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EAST AURORA ESTABLISHED ITSELF AS A NEW URBANIST COMMUNITY DECADES BEFORE IT WAS COOL

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Not long ago, "Nightline" ran a segment on New Urbanism -- a school of architecture that aims to replicate the sort of pedestrian-friendly "Main Street U.S.A." development that dominated American suburbs and small towns before World War II. This type of development is noticeable in Seahaven -- the mythical location of the film "The Truman Show" -- and Seaside, Fla., the real-life resort town on which Seahaven is based.

In New Urbanist communities, cars are part of the streetscape to a greater extent than in dense areas like midtown Manhattan, but they do not dominate the land to the extent that they do in most modern suburbs.

Thus, sidewalks are universal and residences and shops are in close proximity to a compact neighborhood center or "main street" so that children can walk to each other's houses or to shops.

In addition, shops are close to the street so that pedestrians can walk to them without spending 10 minutes walking through a parking lot; streets are narrow enough to be easily crossable by pedestrians; and on-street parking makes driving convenient while creating a buffer between pedestrians and traffic.

By contrast, in many American suburbs, residences and shops are rigidly separated from each other so that nobody can walk to anything, sidewalks are rare, parking lots are enormous and children are slaves to their parents' cars.

While watching the "Nightline" segment, I noticed that both New Urbanists and their critics acted as if New Urbanism was something new. But right here in Western New York, we have suburbs and neighborhoods that are quite similar to New Urbanist communities, built many decades before a few architects invented the term in the 1980s.

For example, East Aurora was New Urbanism before New Urbanism was cool. East Aurora has many of the New Urbanist elements: a compact neighborhood center (Main Street) a few blocks from most homes, shop entrances that front the street rather than parking lots, sidewalks everywhere and quaintness galore. East Aurora is not unique: Niagara-on-the-Lake is basically East Aurora with theaters and more shopping, and Chagrin Falls, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, is East Aurora with a waterfall and better shopping.

But East Aurora is not the only Western New York village with New Urbanist elements. Although Kenmore is less quaint and Disneyish than East Aurora, it, too, includes some elements of New Urbanism. Children roam the sidewalk-clad residential streets, all of which are within a few blocks of the main commercial street -- Delaware Avenue. On-street parking creates a buffer zone between pedestrians and traffic, and parking lots are less overwhelming than on the Buffalo side of Delaware Avenue. By contrast, just a few blocks away on Sheridan Drive or Niagara Falls Boulevard, the wide streets and huge parking lots have turned the roads into a jumble of cars, sky and not much else.

Obviously, the City of Buffalo also has neighborhoods that resemble New Urbanist communities, most notably the area around the Elmwood Strip -- Elmwood Avenue between Allentown and Delaware Park. The census tract where I live -- bounded by Main, Elmwood, Utica and Ferry -- is far more affluent than the average Buffalo neighborhood, yet a third of its households get by without cars, and can do their shopping on Elmwood rather than in suburbia. But the Elmwood Strip is a much more diverse, Bohemian area than Kenmore and East Aurora, with all the advantages and disadvantages that such diversity brings.

Areas like East Aurora illustrate not only our tradition of New Urbanism but also its success. One of the speakers on "Nightline" claimed that New Urbanism would create communities as congested and crime-ridden as cities. But East Aurora proves otherwise. The Town of Aurora, which encompasses East Aurora, had only one robbery in 1996, and otherwise compares favorably with most suburbs. Although Kenmore is a bit less perfect due to its relative proximity to poorer city neighborhoods, its crime rates are lower than those of the average suburb of Atlanta or Washington, D.C.

Similarly, an ABC reporter asked one architect whether the typical strip-mall dominated suburban landscape wasn't really "what people want." But in fact, communities like East Aurora appear to be as desirable as other affluent suburbs. Although East Aurora and, to a greater extent, Kenmore have had stagnant population in recent years, the same is true of more typically suburban Erie County communities like Hamburg and West Seneca.

And throughout the country, other older communities with New Urbanist features like Chagrin Falls are still prestigious areas. "What people want" is determined not by allegiance to some abstract school of urban design, but by the absence of poverty and the ills that come with it, such as crime and poor schools. And if people can find those advantages in New Urbanism-type communities, they will happily move to such communities.