living space." We see in media, film and politics, large corporations like Disney and Hollywood, working to engrave a collective memory and collective identity through the process of image making. The image of a city or suburb becomes embedded. It is the very consumption of these images that produces and reinforces Zukin's symbolic economy, making it an economic endeavour to retain this image of the American ideal. As Sharon Zukin argues "This retains a coded means of discrimination an undertone to the dominant discourse of democratization." With this idea of constructed images and collective memory, Andres Duany, leader of the New Urbanism movement was even quoted to say that: "renderings are instruments of propaganda. This is the way that we should take them. They get the votes necessary for implementation." If we keep designing these eutopic visions of the sitcom suburb that build off of colonial narratives, we will only continue to perpetuate a collective memory and image of a world based around whiteness.

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This has been the podcast, "Same old Suburbanism," a critique of the Charter for New Urbanism, written and produced by Helen Fialkowski and Mae-liosa Barstow as a part of a larger project in the School of Architecture at Princeton University with professor Charles Davis. A special thanks to writers and critics referenced in this podcast, Ariela Azoulay, Audre Lorde, Patrick Wolf, Sharon Zukin, Sarah Ahmed and the authors of the Charter for New Urbanism. Music and sound clips used in this podcast from The Truman Show, Crowander, Jon Luc Hefferman, and the Victor Dance Orchestra. Links to all works referenced in this podcast as well as videos for future research can be found in the shownotes below. Thanks.