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Style Matters

THE CASE OF SANTA BARBARA

Hilda Blanco

Santa Barbara County Courthouse, an exemplar of the Santa Barbara style (Mooser and Company, J. Wilmer Hersey, architects; Ralph Stevens, landscape architect; 1929)
Photo: Santa Barbara Conference and Visitors Bureau

Suppose you read this in your city's paper:

Civic association sets high goals for the city's image

The new Plans and Plantings Committee of the city's two-year old Civic Arts Association advocates a new Spanish Colonial style based on Mediterranean Spain as the perfect architectural image for the city.

The chair of the committee believes this image will be worth millions of dollars to the city in the future. "We're not going to attract major industry or business. Our image is our fortune..."

*"Our committee aims to preserve the city's early nineteenth-century Hispanic buildings, remodel or replace the non-Hispanic buildings with Spanish Colonial ones, use this imagery for all new buildings, encourage landscaping compatible with this image, and use planning tools to maintain the scale and size of the community."*¹

Is this a joke? How fake and dictatorial can this be? In fact, this is very much what happened in Santa Barbara in the early 1920s, and the civic association prevailed beyond its wildest dreams.

Today Santa Barbara is one of the most beautiful cities in this country. One reason, certainly, is that it is blessed with natural beauty—the city is nestled between California's coastal range and the Pacific Ocean, and its climate is better than that of the Mediterranean. But the architectural style that Santa Barbara's civic leaders dreamt up decades ago has been just as instrumental in making the city's image.

Santa Barbara offers a case study in the debate about architectural style and community building, which is currently raging in design circles in regard to New Urbanism. Does the imposition of a uniform architectural style result in repetitive and boring cityscapes? Do the benefits of design control outweigh the

costs—the loss of creative freedom and property rights? Aren't the historicist styles and vernacular elements so often found in New Urbanist developments simply trading on nostalgic sentiment? Which comes first, a community or a community image, and how do they contribute to each other?

New Urbanist developments do not offer many lessons about these issues. Too few have been developed, many design visions have been compromised by development decisions and insufficient time has elapsed to allow for their evolution. Since urbanists, unlike natural scientists, cannot manipulate people and towns in controlled experiments, the evaluation of natural experiments, or cases that differ in regard to the presence or absence of particular causal factors, can be illuminating. Santa Barbara presents a significant experiment in imposing and retaining a distinctive city image.

Crafting an Image

In some ways, this is a story about the Progressive Movement's effect on American cities—the formation of civic associations and local boosterism, the emergence of the City Beautiful and city planning movements.²

Santa Barbara's civic activism was strengthened by the city's wealth. By the 1920s, its mild climate and beautiful setting had attracted many wealthy families, who built winter homes there. Many were philanthropists. Max C. Fleischmann, heir to the Fleischmann Yeast Co., underwrote the renovation of the Mission and historic adobes. Frederick Forest Peabody, heir to the Arrow Shirt Co., financed the Peabody Stadium and Central Library. The Santa Barbara Civic Arts Association, founded in 1920, received \$25,000 a year from the Carnegie Foundation, whose past president was a resident.

Notes

1. This is a paraphrase of statements by civic leader Bernard Hoffman. E. Boba and C. Snook Weare, "Planning in Santa Barbara," in *Studies of a Growing Community: Santa Barbara 1930-1980* (Santa Barbara: Graduate Program in Public Historical Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1982), 48; David Gebhard, *Santa Barbara: The Creation of a New Spain in America* (Santa Barbara: University of California, Santa Barbara, 1982), 19-20.





In 1923, the committee hired Charles Cheney of Olmsted and Olmsted to prepare building and zoning codes, create a waterfront plan, advise on a planning commission and develop architectural controls. As a result, Santa Barbara established its first planning commission, one of its four objectives being “to devise plans and recommen-

City, mountains and bay
Photo: Santa Barbara Convention and Visitors Bureau

Yet if not for the earthquake that destroyed most of downtown in 1925, the product of this civic activity probably would have amounted to little more than a collection of heirlooms. Santa Barbara would lack the strong design and planning processes that have been instrumental in implanting its image, sustaining it and supporting subsequent city design initiatives.

In 1922, the Civic Arts Association’s Plans and Planting Committee began promoting a new Spanish Colonial image for the city. Santa Barbara was already recognized as the most Hispanic of California’s cities, and its Mission and historic adobes provided a precedent for the style and suggested some common architectural elements, such as the pitch of roofs and the use of tiles.

The style the association promoted was more Spanish Mediterranean than Mission or Monterey. The committee made its reference points explicit: Mediterranean, in particular, Andalusian, with influences from Morocco and from Italian villas. This style, called Spanish Colonial Revival, had gained public attention during the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, designed by Bertram Goodhue.

The more examples of the style that existed, the committee believed, the easier it would be to convince people to adopt it as a uniform image for the city. Bernard Hoffman, the committee chair, bought and restored several historic adobes, developed two major exemplars of the style (the Paseo project and the Lobero Theatre) and commissioned the design of the new city hall.³ Committee members educated, persuaded and strong-armed business owners to adopt the style.

dations for the general improvement of the architecture and of the general attractiveness of the city.”⁴

By 1925, drawing on the talent of local architects and committee members, the Plans and Plantings Committee had established a Community Drafting Room, which provided design assistance to property owners, and persuaded the city to establish an Architectural Advisory Committee.

The earthquake helped persuade Santa Barbarans of the style’s advantages; the new Spanish Colonial Revival structures downtown were among the few spared. The city immediately established a formal Architectural Board of Review, the first of its kind in the country. In less than a year (it was soon disbanded due to political opposition), the board reviewed more than 2,000 projects. Most of these involved Spanish Colonial Revival plans flowing from the Community Drafting Room, which stepped up its operations after the earthquake, providing free plans for all types of buildings, from gas stations to factories to shops. By 1926, in effect, Santa Barbara had been transformed into a Spanish city.

The crowning glory was the county courthouse, the product of a forced collaboration between architect Charles Mooser, and the Architectural Advisory Committee (especially J. Wilmer Hersey of the Community Drafting Room). The process yielded a beautiful U-shaped complex of buildings with a magnificent plaza and landscaping. (Mooser’s original design had called for a massive structure in the middle of the block.) Mooser later noted, perhaps in exasperation, that the courthouse was “...more Spanish than any hotel-deville in Spain.”⁵

2. New Urbanism emerged from a narrower context. It is a design movement that seeks to revive aspects of early twentieth-century city design approaches, particularly the City Beautiful and Garden Cities movements. But it lacks the broad-based activism that characterized city improvement efforts a century ago.
3. Other prominent architects were: George Washington Smith (Lobero Theatre, 1922-24; *News-Press* Building, 1922), Lulah Maria Riggs (Lobero Theatre, 1922-24), James Osborne Craig and Mary Craig (El Paseo, 1921-22), Carelton Monroe Winslow (Museum of Natural History, 1927-28, 32-33, 34), Joseph Plunkett and Edwards (Fox Arlington Theatre, 1930-31; National Guard Armory, 1938; Santa Barbara Airport Terminal Building, 1941).

Sustaining the Image

By the late 1920s and 1930s, Santa Barbara's transformation was being noted with admiration throughout the country and in leading architecture and planning journals. Yet Santa Barbara is a real city subject to political and architectural change. Its case further shows how a city, once having established an architectural image, can sustain it with public support and planning controls.

During the 1930s and through World War II, while Modernism was on the rise, construction was slow in Santa Barbara and the Spanish Colonial Revival style prevailed. Though the city had ceased formal design review, the Architectural Advisory Committee and the Plans and Plantings Committee were still influential.

In 1930, Santa Barbara passed a comprehensive zoning ordinance, a pyramid scheme that allowed residences to mix with other uses. Significantly, the city has not changed this zoning scheme, as many cities have, for the single-use zoning districts that are now typical. Residential neighborhoods still have corner grocery stores, and single-family houses and apartment buildings can still be found on the same block. By the late 1930s the city had also set height limits, which it still retains.⁶

After World War II Santa Barbara's Spanish Colonial character faced pressure from growth and from a generation of architects influenced by the Modern movement. Reacting to these challenges, Santa Barbara adopted a new Architectural Board of Review in 1947. But through the 1970s, the board's architect members were also influenced by Modernism; consequently, some older buildings downtown were demolished and replaced with Modern-style buildings, and the Modernism's influence was felt in many remodelings. Bill Mahan, a prominent local architect, explained why, fresh out of school and a committed Modernist, he settled in Santa Barbara: He saw many old buildings and expected they would be torn down, generating plenty of opportunities for "flat roofs."⁷



Santa Barbara rooftop
Photo: Santa Barbara Convention and Visitors Bureau

The city's Hispanic tradition, however, still had great popular support. In 1960, the city designated a historic district, "El Pueblo Viejo," comprising sixteen blocks of the historic downtown, and established a Landmarks Advisory Committee to review renovations and new buildings in the district. About this time, two new civic associations were founded, the Citizens Planning Association of Santa Barbara County and the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation. These groups broadened civic involvement in countywide planning issues, influencing growth control efforts and helping to survey and restore historic structures.

The real challenge to downtown's viability came from La Cumbre Plaza, a shopping mall with plenty of free parking and pedestrian amenities that opened in the late 1960s near the city limits. Downtown merchants realized they had to counter with ample, free parking and pedestrian amenities along State Street, downtown's main street. They agreed to establish a parking assessment district, which financed the acquisition and construction of parking lots and helped make pedestrian improvements.

Six blocks of State Street were converted into a "Hispanic Drive-Through-Plaza" that extends to the waterfront. Sidewalks were widened, landscaped and provided with benches; streets were narrowed to one lane of traffic in each direction; mid-block pedestrian crossings were provided. The improvements saved Santa Barbara's main street from the onslaught of the malls.

Modern architecture continued to make inroads downtown until city politics changed in the 1970s. In 1973, in reaction to growth and environmental prob-

Several landscape architects also embraced the style: Ralph Stevens (county courthouse, 1925-29; Biltmore Hotel, 1926-27); Peter Reidel (Gould House, 1920; Steedman House, 1922-25); Florence Koch and Lucile Council (Stewart House, 1923); Lockwood de Forest (Santa Barbara Museum of Art remodeling, 1940).

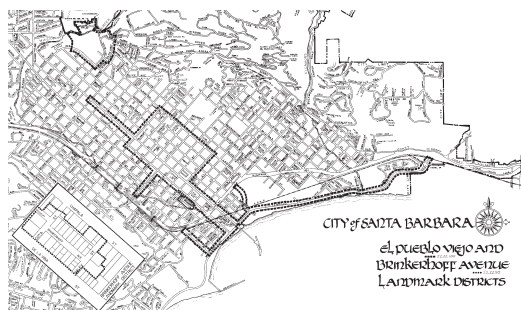
See Gebhard (1982) and H. Andree, Noell Young and Patricia Halloran, *Santa Barbara Architecture* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press: 1995).

4. Boba, 49.

5. Gebhard 1982, 28.



GUIDELINES
EL PUEBLO VIEJO DISTRICT SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA



Santa Barbara's historic districts, design review and design guidelines have been important tools for promoting the city's Spanish Colonial style.
Graphics: City of Santa Barbara

lems, a new anti-development city council took office and adopted an 85,000 population limit for the city. A 1989 ballot measure limited new non-residential development in the city to three million square feet until the year 2010. The historic district was extended and enshrined in the city charter, the Landmarks Advisory Committee became a chartered commission, a sign ordinance was passed and a Sign Review Committee was empowered.

The designation of much of

downtown as a landmark district, and downtown's continued viability as a business center ensured a demand for Spanish Colonial architecture in commercial buildings. This, coupled with growing public and professional disaffection with Modern architecture, brought about a change in local architectural practice. Designers adopted the Spanish Colonial Revival style, reluctantly and clumsily at first⁶, then with increased attention to the great exemplars, such as the Lobero and the courthouse. Beyond employing obvious elements, such as pitched tile roofs and white stucco, architects became sensitive to properties of massing, the relation of inside to outside and of structure to open space, and the restraint in decoration. The Spanish Colonial style is undergoing another revival in Santa Barbara, particularly in the hearts and minds of local architects, some of whom were once its greatest opponents.

Interestingly, Santa Barbara is now drawing on New Urbanism's design advocacy. New design guidelines, meant to guide design review and planning approvals throughout the city's gridded areas, in the historic districts and beyond, are now under review. The guidelines acknowledge their alignment with "traditional town planning" and spell out principles concerning compatibility with existing development, human-scale character, and so on. These principles are embedded

in Santa Barbara's historic areas, but the city is recognizing the value of extending them, explicitly, to outlying areas.

Sustaining the Style

The Spanish Colonial Revival style has been sustained in Santa Barbara for eighty years, despite growth pressures and changing architectural fashion, because of the popular support it has garnered. Key to this support have been active planning and design associations, their leaders and the many volunteers that have served on the city's planning and design review boards.

Continuity of civic leadership has been particularly important. Pearl Chase, sister of influential developer Harold Chase, promoted the new image in the 1920s and was imperiously influential through the early 1970s as chair of the Plans and Planting Committee. As Chase's powers waned, David Gebhard, a nationally respected architectural historian, became active; he served on the city's Historic Landmarks Commission for twenty-two years (1973–95) and wrote popular and scholarly accounts of the Santa Barbara style. These champions were influential with decision-makers, spearheading and shaping public support at times when the style was unpopular or poorly executed.

The style itself also carries its own power. It has a certain romantic quality, not prettified but handsome, with clean lines, interplay of volumes, reliance on asymmetrical elements, sharp demarcation between inside and out, and light colors that accentuate shadows and contrasting volumes that capitalize on the play of light and shadow, requiring less decoration while yielding rich, fluctuating patterns. The use of Andalusian references resulted in an intertwining of architecture with landscape, since artful interior gardens are a legacy of the Arab traditions in southern Spain.

The Santa Barbara style also performs well at the urban scale, perhaps because of its use of interior courtyards, paseos and arcades, which involve a concern for the relationship between structures and urban spaces. The early exemplars, such as the Lobero, the courthouse and the Arlington, were standing lessons for new generations of designers on how to accommodate modern requirements for large-scale development within the tradition.

6. No commercial building can exceed four stories or sixty feet, and no multifamily residential can be higher than forty-five feet or three stories. The height limit was prompted by the construction of the eight-story Granada Building, which showed that scale was an important element in retaining the Mediterranean image. (Gebhard 1982, 21)

7. Personal interview.

**Style: Nostalgia,
Weapon or
Instrument?**

New Urbanist developments often display relatively uniform and historicist architectural styles, and this has become a flash point for debate. The Charter of the New Urbanism itself advocates a uniform architectural style in a vague and mild way through principles that urge compatibility with surroundings and regional character. It states, "Individual architectural projects should be seamlessly linked to their surroundings. This issue transcends style," and "Architecture and landscape design should grow from local climate, topography, history and building practice."⁹

At stake are two intertwined but distinct issues: the choice of a specific (often historicist) style, and the uniformity with which the style is applied. New suburban developments of any stripe typically display a consistent style; many New Urbanist developments impose historicist styles (uniformly or a narrow range of choices) and vernacular elements (picket fences, porches), often regionally inspired.

Andr s Duany, a strong proponent of traditional architectural styles, has said that "Style is not nostalgia; it's a weapon, or at least an instrument." Schneider suggests that uniform historicist expression is needed to help developers and the public accept denser urban patterns.

Some New Urbanists, however, are ambivalent, if not embarrassed, by this aspect of many New Urbanist projects. They think that the historicist elements are fake, and feel that codes that regulate urban form, rather than architectural style, are sufficient.¹⁰ Other critics are less kind, arguing that efforts to impose a uniform style are fake and dictatorial. Santa Barbara's case may clarify some aspects of the controversy.

Fakeness. Take the issue of fakeness. We may object



to the style being imposed as imitative, not creative or authentic. Or we may object to it as being made up all at once, rather than emerging over time.

Santa Barbara's style was clearly made up. It was not authentic to the place; it was an imitation of a style developed long ago and far away. It had historic precedent, but if one compares the Arlington Theatre or the courthouse to a historic adobe, one can quickly mark the distance.

What is wrong with imitation? Many architects imitate. Often, the real issue is which style is imitated. In our culture, and particularly in architectural culture, the new is often privileged over the old, even though the rationale for this is neither clear nor strong. (In contrast, in conventional housing design, traditional styles are typically preferred.)

Perhaps we object to poor quality imitations, cheap copies that seem authentic but on closer inspection are missing essential elements, or are inappropriate applications of a style to a building type. Santa Barbara shows that an imposed, uniform, style can, in fact, stimulate robust design. Although the Spanish Colonial Revival style was driven initially by romantic nostalgia, it has proven itself capable of solving a range of tough, current design problems.

Historically, cities and towns developed over time, acquiring a patina of age, character and variety. Is the charge of fakeness a reaction to the all-at-once feel-

Examples of the Santa Barbara style, clockwise from upper left:

Gonzalez-Ramirez Adobe
Photo: Hilda Blanco

Santa Barbara Fire Station #3
(Edwards, Plunkett and Howell, 1929)
Photo: City of Santa Barbara

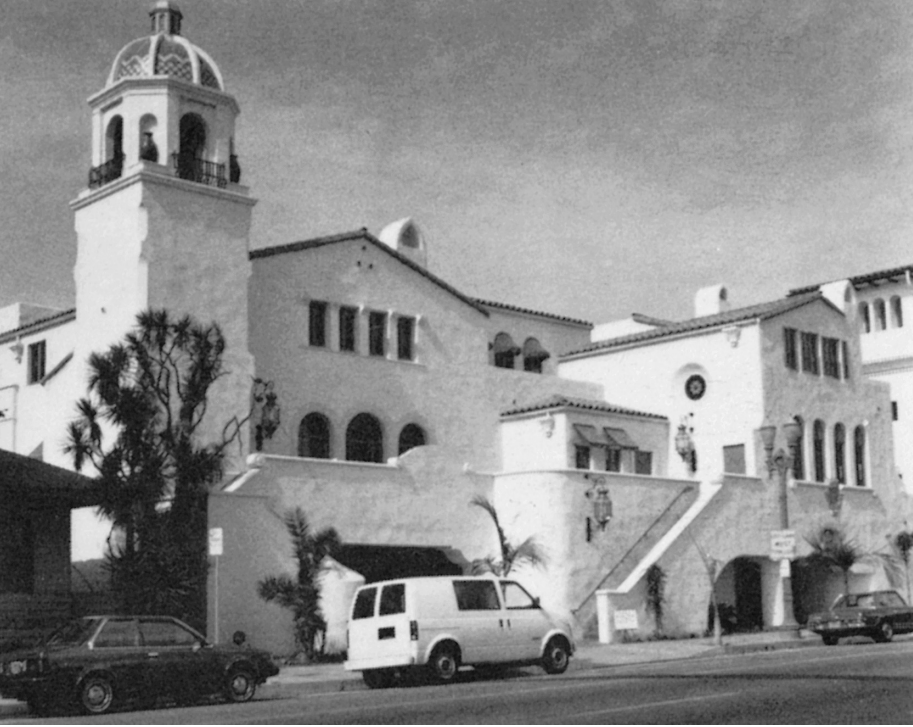
Santa Barbara City Hall (Lockard and Sauter, 1922-23)

Apartment building
Photo: Hilda Blanco

8. This second Spanish Colonial Revival period, which occurred in the 1970s, is characterized as producing "below average" structures. (Andree 1995, 258)

9. Congress for the New Urbanism, *Charter of the New Urbanism*.

10. Robert Campbell, "A Colloquy in Cyberspace," *Preservation* 51 (September/October, 1999), 9-23. G. Schneider, "Substance or Style," *Harvard Design Magazine* (Winter/Spring 1997), 62.



Barcelona Building (Sharpe, Mahan, 1986)
Photo: Hilda Blanco

ing that the uniform style of a new development conveys? Santa Barbara does not convey that sense; though the style was conceived in the 1920s, it has been applied steadily for more than eighty years and could now be considered authentic to the place. The style has not been static; architects have been able to learn from their experience.

Perhaps the concern is that a style will be applied so widely that the results will be uniform and boring. Santa Barbara's Spanish Colonial Revival style has supported a variety of building types, from offices to parking garages, villas to apartments, theatres to schools. Moreover, the style does not blanket the city. It covers downtown and the Mission district, but residential areas are characterized by a mix of styles. Neighborhoods might comprise Craftsman-style bungalows, Victorian homes, Queen Anne cottages and contemporary apartment buildings; on many blocks, there may be few or no Spanish Colonial houses.

Yet, Santa Barbara's image is distinctly Spanish Colonial Revival. I take from this that a city's image is a robust concept. For an architectural style to provide a vivid image for a city, perhaps it must cover only the central area (which is most prominent in people's perception) and be reinforced in a fraction of the rest of the city. This selective application of a single style could carry over into the overall image of a place, yet prevent it from seeming boring.

Santa Barbara did not only construct a style; it also created the conditions (and has been blessed with a stable local economy) that have allowed a local school of architecture to evolve. As an architect in Santa Bar-

bara, you are likely to design a dozen or more projects within your home town—buildings that you see day in, day out—in a style in which your peers also design. The style becomes common ground for a group of architects who, in a town the size of Santa Barbara, intimately experience the buildings they design. This facilitates learning from mistakes and successes and sets the conditions for the development of a living, local-regional architectural tradition.

Today, there is a group of Santa Barbara designers who have absorbed the art in the exemplars from the inside out. For this group, the ingredients of the style are merely raw materials; they struggle with the massing, the relation of interior to exterior, the blend of landscape and building. The existence of this design community makes the issue of the authenticity of the Santa Barbara style moot, because its designs are the product of a living, creative tradition.

Dictatorial. New Urbanism's advocacy of design controls such as architectural codes and review has resulted in charges that it is too controlling, even dictatorial or fascist. One criticism is that design review and architectural codes constrain the freedom of designers and property owners. Freedom from constraint is a core element of American political philosophy; even more so, perhaps, architects consider creativity part and parcel of their ideology.

Yet building construction is constrained by any number of codes, and most of us are glad for that. Besides, being constrained to a style does not necessarily curtail creativity. Paraphrasing Henry Lenny, a Santa Barbara architect: Creativity without constraints is easy; it takes a higher level of creativity to design within the lines.¹¹

Is the imposition of an architectural style too blatant an exercise of municipal control? Hardly. It is an issue of public and economic choice. Communities continually grapple with the dilemma of adding value to the *res publica* at the cost of constraining economic vitality and design freedom. Santa Barbara's efforts have been reinforced through mechanisms now common in U.S. cities—general plans, zoning and historic district design review. Any economic cost seems to have been offset in part by the potential of design controls to sustain a market demand.

11. Personal interview, Dave Davis.
12. Gebhard 1982, 20; W. Tomkins, *Santa Barbara Past and Present* (1975)
13. Some New Urbanists may be accused of physical determinism. See D. Hall, "Community in the New Urbanism: Design Vision and Symbolic Crusade," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* (11), 22-36.
14. Christine Palmer and Babatunde Fodayemi, personal interviews.

We may also object to the power of the group imposing the style or its lack of inclusiveness. Santa Barbara's style was clearly imposed by an elite group of civic leaders who used a variety of sophisticated methods—educational campaigns, demonstration projects, technical assistance, public planning and controls, backdoor influence and strong-arming. By the time the earthquake hit, they had forged a consensus on a uniform style for Santa Barbara.

Though this group was elite, its concerns were inclusive. In the 1920s, the Plans and Plantings Committee “initiated a ‘Small Homes Program,’ both to educate and to encourage the building of well-designed small houses.” In the 1930s it participated in the “Better Homes for America Campaign” and developed an affordable suburban housing subdivision—one-acre lots, each with a four-and-a-half-room bungalow, garage and thirty-five trees, and selling for \$3,000 to \$4,500.¹²

These efforts have, arguably, facilitated a strong sense of community in various ways. Of course, creating a sense of community takes more than improving a city's image, but improving people's perceptions of the public environment can facilitate a sense of community by strengthening place identity.¹³ Let me be clear, lest I be charged with physical determinism. The Santa Barbara style has made clear to many people the social construction of the public environment; it has made the *res publica* more psychologically available.

Moreover, design concerns have been pursued through various organizations, both public and private, whose care for design has arguably been a factor in strengthening the community. Public institutions, such as planning and design review processes, are open and responsive to public input.

My hypothesis is that these factors would increase the rates of citizen participation in public affairs, though I only have anecdotal accounts to support it. Planning commission meetings draw crowds of eighty people or more, which is high attendance for a city of this size. The city historian explained that there seems to be a culture of attending public meetings. Social critics indicate that Santa Barbarans are unusually engaged and responsive to civic issues.¹⁴



This highlights a significant contrast between Santa Barbara and New Urbanist developments. In Santa Barbara, style became a way to forge a distinctive image for an existing city. Creating and retaining the image clearly became community building projects. Civic associations were formed and sustained to that end; public regulatory processes were established; a professional community was fostered. New Urbanist developments, on the other hand, often use style to create the appearance of civic agreement in the absence of civic culture.

Is it fair to criticize New Urbanists for using style to create the appearance of community? In new suburban subdivisions, at the outset, at least, there is no community. The best designers can do is to create places that, hopefully, will facilitate people's interaction once they inhabit the place.

Can we criticize New Urbanists for not doing enough to build a civic culture that sustains places, like Santa Barbara, which can constantly be reinvested in, even reinvented at times? Perhaps. If New Urbanism remains a movement to redesign products for the real estate market, then it might contribute better design to the middle kingdom of suburban America, but it cannot pretend to deliver an invigorated public culture. If New Urbanism seeks to become a broader, social reform movement (as the Charter of the New Urbanism suggests), then the case of Santa Barbara suggests that New Urbanism must reach beyond design circles and development practices and consider the prospect of engaging a range of local institutions, public and private, in broad community-building processes.

Paseo Nuevo shopping area
(James Osborne Craig, Mary
Craig, 1921-22)
Photo: Santa Barbara Convention
and Visitors Bureau

Acknowledgements

This article came to life with the help of interviews with Bill Mahan, architect and city planning commissioner; Dave Davis, Director of Santa Barbara's Community Development Division; Christine Palmer, city historian; Louise Boucher, Landmarks Commissioner; Babatunde Fodayemi, Director, Pro-Youth Coalition; Liz Limon, city planner. Mahan, especially, make clear to me that the Spanish Colonial Revival style was a living tradition.