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Market Urbanism

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This speech is about a movement (or perhaps a mini-movement) called Market Urbanism. In the words of the Market Urbanism website, this means reconciling “classical liberal economics (market) ...with an appreciation of the urban way of life and its benefits to society (urbanism).” So what I’d like to briefly outline in this talk are: the key priorities of market urbanists, how they differ from some other movements, and how their agenda relates to environmentalism.

First of all, the market urbanist combination of classical liberalism and urbanism means that market urbanists are against pro-sprawl government regulation and spending- this means that they are likely to be skeptical of highway spending (because such spending makes suburban life more convenient) and very much opposed to land use regulation that makes cities less walkable. Thus, market urbanists consistently oppose density regulations, because low density means fewer people can live within walking distance of any particular destination. They oppose regulations that keep housing far from shopping, for similar reasons. They oppose minimum parking requirements because when a moat of parking separates sidewalks and shops it becomes harder for pedestrians to reach those shops.

Right now, lots of market urbanist work is focused on the issue of high housing costs in expensive coastal cities. Market urbanists provide intellectual support for the “yes in my back yard” (or YIMBY) movement, arguing that the only way to contain housing costs is to build more housing.

Thus, market urbanists are quite different from self-styled libertarians who defend suburban sprawl. These “sprawl lobby supporters” as I call them, are all for government intervention in the economy to prop up suburbia. Even if they are against zoning, they still favor lots and lots of government spending on highways.

Market urbanists have a more complex relationship with the new urbanist movement. Like new urbanists, they believe that zoning codes are rigged in favor of suburban sprawl. But new urbanists are generally much more pro-government and pro-regulation. New urbanists are quite willing to support zoning codes that support their

vision of urban form, favoring form-based codes that create slightly more walkable, prettier versions of the status quo. In particular, many new urbanists detest tall buildings, believing that neighborhoods full of small walk-up buildings provide the highest level of street life. By contrast, market urbanists believe that if there is market demand for tall buildings, government should not interfere.

More broadly, new urbanists favor anti-sprawl government regulation such as Oregon's growth boundaries; market urbanists worry about the impact of such regulation on housing costs.

On transportation issues, market urbanists and new urbanists agree that government builds too many wide arterial streets and interstate highways; however, new urbanists tend to favor lots of investment in public transit, while market urbanists are divided on transit issues.

What's the relationship between market urbanism and the environmentalist agenda- or to use today's common jargon, "sustainability"?

Here, there is no simpler answer. On the one hand, it seems to me that because market urbanists are more consistent YIMBYs, a market urbanist agenda will lead to a more urbanized population, which means that more people can live in places that are walkable and transit-accessible. By contrast, new urbanists do not always support infill development, especially where new housing is aesthetically problematic.

On the other hand, new urbanists are more consistent supporters of mass transit, and of regulations that discourage new, car-oriented suburban development. Better transit obviously means less pollution, and new suburban development means more driving and more pollution.