



# THE NEW URBANIST MYTH OF DEMOCRATIC CITY PLANNING: THE POLITICS OF CHARRETTES

By Cynthia Spielman

**W**hile the City of San Antonio (CO SA) City Planning and Community Development Department claims to use democratic and inclusive planning techniques in neighborhood planning, it often excludes the visions and voices of the poor and working class people of color, further marginalizing this already disenfranchised population. A principal way in which people are excluded is through the New Urbanist planning technique of the “charrette.”

New Urbanism (Smart Growth, Urban Villages, NeoTraditional Neighborhood Design, Transit-Oriented Development, New Pedestrianism...) is city and neighborhood planning techniques that share some common elements: “fine-grain” mixed-use neighborhood plans, a preference for codes that build “harmony” rather than large zoning districts, and a stress on walkability and transit use. It is a European-inspired reaction against “urban blight” and “soulless suburbs” used widely by city planners in the U.S., Canada, and in Europe. Its goals, described in The Charter of New Urbanism, are lofty:

*We advocate the restructuring of public policy and development practices to support the following principles: neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice.*

The New Urbanism presumption that “good planning makes good communities” helps us to understand that behind the New Urbanist ideas are issues of power: who has the power to decide what constitutes “good” planning and community? Often these plans lack real community support and are articulated primarily in terms of how to attract investment dollars. Seldom are social issues

such as poverty, homelessness, and the elderly addressed. New Urbanism poses the community as consumers rather than active participants in the production and sustenance of community. “The good community,” a New Urbanist ideal, is one that is manufactured.

One of the most important processes of New Urbanist planning is the design “charrette,” a French term for “carts,” a planning method in which intense multiple planning meetings are held with “stakeholders” to decide the design elements for a community before the plans are outlined through city codes. By controlling the choices that stakeholders have in the public meetings, the planning department furthers a plan that “experts” have agreed is beneficial to a community. In design sessions in neighborhoods across San Antonio, planners seek to implement their preconceived ideals as the goals of the charrette sessions, not the ideas that come from the collective participation of the community. The community, it is sometimes articulated, “doesn’t know any better...is stubborn...doesn’t like change.” This is a process that takes place in neighborhoods all over San Antonio, but on the West Side, a part of San Antonio that has historically been denied a voice in issues of its own welfare, and therefore denied access to important city resources, this process is seen as evidence that the city’s attitude toward this area of town hasn’t



Cynthia Spielman and her Tia Mary Ann Merla at the International Woman’s Day March 2008.



changed and further weakens the participation of the Westside community.

### THE AVENIDA GUADALUPE PLAN

On January 6, 2007 the first workshop by the City of San Antonio Planning and Community Development Department and the Guadalupe Westside Planning Team served as an introduction to the charrette process to “stakeholders” about the “vision” for the Guadalupe West Side community. Inside the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, tables were set up to encourage the people milling about to look at the beautifully rendered cityscapes taped on the walls around the room. As the meeting progressed, participants were asked to choose one of the many tables around the room and remain there as the city staff rotated with design options to discuss the different aspects of the plan. They asked questions such as... Which of these kinds of structures would you like to see here? Planning members were encouraged to choose among building types that had never been seen in the area. One citizen laughingly chose a picture of a brownstone, the likes of which is more likely seen in Minneapolis than the West Side of San Antonio. All of the choices were guided by the building types on the posters. The entire process was neatly “managed” (timed group sessions, etc.) to elicit consumer choices rather than real input. It was a democratic plan for show only.

As part of the charrette process, lively discussions at the tables ensued as people were encouraged to talk about their visions (“talk about your wildest dreams for this area!”) for the West Side. The charrette “conversations” rarely considered the historical or social context of the West Side or, more tellingly, “West Town” as the city began calling it, to counter some of the “unfortunate” associations with the longtime name. West Town would connect nicely, it was argued, with the South Town area of town that had gentrified into an arts community south of King William, a community that saw the value of the modest homes soar dramatically, forcing many long-time residents to leave.

One person proposed a Calatrava (a Spanish artist given to elaborate and dramatic designs) bridge to replace the modest Guadalupe Street bridge. One member talked about a nest of upscale restaurants and galleries near the center of town. When the planning staffer heard a “good” idea, s/he rewarded the speaker with a smile and a “that’s great” as s/he wrote it down; whatever

was said that didn’t fit in with a preconceived new urbanist ideal, the planner would look disappointed or puzzled and say, “that’s nice but what about...” As one looked around the room it was clear that few of the people there were actually from the Guadalupe area. One of the few people from the neighborhood asked, “Where will the crime go?” The city planner answered her with the logic that crime “just goes away” with the right neighborhood design. “Where?” asked the woman.

The city website describes the charrette method used for the Avenida Guadalupe Plan as a “visioning tool for revitalization and infill development for the Avenida Guadalupe area... The purpose of the strategic Revitalization Charrette process is to coordinate with community residents to establish a vision for the Avenida Guadalupe Corridor, create design guidelines to reflect community character, and to develop short and long-term strategies for implementation.

The charrette’s primary claim to legitimacy is based on the democratic process of inclusion through “public” meetings. However, many people who live in the area do not come to the meetings for a variety of reasons. The area is economically disadvantaged and many do not have the resources of time or energy to become involved. Another reason people do not attend city meetings is that any city endeavor, in the eyes of the marginalized, is a “done deal.” The feeling of helplessness in the face of city power has a long history in San Antonio. Anytime many people, particularly poor and working class people of color, hear the words, “for the public good” it means displacement and/or financial burden as expressed in the popular saying: “Urban renewal: Mexican removal.”

The sacrifice “for the common good” by the West Side community is evidenced by the freeways, I-35 and I-10, that were constructed through poor neighborhoods, destroying them socially and economically; the county jail that blighted neighborhoods of the West Side; the city neglect that ignored the deadly flooding in poor neighborhoods (When Olmos Park, a far wealthier part of town experienced the same floods, an expensive dam was built.); and the neighborhoods that were destroyed to create the Hemisphere ’68, an area that is now an “attractive” but barren wasteland that is mostly inhabited by convention visitors walking through it to get to somewhere else, robbing a community of not only a tax base, but a voting block as well.

**Anytime many people, particularly poor and working class people of color, hear the words, “for the public good” it means displacement and/or financial burden as expressed in the popular saying: “Urban renewal: Mexican removal.”**



The notion of a “done deal” has become a mantra of futility in San Antonio. The city government is often implacable in the face of protest or reasoning. It has a long, long history of ignoring community voices and democratic processes to enact ordinances that are in the interest of investor dollars (See recent PGA decision: Although the city eventually had to capitulate, it took heroic efforts on the part of the community to stop a golf development over the aquifer. The city’s arrogance in the face of community efforts was noteworthy.)

Sometimes, as evidenced by the recent “parade” ordinance that in effect limits first amendment free speech marches to those who are favored or wealthy, it is because it helps the city budget. Rarely does San Antonio’s city government respond to voices of anyone that disagrees with its decisions, much less the voices of the marginalized and poor. Oftentimes, stories from the community include descriptions of the neighborhoods that have been razed: “It is gone now. It was tore down to make way for...” the “public good.”

### LISTENING TO THE NARRATIVE OF THE COMMUNITY

However, there are alternatives to the exclusionary methods of New Urbanist city planning. Another way to re-envision and re-create the city is through the heeding of community narratives. The narratives or stories of the community offer more inclusive ways of understanding community needs and desires that are organic and reflect actual lived experience, which often counter the city’s limited notions of “good planning.”

A model for using narrative as a planning tool can be found every first Saturday morning: the elders from the community, sitting in a circle in chairs and couches drinking coffee and eating pan dulce, come together to talk about their lives and the life of their community in San Antonio. They are part of the En Aquellos Tiempos, an oral history project sponsored by the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. Narratives are effective because they translate hopes and visions into plans that are difficult to manipulate by outside investors looking to make a fast and high return on their investment. They describe a lived spatial experience instead of a superficial visual landscape that focus on a way a community looks (presumably to more easily sell to investors.)

As the elders talk about their communities, they speak wistfully of small, locally-owned businesses that they once frequented: botanicas, restaurants, butcher and produce shops, beauty and barber shops, panaderias and family ice houses. They remember playgrounds and small parks to mind children, places that they happen to linger with someone. These places were not chosen from a list, but were part of stories, places that served as settings for lives. Sometimes the city vision is a subtext of the narratives: Several of the elders used their experiences walking to places to frame their narratives: “As I was walking to my aunt’s...the store...downtown...” What was telling is that the stories center on the experience of walking itself. This importance placed on walking tells us that walkability, which in the climate of San Antonio means shaded walkways, benches to sit and drink something cold; and most of all, well-maintained sidewalks are important in this narrative of the city. Cultural Arts centers, churches, schools, gathering of elders, Scouts,



Scenes from *An Altar for Emma* performed at the Guadalupe Plaza on Sunday, March 2, 2008. Photo Credit: Esperanza archives.



Jessica Guerrero documents Doña Paulita's story at the Casa de Cuentos.



A West Side family business, the Guadalupanita Cafe, on El Paso St.

PTAs and local business-sponsored evenings might be places to gather narratives. Community leaders might help “translate” these narratives into concrete plans.

These translations are not easily accessible to monied, often out-of-state investors who would rather talk about large visions articulated in the beautiful drawings of the charrettes, drawings that have little to do with the lived environment. These visions further alienate the community from the process because their visions create something new instead of allowing growth in the way the community chooses. The charrettes offer a ready-made preconceived community instead of a community of opportunities to grow and evolve its own way. This evolving community offers no quick payoff, no seductive plan for-out-of-community investors who are looking for quick and generous returns that the city of San Antonio seems to reward instead of encouraging microlending and small business development. The payoff is to the community and to the small businesses that provide for those communities.

Though on the surface, some of the planning elements may seem to be the same as the New Urbanist ideal: mixed-use, density, and walkability, these are not based on how a community will look (which seems so important to the charrette process), but rather, how it is lived. There is an assumption that good design

choices preclude the need for further citizen participation.

Meanwhile, The Avenida Guadalupe Plan, as described on the website, is a landscape of upper middle class amenities and visions that are articulated by pictures reminiscent of the shiny, newer parts of Miami, L.A., or San Diego. These places do not look like home to the people who live there now. The designs rob the West Side of its “sense of place.” The problems and poverty of the West Side were invisible. This New Urbanist process ignored the social and historical context of the West Side, and intentionally or not, excluded much of the Guadalupe community.

Avenida Guadalupe Plan: [http://www.sanantonio.gov/planning/pdf/Guadalupe\\_Westside/09avenida\\_guadalupe\\_corridor.pdf](http://www.sanantonio.gov/planning/pdf/Guadalupe_Westside/09avenida_guadalupe_corridor.pdf)

**SUGGESTED FURTHER READING:**

□ Grant, Jill. *Planning the Good Community: New Urbanism in Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 2006. This is an excellent critique of New Urbanism.

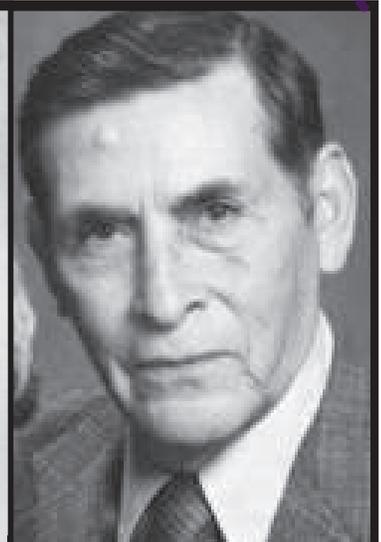
□ Rosales, Rodolfo. *The Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San Antonio*. Austin: University of Austin Press, 2000.

*Bio: Cynthia Spielman is a teacher, a neighborhood activist, and buena gente of the Esperanza Center. Comments on this article or on Voz del Zocalo can be directed to: [spatialpolitics@yahoo.com](mailto:spatialpolitics@yahoo.com)*



## Apolinar Rodriguez

The Esperanza Center and community express sincere condolences to María Antonietta Berriozábal, her husband, Manuel, and her familia on the passing of her father, Apolinar Ramirez Rodriguez on February 27, 2008. He died peacefully after 98 years of faith, courage, wisdom, service and love. Apolinar was born in Leon Guanajuato Mexico and immigrated to the United States during the Revolution of 1910. Possessing a strong work ethic he raised his own family through the work of his hands as a laborer after leaving his early years as sharecropper in Lockhart, Texas where he met, grew up with, and married Sixta Arrendondo, his wife of 68 years. One of his great gifts to his children and all who knew him was that he was a great storyteller who felt that knowledge of culture and family history provided the rootedness needed to stay anchored in this ever changing world. Apolinar inspired Maria's sense of civic duty that ultimately led to her run for mayor. Until his dying days Apolinar had interest in and an opinion on the politics of the day. His spirit lives on in the many members of his extended family and community. May he rest in peace.



*Que En Paz  
Descanse*