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What is This?
Constructing the ‘Genuine American City’: neo-traditionalism, New Urbanism and neo-liberalism in the remaking of downtown Milwaukee

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In this era of competitive capitalism, American cities have sought to orchestrate strategies of both image and material regeneration. The recent revival of central Milwaukee demonstrates the convergence of three discourses in the city’s image-making and redevelopment schemes. These three are the cultural discourse of neo-traditionalism, the planning discourse of the New Urbanism, and neo-liberalism in the arena of public policy. This paper examines the convergence of these three as a case study of the role of culture in contemporary urban development. We structure our argument in three parts. First, we give attention to a campaign designed to promote metropolitan Milwaukee, reflecting its most recent incarnation as a city that nostalgically embraces its industrial past. The promotional image includes the city’s grounding in traditional Midwestern values, the cultural capital represented by its late nineteenth-century industrial landscape, and its claim to the title ‘Genuine American City’. This reflection on ‘genuineness’ and ‘tradition’ reveals nostalgia for an earlier era that appeals to a significant segment of the population. The second portion of the paper examines the links between Milwaukee’s ‘traditional’ urban form, its design and investment strategies, and the city’s evolving New Urbanist landscape. The third section addresses the mayor’s neo-liberal views as they relate to his particular vision of Milwaukee. We conclude our exploration by examining the potential consequences of such neo-traditional ideologies for various communities within the city.

When the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) held its annual conference in Milwaukee during the spring of 1999, the selection signalled several intentions. Unlike preceding conferences, which focused almost exclusively on design, the Milwaukee programme – titled ‘The wealth of cities’ – emphasized strategies to strengthen the physical, economic, and social aspects of the urban environment as a whole.
Like so many other American cities, Milwaukee is just now rediscovering its own urban strengths, rebuilding its riverfront and encouraging middle-class homeowners to move back to the inner city. Can Milwaukee and other cities continue to lure homeowners and employers back from the suburbs? . . . [this conference] will look at what Milwaukee and other cities have done to *remake themselves as centers of cultural and economic wealth* (emphasis added). (Congress for the New Urbanism, 1999)¹

Widely criticized in both academic and architectural circles for their apparently narrow emphasis on aesthetics, New Urbanists responded to this critique by placing issues of race and urban disinvestments on the agenda alongside the more commonplace New Urbanist themes of transportation and community-building design practices.²

The conference also sought to situate urban-oriented strategies within the context of Milwaukee’s ongoing, yet still rather subtle, revitalization. As a member of the CNU’s Board of Directors, Milwaukee’s Mayor John Norquist, offered his city as an example of the change in metropolitan living that New Urbanist principals might bring about. In doing so, the Congress also affirmed the maverick mayor’s agenda that favours ‘individual responsibility’ over government subsidy and emphasizes private-sector solutions for issues ranging from the provision of affordable housing to education. Norquist’s growing national prominence gained additional stature in 1998 following the publication of his book *The wealth of cities*, which highlighted ‘the value of traditional, walkable, interconnected mixed-use neighborhoods’.³ When the organization borrowed his book’s title for the spring 1999 New Urbanism conference, the Congress endorsed Milwaukee’s efforts to remake itself, noting in promotional material that Milwaukee was ‘proving the principles of New Urbanism in a tough real estate market – a rust belt city’.⁴ Touting Mayor Norquist’s leadership, CNU publicity introduced him as someone who ‘had preached for years that cities can capitalize on their urban form’. Accordingly, Milwaukee’s most celebrated feature is its ‘traditional’ urban fabric in which the collection of humanly scaled neighbourhoods nurtures timeless human values like community, rootedness – and diversity. New Urbanists hold these beliefs as central tenets of their design philosophy, contrasting the traditional with landscapes of high-growth sprawled America.

‘Pumping new life into a city with urban design’ headlined CNU conference literature and is carried through other, convergent messages of local business leaders. During a recent visit by economic development specialist Richard Florida, an event sponsored by regional business interests, Milwaukeeans were assured that the urban landscape itself offered opportunities to lure members of the ‘creative class’ to the region, members of which he argues are key to economic development.⁵ Furthermore, the Greater Milwaukee Convention and Visitors Bureau’s recently adopted official slogan – ‘Milwaukee, the Genuine American City’ – suggests the essence of urban life borrowed from an idealized past. The discourse of ‘traditional’ cultural values, the ascendant planning discourse of New Urbanism, and dominance of neo-liberalism in the arena of public policy converge in Milwaukee’s image-making and development strategies. Our paper examines their convergence as a case study of the role of culture in contemporary urban development in general, and analyses the articulation of New Urbanist and neo-liberal strategies in a central city in particular. Arguably, New Urbanist design principles and neo-traditional values are not necessarily linked – and we will consider this possibility – but in New
Urbanist literature they tend to be. The ascendency of neo-liberalism in the last 25 years inevitably situates these other ‘neo-’ discourses in a political economy of market enablement. ‘Authenticity’, ‘diversity’ and ‘vibrancy’, of a distinctly nostalgic form, attract investment dollars as the city seeks to construct a reality based on this image. A closer examination of Milwaukee’s experience provides further evidence to the power of this and other forms of neo-traditionalist discourse in efforts being made by a diverse constituency that is, as Mayor Norquist has stated, ‘dedicated to rebuilding urban civilization’.6

To analyse Milwaukee’s efforts to ‘remake itself as a center of cultural and economic wealth’, we structure our argument in three parts.7 First, we give attention to a campaign designed to promote metropolitan Milwaukee, reflecting its most recent incarnation as a city that nostalgically embraces its past. The promotional image includes the city’s grounding in traditional Midwestern values, the cultural capital represented by its late nineteenth-century era industrial landscape, and its claim to the title ‘Genuine American City’. This reflection on ‘genuineness’ and ‘tradition’ reveals a nostalgia for an earlier era that appeals to a significant segment of the population. The second portion of the paper examines the links between Milwaukee’s ‘traditional’ urban form, its design and investment strategies, and the city’s evolving New Urbanist landscape. The third section briefly addresses Mayor Norquist’s neo-liberal views as they relate to his particular vision of Milwaukee, as a means of locating these views in relation to the discourse of New Urbanism. In this discussion, we conclude our exploration by examining the potential consequences of such neo-traditional ideologies for various communities within the city. By placing race and urban disinvestments on their conference agenda, the New Urbanists attempted to make more explicit these issues without acknowledging that the creation of a landscape involves a contest among varied groups, each with a stake in whose values and interests prevail. Milwaukee’s contest invokes the racial and class politics of the metropolitan area and thus exposes the veiled issues of race and class in such neo-traditional discourses.

**Constructing the ‘Genuine American City’**

As noted in the growing literature on cities’ efforts to manipulate their cultural and historical associations to generate economic and political power, urban promotional strategies are both adjusted in response to local systems of meaning and situated within multiple scales of cultural reference.8 The emerging role of the ‘entrepreneurial city’ and the reality of increasing inter-urban competition meant that by the 1980s Milwaukee’s leaders felt the need to market it as a ‘world-class’ city, complete with the appropriate business climate and quality of life associated with that distinction. For nearly a century prior to that Milwaukee residents and officials appeared to take almost universal pride in the city’s ‘beer capital’ and ‘working man’s town’ image. Indeed, a famous booster poster from the early twentieth century proclaimed that Milwaukee ‘feeds and supplies the world’, representing the city with an image of an idealized (white) woman surrounded by chief icons of the industrial age, including an oversized precision gear and a pick and axe (Figure 1). The notion of Milwaukee as a central place was also captured in the foreground of the poster,
where steamers and locomotives radiated in every direction. By the 1980s, however, the combination of expanding suburbanization and deindustrialization, as well as the loss of some of the city’s figurehead industrial namesakes (e.g. Allis-Chalmers, Briggs & Stratton and the Schlitz Brewing Company) undermined the strength of this industrial imagery and resulted in a publicly proclaimed crisis of representation.9

As a consequence, in 1988 the city launched its official new motto, ‘A Great Place on a Great Lake’, accompanied by a new logo – a blue ‘M’ designed to suggest a watery wave pattern echoing the shores of Lake Michigan (Figure 2). Waterfront property promised a city rich in amenities, with an attractive vibrant urban character well suited to its growing service-sector economy. By the middle of the 1990s, however, it became clear to many at the Greater Milwaukee Convention and Visitors Bureau (GMCVB), Milwaukee’s official publicity machine, that the ‘Great Place’ campaign was too vague and only tended to reinforce the idea that perhaps Milwaukee was not a ‘world-class city’ after all.10 A new campaign was initiated in 1995 that called for an alternative representational strategy. The question then became – what is Milwaukee? Was there something that set it apart from other urban centres that might serve its economic interests?

FIGURE 1 ‘Milwaukee Feeds and Supplies the World’ celebrated the city’s industrial strength in 1901. Today this popular poster offers a nostalgic image of its historical roots. (Provided courtesy of the City of Milwaukee Department of City Development, Special Committee on Economic Development.)
This search for a new identity for Milwaukee took place within a critical cultural context. Evident in everything from the heritage industry to the Martha Stewart phenomenon, the genealogy rage to the historicist architecture of the New Urbanism, nostalgia and the search for authenticity have shaped and produced new cultural practices during the last 20 years. Studies such as *The fall of public man, Habits of the heart* and *The good society*, along with more popular accounts like *The old neighborhood* and *Bowling alone*, presented an American middle class that had traded in a full and rich life for atomized affluence on the suburban frontier. These authors bemoaned the perceived artificiality, crass materialism and hyper-individualism of suburbia, and longed for a spiritual regeneration based on a vision of dominant, shared social values from an earlier period. The New Urbanist discourse shared in this neo-traditionalist nostalgia. Conflating cultural practice with built form in his polemical *The geography of nowhere*, James Kunstler became a popular voice for the New Urbanism in his provocative cultural commentary and critique of the American urban landscape. Several strands of meaning linked to this nostalgia became particularly influential in the design movement. These include: a perceived loss of civility and safety in the midst of a diverse, fragmented population; a link constructed between commerce and street life, emphasizing the vibrancy of traditional marketplaces and mixed-use development; and the desire to recover a sense of familiarity/community through neighbourhood level connectedness.

It is within this context that Milwaukee’s image-makers launched their new campaign and slogan: ‘Milwaukee: the Genuine American City’ (Figure 3). The distinctively industrial symbol and neo-traditional slogan of the new campaign were designed to create

FIGURE 2 The Milwaukee wave became the icon for the metropolitan area when the Greater Milwaukee Convention and Visitors Bureau launched the ‘Great Place on a Great Lake’ campaign in the mid-1980s. (Provided courtesy of the Greater Milwaukee Convention and Visitors Bureau.)
a breakthrough image for the city: one which alluded to images of the ‘real America’, complete with solid architecture, upright citizens and family-oriented tourist attractions. Promising sophistication without pretension, the campaign emphasized a mix of urban renaissance, new investment and ethnic heritage, seeking to magically convert what were once Milwaukee’s chief liabilities into the city’s most saleable features. Previously downplayed in ad copy, Milwaukee’s medium size, its industrial and European-peasant past and admittedly middle-of-the road culture were now the celebrated roots of its ‘realness’ in the present. As the lead member of the ad team put it: ‘A lot of things about Milwaukee are truly genuine. It has a strong industrial base. It’s a city built with strong, hard-working people. It has those values.’ The ‘genuine American’ campaign articulated a form of nostalgia that was ambiguous enough to sustain popular appeal locally. At first, the GMCVB tried to highlight Milwaukee’s favourable mix of urban pros and cons with the slogan ‘What a City Ought to Be’. They also tried ‘Milwaukee: The America You Remember’ but quickly scrapped it, concerned that such explicit nostalgia for an inegalitarian past would be found offensive to parts of the population. In ‘Genuine American’ the GMCVB found something with broad appeal, while claiming the values of

FIGURE 3 In the late 1990s, promoters chose ‘Milwaukee – Genuine American’ as the basis for a campaign to draw visitors and investment. The symbol celebrates Milwaukee’s industrial image and ‘genuine’ values. (Provided courtesy of the Greater Milwaukee Convention and Visitors Bureau.)
an earlier period and the cultural atmosphere associated with early twentieth century America as the city’s hallmark. This message attempted to balance vibrancy and diversity with an assurance of safety and comfort. The marketing strategy celebrates the city’s cultural identity based in Midwest sensibilities, while entertaining the notion that its wealth of older buildings and renovated industrial landscape can make the city invitingly ‘hip’ and festive.

Although designed to appeal to a larger, tourist market, the new campaign also targeted metropolitan Milwaukee residents, inviting them back downtown to appreciate once again urban amenities and public life. The metropolitan population is well aware that uneven development remains a consistent pattern in the area’s geography. The city proper suffered a net loss of 31,000 residents in the last decade, almost 9 per cent of its population, and 5 per cent of its jobs. Those searching for optimism concerning the city’s economy point to the growth in affluent taxpayers, which reflected in part the in-migration of middle- and upper-income residents to downtown and nearby neighbourhoods. Associated with the problem of uneven development, however, Milwaukee ranks as one of the nation’s most racially and economically segregated metropolitan areas. The city’s civic and business leaders hope to eclipse this situation by marginalizing the contemporary issues of class and race, nostalgically celebrating ethnicity and a working class heritage. Evoking Milwaukee’s historical roots, the early twentieth-century image shown in Figure 1 is again a popular Milwaukee poster. Milwaukee’s Department of City Development’s Special Committee on Economic Development holds the copyright to a piece of history that celebrates the city’s centrality, economic health and European-American past.

An emphasis on tradition in its civic image stands as the promotional reality in Milwaukee, while the rhetoric of New Urbanism attempts to capture the traditional scale of a walking city and local, architectural references in the city’s built environment. We next examine how effectively the disparate parts of Milwaukee – the majority and minority populations and central city and suburbia – are woven back together in an effort to create conformity between image and experience by focusing on the New Urbanist discourse, the land use plans it inspires for the city and the neo-liberal strategy intended to achieve these goals.

**A New Urbanist vision for Milwaukee**

**Downtown: ‘everybody’s neighborhood’**

Among the most visible changes in the city’s landscape during the last five years, Milwaukee’s new convention centre recently opened in the Downtown district (see Figure 4). With a German Renaissance-style facade referencing many of Milwaukee’s major late nineteenth-century commercial structures, it provides an architectural example of the fusion of neo-traditionalist values, New Urbanist design rhetoric and late twentieth-century civic entrepreneurialism by supporting a growth in hotel rooms and other aspects of the GMVCB’s tourist-oriented economic development strategy. The physical form of the convention centre suits the place-making goals of New Urbanist design, suggesting an authentic experience of place enriched by Midwestern, traditional values.
Banners that hang on lamp posts outside the convention centre emphasize another message to visitors and metropolitan residents: ‘Downtown – everybody’s neighborhood.’ If Milwaukee is to remake itself as a centre of cultural and economic wealth, that goal is specifically to make the downtown the symbolic heart. The city’s Downtown Master Plan, completed at an expense of $350 000 in Spring 1999, seeks to orchestrate this vision by emphasizing the potential to enhance the downtown area as an amenity-rich ‘traditional’ neighbourhood where people ‘live, work, learn, and play’. Initial protests over the expense of the exercise, raised by councillors from two central city districts, were drowned out by a consensus that the city’s health would be judged by its downtown. The planning partnership, staffed by City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee Redevelopment Corporation employees, summarized its objectives:

The overarching goal of the plan is for downtown to add value to Milwaukee. It seeks to accomplish this by creating a downtown that is appealing to *visitors, current and potential investors and current and potential residents*. It seeks to guide development of downtown property and public space to create a more vibrant, active and exciting place to live, work, learn and play.

**FIGURE 4** The late twentieth-century New Urbanist design for the *Midwest Express* Convention Center references the German Renaissance style common among Milwaukee’s late nineteenth-century buildings. The downtown convention centre is central to the GMCVB’s tourist-oriented economic development strategy. (Photograph by Judith Kenny.)
Employing rhetoric that maintains links with the marketing concerns of civic entrepreneurialism, the plan cites the need to take maximum advantage of the downtown’s particular assets (such as the river and the area’s ‘rich architectural legacy’) and the potential to introduce ‘catalytic projects’ that will provide the city with further marketing advantages. The document directs attempts to clear away the sins of the mid-twentieth-century modernist planners, their design vision and associated values, as it alters the landscape of deindustrialization.

Figure 5 maps this New Urbanist vision for Milwaukee’s downtown as it has thus far progressed. The $20 million planned destruction of a section of freeway, the Park East Freeway, has begun (Figure 6). With the removal of the expressway and the parking lots located at its base, plans are under way for a new ‘neighbourhood’ of housing, restaurants, shops and a motorcycle museum devoted to one of Milwaukee’s signature manufacturers, Harley-Davidson. The mixed use that is key to the New Urbanist perspective is more easily accommodated and understood in a central city location, where infill projects need only be oriented to the street to honour a major NU principal – and to be oriented to the river to honour a feature deemed one of Milwaukee’s key ‘natural’ assets. The Milwaukee River, perceived as a key amenity for redevelopment since the late 1980s, is being woven ‘back’ into the city’s urban fabric through new residential and commercial developments. At the same time, a concerted effort is being made to enliven the street life of the downtown area through the construction of a pedestrian walkway along the Milwaukee River. The CNU’s Charter of the New Urbanism showcased this project as an example of linking park areas, commercial districts and different neighbourhoods. Accordingly, the RiverWalk, ‘a ribbon of concrete snaking beside a workhorse waterway’, references the past while creating a distinctively post-industrial public/private space (see Figure 7).

At a price of $13.8 million, the pathway attracts investment dollars for the renovation of old commercial and industrial buildings. As the map of housing suggests, developers of condominiums and rental units find the possibilities particularly attractive. Other redevelopment projects along RiverWalk include brewpubs, restaurants and office space as demonstrated by the renovation of the Schlitz Brewery (see Figure 5).

The city shows its appreciation each year of the entrepreneurial efforts of businesses along the RiverWalk by bestowing the ‘Gertie RiverWalk Award’. Nostalgic mention of Gertie, a duck, distracts from the novelty of this new orientation toward the river and its de-industrialized waterfront. Fewer and fewer Milwaukeeans recall Gertie, but an effort is being made to correct that loss of memory with a statue to the duck, located in a prominent position along the RiverWalk, as well as the award named in her honour. Why should Gertie be recalled? Her story creates a link with the civility and community spirit of an earlier era. This homespun story drew national attention during the last spring of the Second World War, when Gertie guarded her nest on a downtown bridge pier and thus stopped repair work on the structure until her ducklings hatched. Gertie remains an obscure figure in the Milwaukee public’s collective memory, but the choice of her as a symbol and the effort at her promotion underscores the nostalgic message local leaders wish to convey to visitors and locals alike. Civility, commerce and street life once again come together – on the RiverWalk. While nostalgia for an earlier era may be the message...
FIGURE 5 While the slogan ‘Everybody’s Neighborhood’ supports investment in the downtown generally, the growing number of residential units gives the downtown neighbourhood new meaning. Residential development, focused primarily on the Milwaukee River, has produced significant increases in population and property value within the area. (Map by Jeffrey Zimmerman.)
implied in this promotion, the significance of the pedestrian amenity does not preclude other interpretations. A youth-oriented alternative newspaper recently discussed Milwaukee’s changing Downtown, and suggested that the pedestrian amenities warrant a new, hip slogan (providing a positive interpretation of the phrase) – ‘Take a Hike!’

The material and symbolic changes introduced along the RiverWalk offer powerful evidence of efforts to create ‘everyone’s neighbourhood’ in the downtown – with a particular emphasis given to neighbourhood. Increased residential development tops the list of the downtown Plan’s objectives, and approximately 2500 new residential units have been constructed or planned since 1997. The market for downtown living draws from two demographic groups, young childless professionals and the ‘empty-nesters’; and, despite the impact of the current recession, demand for new condominiums remains strong. Milwaukee’s ability to capture these markets is relatively recent and was
facilitated by the style of New Urbanism, which arrived most dramatically in the
downtown with the East Pointe Commons development (Figure 8). The development
opened in 1992 introducing 214 housing units to an area destroyed by a failed freeway
project, a planned extension of the Park East Freeway. Targeting a distinctive market,
the name of the development drew upon imagery of age and gentility to create the sense
of an urbane neighbourhood. As one journalist summarized it, the project’s developer
envisioned that ‘40-something renters would carry their traditional Ethan Allen furniture
up the front steps of a rowhouse. They would, in a certain way, be adventurers leaving
the security of suburbia, and yet they would want – they would demand – to feel secure.’
Indeed, 62 per cent of the project’s tenants who moved into the new ‘architecturally
interesting, old-fashioned homes’ moved from the suburbs. Fences and electronic
systems reinforced their sense of security. The New Urbanist promise of ‘vibrancy’ and
‘diversity’ required some mediation in this development: a controlled environment
underpins claims of vibrancy, while the offer of diversity translates as new opportunities
for a form of urbanity. With homes selling for $500 000 and the development’s new

FIGURE 7 Attracting investment dollars in the renovation of old industrial and commercial buildings,
the RiverWalk creates a decidedly postindustrial public/private space along the Milwaukee River.
(Photograph by Judith Kenny.)

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supermarket, which attracts the highest grocery sales of any in the city, East Pointe Commons drew upon and further contributed to the downtown’s changing image. The success of the project assured many of the strength of a downtown housing market as an alternative to suburbia.

Appropriate to Milwaukee’s industrial legacy, other new units occupy renovated brownfield sites. Among the notable developments, the warehouse conversions of Milwaukee’s ‘Historic Third Ward’ offer an example of effective marketing of ‘authenticity’. Although it was an Italian-American neighbourhood in the 1960s, construction of the freeway system eliminated the area’s residential use until the late 1980s, when loft development began slowly. The location of the Milwaukee School of Design and design-oriented retail in the Ward supports the area’s new reputation for trendiness. The ‘high-tech hot spot’ consultant Richard Florida pronounced Milwaukee ‘cool’ – as evidenced by the potential shown in the Third Ward’s ‘pubs, coffee houses and funky renovated old warehouses’, and he encouraged local leaders to embrace an economic development advantage based in the city’s old buildings. Stating that ‘Milwaukee does not have to make facsimiles of the past as much as refurbish what it has’, he judged the city to be capable of capitalizing on its built environment. His message has been borne out to an extent in the Downtown real estate market, as the
conversion of lofts in the Third Ward produced the fastest-growing census tract in the metropolitan area. Such investments helped triple the District’s assessed property values in the five years between 1995 and 2000.\textsuperscript{37} As theorists evaluate the ‘creative class’ hypothesis and its link to economic development, a youth-oriented image of an urbane Milwaukee is being formed in the Downtown. In Generation X (and Y) slang, Milwaukee has become ‘the Mil’ for those who see a trendy, new potential.\textsuperscript{38}

‘Beerline B’ – which lies to the north of the Park East Freeway extension and west of the Milwaukee River – is also influencing the city’s residential make-up (see Figure 5). Sponsored by the city at a cost of over $6 250 000, the ‘privately’ developed Beerline B project includes 300+ residential units, offering trendy apartments and condominiums on land once occupied by tanneries and other industrial developments.\textsuperscript{39} Drawing upon a modern, industrial aesthetic, named ‘prairie-style industrial’ by one designer, the project provides evidence that New Urbanist planning principles are not dependent on neo-traditional style architecture.\textsuperscript{40} Its promenades link the westside RiverWalk, and a stairway unites the river with the historically working-class neighbourhoods above the bluff for the first time. During 2000–02, property values that reflected the deluxe condominiums and apartments concentrated in the formerly derelict waterfront portion of the district contributed to a 29 per cent increase in assessed value for one of the city’s poorest aldermanic districts, ranking the district’s percentage increase in value second only to the downtown’s.\textsuperscript{41}

The dominant response of the city’s leaders is to hail such increases as evidence of Milwaukee’s vitality and the ‘return’ of jobs and residents. As middle-class, and upper-middle-class residents move to the area, however, developments like Beer Line B fuel concerns about gentrification and displacement. Implications for further gentrification beyond the boundaries of the Downtown, a boundary once established by the 1960s freeway extension, are significant. Its significance is also understood in regard to its potential for redefining the ‘heart of the city’.

**Shifting boundaries**

As the Park East Freeway comes down, changes in the area that lies to the north of the structure and between the river and north–south freeway are expected to accelerate. Already drawing significant attention, these changes include: the Beerline B Project noted above; gentrification of the Brewers Hill Neighbourhood, on the bluff above the river; and, the HOPE VI renovation/redevelopment of two public housing projects on the area’s western edge. Both the Beer Line B Project and the HOPE VI-funded projects specifically reflect New Urbanist design principals.\textsuperscript{42} Gentrification in Brewers Hill began in the 1970s, but is growing at a rate that reflects the public investment in the area and the enhanced attractiveness of nearby downtown living.

Marketing of certain new developments in Brewers Hill claim a return of a ‘vintage’ neighbourhood to its ‘affluent past’.\textsuperscript{43} Beer barons, however, were associated with the area for only a brief period during the late nineteenth century before they moved to more select neighbourhoods and the area became primarily a mixed working- and middle-class neighbourhood. Prior to the mid-1950s, however, Martin Luther King Drive
(old Third Street) – which forms the edge of the Brewers Hill neighbourhood – was the second busiest commercial street in the city, second only to downtown’s main street. Despite its currently valued characteristics, suburbanization, the construction of larger shopping centres, and the construction of a freeway, which took traffic away from this north–south corridor, chipped away at its business over several decades. As the inner-city neighbourhood lost the European-American working-class population to suburbia during the 1950s and 1960s, the growing African-American community in Milwaukee took its place. The image of the old commercial district faded and visions of violence replaced it in the minds of many Milwaukeeans when a riot took place at the intersection of North and Third Street in the summer of 1967. As in many other areas of disinvestment in the central city, deterioration of the housing stock and destruction of the units resulted in a growing number of vacant lots and an emptying out of the population.

Approximately 20 years ago the National Register of Historic Buildings acknowledged the architectural significance of the area with a historic district designation, and gentrifiers began to establish themselves in the neighbourhood, reclaiming the mansions and cottages on the hill. Others moved older structures into the neighbourhood, where the increasing number of vacant lots opened inexpensive property and superior views to new residents. Local analysts made cautious claims of gentrification until the early 1990s, when first commercial redevelopment on King Drive and then residential development took off. The King Drive area’s valuation rose 69 per cent in the most recent reassessment, leading the city’s business districts in terms of property value change. In terms of residential change, gentrification of older homes is no longer the primary development activity in the neighbourhood. New planned developments on empty lots, such as the Brewers Hill Commons development, introduce condominium units from $200 000 to more than $350 000. Ten years after East Pointe Commons ‘pioneered’ new housing development on the eastside, the developers of Brewers Hill Commons proposed 220 units, arguing the ‘importance and necessity of creating a contemporary habitat for the professional work force of Milwaukee’. The two stages of development include conversion of factory space into lofts and construction of single-family housing reminiscent of the Victorian styles located in the neighbourhood. The single-family homes feature New Urbanist design elements such as alleys, front porches and lot dimensions that conform to the older, long, narrow lot configuration. Promotional material promises: ‘Home life will never be the same in Brewers Hill.’ Certain members of the neighbourhood worry that this indeed may be the case.

To the west of Brewers Hill, two public housing projects provide evidence of the influence of New Urbanism as well. In HUD’s HOPE VI Program, dedicated to the reconstruction of federal public housing, New Urbanist design concepts underpin federal policy as summarized in Principles for inner city neighborhood design. Two of Milwaukee’s more notorious housing projects, Hillside Terrace and Lapham Park (the new townhomes at Carver Park), underwent renovation based on guidelines intended to decrease the ‘density of poverty’ and ‘remove the stigma of the projects’ (See Figure 5). In 1999, the then Secretary of HUD, Andrew Cuomo, summed up HOPE VI’s ‘vision’ by urging: ‘Don’t build public housing institutions. Build neighborhoods. Build communities – smaller, lower density, not all poor people...’ The New Urbanist...
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objectives that inform HOPE VI are clear: the physical shape of public housing must be changed and the newer, smaller-scale buildings are meant to ‘become part of their surrounding communities’. Building neighbourhoods rather than rebuilding ‘the projects’ redefines the public commitment, suggesting the significance of a particular quality of life rather than the public provision of shelter for those not well served by the private sector.

The 422 unit Hillside Terrace development holds the distinction of being the first HOPE VI project in the country to be occupied. With its transformed facades and reduced density, members of the design community, of the larger Milwaukee community, and its clientele judge Hillside Terrace a success. No longer project-like in appearance, various anecdotes reveal that the larger Milwaukee community apparently cannot distinguish the units from other new, nearby development, thus arguably removing the stigma of public housing units. Prospective tenants form a long waiting list for units that previously had a 200:1 turndown rate. Current and former tenants describe pleasure at the improved appearance, which includes a large, NU-inspired porch and improved public space. To reduce density and improve design, however, 174 public housing units were lost on-site. An individual associated with the HOPE VI redevelopment speculated that if the plan for the public housing project had occurred any later, pressures from area developments would have made it difficult to retain as many public housing units. When Lapham Park underwent reconstruction, the HOPE VI funded project lost an even greater number of public housing units. Clearing the site entirely, the Housing Authority rebuilt 51 units of public housing, and introduced 51 affordable units and 21 market-rate units, thus creating a new mix of income levels for future neighbours. Recently opened, the new Townhomes at Carver Park has waiting lists for each category of housing and is lauded locally as a great ‘neighborhood success’ (Figure 9).

Residents in Brewers Hill increasingly voice their displeasure at growing rents and fears of the possible cultural homogenization of their neighbourhood. These new developments have aggravated divisions – both real and symbolic – within the Near North Side district. Just recently a minor political controversy erupted over a redistricting plan that would have carved out the revitalized portion of Brewer’s Hill and merged it with the much wealthier lakeside and downtown district. The alderwoman who represents the district immediately protested. Her argument contained a degree of ambivalence, however. She stated that she had not worked hard all these years to bring investment to the Near North Side only to see it disappear in one stroke of the cartographer’s pen. Redistricting was forestalled; yet clearly the symbolic geography of the area is rapidly changing. Brewers Hill – a more populous and wealthier area than it was just five years ago – is now on the middle-class map, and its borders are expanding to the north and west.
The convergence of New Urbanism and neo-liberalism

The wealth of cities

The question ‘Can Milwaukee and other cities continue to lure homeowners and employers back from the suburbs?’ played a role in promoting the Congress for the New Urbanism’s conference in 1999. Serving as a spokesperson for the CNU then, and as the present chairman of the CNU now, Mayor Norquist offers an answer that provides evidence of the links between neo-traditional values, neo-liberalism and the New Urbanist planning movement. Although many have commented on the pro-business undertow that characterizes a good deal of New Urbanist thinking on the city, perhaps nowhere is the connection between neo-liberal ideology and New Urbanism more starkly evident than in the writings and actions of Milwaukee’s Mayor. Norquist has articulated what might be called a ‘neo-liberal/New Urbanist’ urban vision in his recent book, The wealth of cities: revitalizing the centers of American life, and in his actions in office. His text is particularly instructive, since it articulates his views on what generated Milwaukee’s decline and what can be done to reverse it, and situates his ideas among those of other urban specialists.

Many have commented on the book title’s decidedly capitalist, free-market reference.
Reminiscent not only of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of nations*, Norquist’s choice of titles reveals his approval of Jane Jacobs’ *Cities and the wealth of nations*. Certainly, Jacobs’ protest against modernist planning and the reconstruction of postwar urban form in *The death and life of great American cities* serves as a foundational text in New Urbanism’s anti-modern vision. Jacobs and Norquist share as well a *laissez-faire* attitude and disdain for bureaucratic intervention, celebrating cities as the engines that drive economies. Jacobs praises a ‘creative class’ similar to those Florida describes as the driving force in local economies, although she emphasizes the role of venture capitalists. To harness their energy most effectively, Norquist (*à la* Jacobs) argues that government must keep taxes low and cities safe. When that happens, the private sector can provide the solutions to urban problems. This position resembles so-called new Democrats such as Chicago’s Mayor Daley, who also focuses on cutting taxes, streamlining municipal services, fighting crime and reforming schools.

Norquist also calls for the total abolition of welfare and public housing. His active support of HOPE VI only partially belies his words regarding public housing, since much is made of these new developments’ ability to demonstrate New Urbanist architectural and planning principles, transforming ‘the projects’ into neighbourhoods. Whether these neighbourhoods are sustainable under current economic pressures, including high unemployment and the impact of gentrification, remains the significant issue. Otherwise, he claims that the free market once successfully addressed the problems associated with employment and housing in urban areas, and that it can do so again. His examples suggest a period when the initiative of individuals – Milwaukee’s immigrant workers – created viable solutions that would later become impossible with the introduction of urban reform ideas such as a uniform zoning code. Furthermore, the federal government, according to Norquist, has underwritten sprawl and freeway building, stifled trade and competition, and inadvertently caused the supply of low-income dwellings to shrink while promoting the demise of low-rent urban hotels. In his most radical move, Norquist calls for the complete independence of cities from Federal control and largess. This sentiment is expressed in the most frequently quoted line from his book, ‘You can’t build a city on pity.’ It follows in his argument that old-fashioned initiative, a legacy in Milwaukee, can be expected of modern-day citizens if they are provided with the proper environment of safety and low taxes. Norquist’s confidence in the attractiveness of the urban environment is reflected in the following statement: ‘As cities reduce crime and taxes, the physical appeal of the urban form becomes apparent and attractive to potential residents and businesses.’ In his own city, he advocates for the return of professional, middle-class Milwaukeeans from the suburbs to the city, where they will be able to enjoy the richness of the urban landscape and lifestyle as compared to the ‘ersatz countryside . . . see[n] on the edge.’ Much as the GMCVB’s advertising copy targets the larger metropolitan area in a campaign to enhance business in the downtown area, Norquist seeks to attract members of his baby-boomer peer group back into the central city, to occupy both the new downtown housing units and the older, central neighbourhoods that many of their parents’ generation left in the 1950s and 1960s.

Like other New Urbanists, the mayor advocates mixed-use neighbourhoods similar to the city’s older residential areas, civic-oriented and lively downtowns, the protection of
environmental quality in urban areas and an increase in funding for alternative transportation, with special emphasis on light rail. Without acknowledging the contradiction, federal funding of such efforts is endorsed. As suggested by efforts in his own city, Norquist encourages Americans to consider the following future:

Urban superhighways should be relegated to the scrap heap of history, and defederalization of our surface transportation system should be considered, allowing for major local and regional investments in transit, pedestrian, and bicycle routes integrated with the time-tested, traditional street grid.\(^{68}\)

The influence of various New Urbanist ideas illuminates this image of a possible future. Norquist’s broader ideology draws upon several themes within neo-traditional discourse and a nostalgic interpretation of public life and public places. He envisions a place of safety and civility, which would be possible given the characteristics of the region’s population once twentieth-century policies and practices of government are undone. As to the excitement of a vibrant, diverse marketplace combined with the feeling of connectedness of neighbourhood life, the roots of this vision are in a past such as described by Jane Jacobs in *The death and life of great American cities*. The intricate sidewalk ballet that she described in the streets of the ‘old city’ of New York supports many people’s image of the diversity, vibrancy and community assumed to be part of urban neighbourhoods before the freeway.\(^{69}\) This nostalgia does not examine whether those qualities existed in Milwaukee’s old neighbourhoods. During the period favoured by New Urbanists, Milwaukee’s neighbourhoods reflected even then a high degree of class segregation, distinguished by ethnic concentrations. Nor does it question the racial politics and deindustrialized economy of early twenty-first-century Milwaukee. This suggests the need to examine closely what is planned for the future of these neighbourhoods in a ‘majority minority city’.

**The rhetoric of race and class**

As the effects of gentrification on the Near North Side are being felt, the relatively recent effects of rising property values are just beginning to allow members of the community to weigh the consequences. The stagnant and declining property values that concern other nearby neighbourhoods continue to draw greater concern for many, as racial disparities in income and employment and other quality-of-life indicators still stand out as some of the primary features of the city’s urban landscape. In a city whose decline resulted from a far more complex combination of factors than bad design and the automobile, the city’s New Urbanist-guided policy initiatives draw a blank on these issues. This is a grave omission, given that the issues of race pervade nearly every element of urban transformation in Milwaukee in the postwar decades, including white flight, redlining, block busting, the decline of the public schools and the attending capital drain and depreciation of the central city. These transformations structure current urban problems and battles over urban policy. From the welfare and school-choice debates to crime and gentrification, questions involving race in Milwaukee, as elsewhere, are omnipresent. Current development policy pins a great deal on the city’s ‘unique
advantages such as fine architecture and walkable streets', celebrating a particular moment in American urban history when the streets were supposedly full of life, civic-minded progress dominated urban politics, people relied on their own capabilities (rather than handouts from the government) and ‘genuine’ community was rooted in the humanly scaled streetcar neighbourhood. Missing from this picture of Milwaukee’s social life at the end of the Second World War are both the acknowledgment of the relative abundance of working class jobs and the fact that the city was overwhelmingly white. At that time, the city’s small African American population was restricted to a tightly bound ghetto, where overcrowded housing and a restricted participation in the local labour market were the order of the day. Nostalgia may appear a relatively harmless endeavour when it comes to urban boosterism, but it is not so safe when it informs attempts at urban reconstruction.

The chief New Urbanist writers fail to consciously articulate issues of race and racism in their primary texts, while being exclusively preoccupied by the fraying of the physical and social fabric of dominantly white and middle-class suburbia, where (it is argued) the confluence of technology, affluence and consumption-oriented lifestyles have (tragically) overwhelmed ‘real’ community. Furthermore, despite the fact that many New Urbanist writers spend a great deal of energy lamenting the cultural ‘sterility’ of suburbs, little evidence suggests that an open embrace of the multiculturalism of the city is on their agenda. The most socially charged moment of the 1999 Congress, for example, sprang from a debate on the racial politics and consequences of gentrification. During the debate, James Kunstler rose from the audience and declared that blacks need to stop blaming all their problems on whites. Blacks, he continued, should also ‘tell your kids to be nicer to white people. Turn your baseball hats around, get interested in reading and quit trying to scare everyone.’ Comments such as these betray a moral panic over the convergence of youth, race and class in the unpredictable public spaces of the multicultural city and, perhaps more generally, point to a widespread reluctance on behalf of many New Urbanist thinkers to think beyond the confines of their own suburban privilege.

A second blind spot in the leading texts of the New Urbanists relates to the ways in which the free market and private capital have played a damaging role in the historical process of American urbanization. Reflecting this neo-liberal ideology, Norquist explains the flight of jobs and capital from the central city as the result of an overbearing federal government, not as an expression of race, geography, technology and uneven development. Lacking a more nuanced perspective that would address the impact of racism, lending practices, the interests of private contractors who profited from suburban development and anti-urban biases inherent in the suburban ideal, which is dominant in American culture, the picture ultimately presented is that American suburbia was somehow the direct result of a conspiracy by Washington and the twentieth-century European architectural avant garde. How effectively can one address the problems of the postmodern inner city by campaigning against suburbia? Yet even in Milwaukee’s African American community, great hope is attached to the ‘return’ of residents and jobs to the central city and the subsequent opportunities for building middle-class wealth through home-ownership in stable neighbourhoods.
Conclusion

Milwaukee, ‘the Mil’, is being transformed by nostalgically celebrating a heritage of ethnicity and industrialism while attempting to eclipse the contemporary issues of race and deindustrialization. When the city changed its slogan from ‘A Great Place on a Great Lake’, the urban marketers shifted the cultural image from that of a ‘world-class city’ to the newly acceptable assessment of its ‘down home’ culture. The qualitative change in the two messages reflected a new, culturally responsive effort to create wealth through neo-traditional imagery, assuming an ability to build Milwaukee’s future on the value of authenticity, vibrancy and diversity. Reassuring visitors and prospective investors, it hoped to lure others back from the suburbs. Milwaukee’s leaders claim relative success, evidenced by recent rises in property values, noting that increased residential development supports the strength of the city’s attractiveness for investment.

The downtown appears to be thriving, and, more so than at any time in the recent past, the area is evolving into a distinct neighbourhood in its own right. The same can be said of the formerly derelict Milwaukee River corridor north of downtown. New urban amenities, such as pocket parks, increased pedestrian access, restaurants and public art, have also contributed to a higher quality of life in the central area. Strolling along the Milwaukee River would have been unthinkable just a decade ago. Even Martin Luther King Drive – the commercial heart of the Near North Side – has a coat of paint and new businesses, and many in the metropolitan area are rethinking their stereotypes of the neighbourhood. Public and private investments have been noticed in the successful creation of a newly energized and growing downtown; yet the public subsidy of middle- and upper-income lifestyles receives little mention, and the displacement that results is barely perceived. Neo-liberal rhetoric, such as that outlined in Mayor Norquist’s *The wealth of cities*, suggests that government serves best by attending to crime and taxes, returning to those limited responsibilities defined for it before the New Deal. Yet behind such rhetoric, civic entrepreneurialism remains the order of the day.

Milwaukee provides one case study of the extent to which neo-traditionalist values can attach themselves to the rhetoric of planning policy, and how, in the process, both neo-ideologies become conflated with the practices of neo-liberalism. The message of New Urbanism may advance the city’s urban design agenda and in the process transform significant portions of it into an upper- and middle-class landscape; but, as it is articulated and practised, it is blind to those challenges that face a highly segregated city in the current climate of neo-liberal policy.

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Notes


6 City journal, a quarterly magazine published by the Manhattan Institute, quoted Mayor Norquist in its promotional material on www.city-journal.org, viewed in Jan. 2002.

7 The methodology employed in this paper involved qualitative methods, including interviews, archival research and the interpretation of public documents, private advertising and brochures, local newspapers and internet sites.


9 For a more extensive discussion of Milwaukee’s efforts at promotion during the 1980s and early 1990s, see ibid.


16 Interview with William Hanbury, 2 June 1999.
22 The Milwaukee Redevelopment Corporation is a non-profit development corporation formed by Milwaukee’s business community.
23 *Downtown plan*, p. 8 (emphasis added).
26 Ibid.
28 Mayor Norquist noted that Boston Library had a duck made famous in Robert McCloskey’s *Make way for ducklings* (New York, Viking Press, 1941), and suggested that Milwaukee could have its heartwarming bird with similar effect.
29 ‘Rediscovering Milwaukee’, *Shepherd Express city guide* (Spring/Fall 2002), p. 23.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Gertzen, ‘Is this a hip place?’ See also B. Murphy, ‘Medium cool: how can we make a more hip city? Build on the strengths of our arts scene’, *Milwaukee Magazine* (May 2001), pp. 39–44; C. Dreher, ‘Be creative – or die’, *Salon.com* (6 June 2002); and Florida, *The rise of the creative class*.
36 J. Gertzen, ‘Is this a hip place?’
37 City of Milwaukee Assessor’s Office, ‘Special 2002 revaluation information,’

38 See ‘lukewarm blurb’, Info* Milwaukee (Winter 2002) (Milwaukee, Rockstar Design). The introduction to this new magazine begins: ‘Another winter in the Mil, and we at Info* magazine . . . continue representing the life and culture of the people who create the energy in this town.’


41 See City of Milwaukee Assessor’s Office, ‘Special 2002 revaluation information’.

42 CNU website, ‘Find a new urbanist development’.

43 See Brewers Hill Commons Development website: www.brewershillcommons.com


45 We gratefully acknowledge the analysis conducted by H. Perkins and N. Winkler in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee geography course: ‘Internal structure of the city’, spring semester 2002.


47 See City of Milwaukee Assessor’s Office, ‘Special 2002 Revaluation Information’.

48 See Brewers Hill Commons Development website.

49 Ibid.


54 Ibid.


56 Interview with Rocky Marcoux, building construction manager, Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, Apr. 2001, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

57 Interview with Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee administrator, Jan. 2001, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

58 Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, HOPE VI Revitalization Application: Lapham Park.

59 http://www.brewershill.org/.


64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., pp. vii.


