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Post-Pandemic Housing Design Energy Efficiency, Flexible Space and Fresh Air



Treadmark, Dorchester location,
a neighborhood in Boston, MA

Photo by Andy Ryan

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Breaking Ground

A Conversation with Architect and Urban Planning Pioneer Andrés Duany

By Darryl Hicks

Andrés Duany ranks among the world's most influential urban planners. He is the father of "New Urbanism," the theory of town planning and architectural design that enables walkability, transit and diverse communities.

But that's not the focus of my interview.

Three years ago, the now 71-year-old Duany was delegated by the partners of his firm to research the most pressing issues facing America and recommend solutions. It has been the most interesting project of his career.

There are, of course, many such problems to which urban design can ameliorate. Duany identified climate change as the most dangerous one, but, he noted, the most immediate is the crisis of affordable housing. In a wide-ranging interview with Tax Credit Advisor, Duany gave some frank answers to what might be done to address this massive problem at the scale required.

Tax Credit Advisor: I'll get straight to the point. How do we deal with the affordable housing crisis?

Andrés Duany: I began by researching the last time we succeeded at building enough affordable housing. It was the latter half of the 19th century, when we housed 30 million largely penniless immigrants—without subsidy. First, I found that affordable housing was then allowed. It was legal to build it, as the building standards were reasonable. There were no minimum lot sizes or off-street parking requirements. These fostered very small increments of development. Second, there were very light permitting processes. Today, the onerous "process" just annihilates affordability. Lastly, there were building types, which enabled individual owners to provide housing as a business, such as accessory dwelling units for the backyard, or you could run a decent boarding house. There were types like the "triple-decker" in Boston, a building where the owner lived on one floor and rented the other two. There were the "Polish basements" of Milwaukee and many such complex housing types. And quadruplex apartment buildings mixed among conventional houses. None of these building types are legal today.

Regarding the permitting process, it is now so protracted, complex and expensive that it can't justify such small increments—only a big project makes it worthwhile.

The government has inadvertently prevented the building of affordable housing, such that it can now only be done with government subsidy. And such subsidies are accessible only to experts in navigating through their murk. It is an impediment created by bureaucracy that can only be overcome through overwhelming counter-bureaucracy.

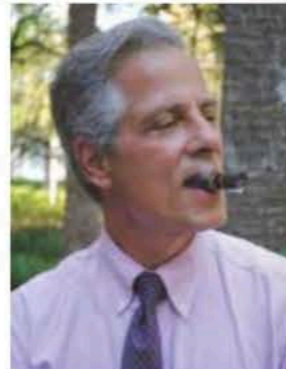
We must recognize that when we place the same requirements on all projects regardless of scale, the small projects bear a disproportionate burden—and we therefore get few of them. As I said, much of this country was built by and for regular people, in small projects by the millions. That is now effectively prohibited. To restore the supply of affordable housing, we need to make small projects possible again.

TCA: So, this problem can be solved?

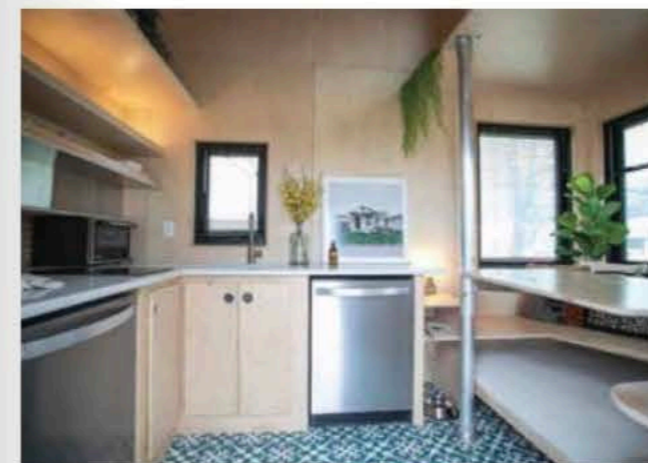
AD: Yes, but don't start by dismantling the current problem. Too many are making a living from it. We still need all kinds of projects, including those with a big-stack and subsidies. The solution is to create a parallel system that levels the playing field for small projects and then provides the two options. The few big developers and consultants choose the existing subsidized route and the rest, who number in the tens of millions, are allowed to do it with regular loans and less cost.

TCA: Are there things we can be doing right now to implement such ideas? What impediments must be overcome first?

AD: Impediments can be negotiated only locally. It takes too long for the Fed-level to change policy. We worked out a method for developing "Pink Zones," where experts pre-negotiate the lightening of the "red tape," thereby allowing smaller developers and even homeowners to build. This clears the deck for infill housing. Pink Zones do not propose to rip up the codes or risk safety; just to



Andrés Duany



Locating "tiny houses" on unused parking lots is one way to expand affordable housing options.

ease up on the process. The idea is that people can make a living with, say, three units a year. It is just not fair that it be as difficult to build three units as 30.

TCA: Is this theory, or are there success stories happening now?

AD: Three years ago, we received a large grant from the Knight Foundation to create the Project for Lean Urbanism. The first year, we traveled the country interviewing those who were getting such things done. People like John Anderson, who teaches small developers about available loopholes and how to manage small projects. Then there's the grad school in San Diego (which shall remain anonymous) that teaches architects to become small developers by hacking "the system." We found some places where they didn't inspect construction, so long as the neighbors didn't complain. Or a city where the architect's stamp was the permit and responsibility

for code compliance rested on their taking professional responsibility for code compliance by the contractors: The authorities can inspect anytime, and a violation stops the job. The only permission required is approval of the site plan, the building's exterior and meeting the standards of the utility companies. There are similar systems in France and, indeed, all around the world.

We also commissioned a book called *The New Pioneers: How Entrepreneurs Are Defying the System to Rebuild the Cities and Towns of America* by J.P. Faber. It tells a dozen stories of people getting things done. For example, the incredible Dan Camp, who built a beautiful neighborhood, all affordable, in Starkville, MS, with the government trusting him to do a good job. He became so popular he was elected mayor. Sadly, he passed away from COVID-19 just a few months ago.

TCA: Did you publish your research?

AD: Yes, and we commissioned more. There are dozens of white papers and case studies published on our website, leanurbanism.org. The person who organized this and who is now in charge of the Project for Lean Urbanism is Brian Falk. Prior to COVID, he conducted a series of Pink Zone pilot projects in various cities. These helped identify the tools needed "to make small possible." We're now releasing a free kit of tools. It includes the House Hacking Catalog to help owner-occupants create accessory dwelling units and triple-deckers. It includes the Lean Code Tool for cities to make them legal and feasible—not by overhauling the zoning code, but by making a few tactical fixes. The most important tool is the Pink Zone Manual, a step-by-step guide for affordable housing advocates. These are all free, and we've had cities request that help, so we offer technical assistance.

Finally, I've been working with the mobile home industry, which provides about 30 percent of this country's unsubsidized affordable housing. It's a fascinating world. The industry lobbies against the gold-plating of building codes which—as much as the bureaucratic process—makes housing unaffordable, as we know. The designs are usually awful, so they carry the stigma of housing of last resort, but DPZ has now designed mobile homes that are really elegant – prize-winning, in fact. They cost somewhat more than the product currently coming out of the factories but still they cost half as much as anything else. The "production home" industry has solved the technical

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problems of cost but not the cultural problems of acceptance. That is now our job.

TCA: If developers are going to play a role in this effort, what advice would you give to maximize their impact?

AD: At the site-selection or master-plan level, I would locate these projects within a walkable urban pattern that would not require every adult to own a car. According to the AAA, a car costs more than \$9,000 a year to own and run. If a person had the \$9,000 available, they could cover six months' worth of a mortgage at \$1,500 a month! Since WWII, one thing that makes housing unaffordable is that suburbia forces people to have cars. The New Urbanists reverse that assumption. We recommend that affordable housing is attainable in neighborhoods where daily needs are accessible by walking. That's an immediate \$9,000 annual subsidy that you don't even need to apply for! Is that too simple to believe?

Next, there must be thresholds for what is necessary and then for what is ideal. For example, about 25 years ago, the Residential Building Code (RBC) increased the electrical requirements for houses. The wider conduits made individual apartment renovations too expensive. And yet, most of us still live in housing built to the earlier electrical and other codes. Why was it changed? Well... just as in your tax subsidy field, industry lobbyists are doing their jobs. This is their right—but there are consequences to affordability. For example, not too long ago, you didn't need a sprinkler in every room, or accessibility in every apartment. Not everybody is handicapped, after all. Now it's universal in design, this is a misallocation of funds: Bathrooms are so large in small apartments that the toilet shares space with storage shelves. But who questions this when it is about "fairness?" The perfect has driven out the good—again!

As soon as you touch federal subsidy, housing magically becomes more expensive. There is a scandalous new building in Los Angeles that costs \$600,000 per single-room occupancy. I remember when it wasn't that way, and I am not that old. I live in a house built in 1926. Is it harming me? Not at all. What if we could restore building codes not to then—but to 1975 when I began to practice and got a lot done easily? That would be a huge help to affordability. Since the public does not vote on

building code changes, let's enact a restoration to sanity, just as the experts constantly enact the gold-plate. Then the New Urbanists will restore zoning codes that allow for the building types that once housed our immigrants, the "Polish basement" in Minneapolis, the boarding house. We call it the "missing middle" density.

TCA: There's still so much uncertainty of the long-term impact of COVID-19 on where people are willing to live and where those jobs will be (city centers or remote). What are your thoughts on that?

AD: DPZ has been asked by clients to develop designs for that. And we have. But such change matters only when it sticks long-term. So, the question is how long will the patterns introduced by COVID-19 last? It is most instructive to look at the pandemic in 1918, which is a clear precedent. People think that the Spanish Flu pandemic was followed by the Roaring 20s, when the stock market went up and women danced in short skirts and men wore tuxes—but actually that movie image represented a very small segment of society—the young, the urban and the rich. The rest struggled. Remember that then there was no prospect of a vaccine. All they had for protection was fresh air and sunlight. So, people moved south in massive numbers. Think about Florida. People think it was air conditioning that made its development possible. But air conditioning didn't come until after WWII, while Florida boomed in the 1920s. I live in Coral Gables, which in 1924 was the largest new town in the world. In California, the place was in cold, foggy San Francisco, but by 1926, Los Angeles had become the hot place, when in 1918 it was still a backwater. People moved to where the sun was—and it became permanent.

Today, COVID will lead to permanent changes in affordability. The "flyover" places are desirable now because entertainment, education, culture, shopping, work, society, dating and food—the reason for cities—are all now delivered via the internet.

At a smaller scale, modern architecture was first promoted for health reasons. The plain white walls, as ornament could not be wiped clean. Big glass walls for sunlight to disinfect interiors. Shaded porches disappeared to be replaced by pool terraces and roof gardens for taking the sun. Yes, things are going to change with COVID and many of the changes will be permanent—

not least because they have proven to be pleasant and reasonably inexpensive. Outdoor living areas are far cheaper to provide than the interiors of a large house. Or you can live in a small dwelling on a great street where you can socialize at the café rather than a living room. In Europe, people often meet at cafés because their apartments are tiny. The McMansion doesn't need to internalize a neighborhood, with multiple eating areas and a gym. Streets, squares and plazas can be the real neighborhood.

TCA: Do you see the role of federal and state governments evolving over time to resolve the housing crisis? No matter how much funding is provided, it doesn't seem to be working.

AD: Again, be realistic. Don't eliminate anything. Just add. Create a decision tree for affordable housing. You can choose the existing route—which is highly developed—with its government subsidy, or you can select an alternate route that involves less red tape—less of the zoning codes, building codes and permitting processes. This would increase enormously the quantity of affordable housing developers. That is the thesis of Lean Urbanism.

TCA: As one of America's preeminent architects, do you see a role for design in this effort?

AD: Let's assume to start that floor plans are competent. What is necessary then is beauty. Good design is like camouflage, with truly beautiful housing, the opposition to affordability withers. There remains only the problem with scale, as nothing large is acceptable to neighbors—and it shouldn't be, as it could overwhelm the existing society. Twenty affordable units will upset the neighborhood, while four in a good looking, contextually-designed project might be welcomed!

TCA: In a separate discussion I had with you, you mentioned the promise of the moveable "tiny house" and the placement of these units in unused parking lots. Please elaborate.

AD: The "tiny house" has, since 2018, been defined and regulated by the RBC, but it is still emerging from its counterculture origins. I became interested in a specific segment that is permitted through the State Department of Motor Vehicles and therefore can be located on dead parking lots—of which there are now thousands of acres

in America. Such parking lots offer proper drainage and environmental damage is already done. Sewer, power and water are already present on the site; the traffic impact has already been accounted for by the prior use, and the pavement is strong enough to be a foundation. The site can be leased instead of bought. You can offer tiny houses for the teachers at the schools and on hospital parking lots for nurses. But the most widespread market is the emergent category of the employed but homeless: Young persons with master's degrees who must still commute long hours because "Silicon Valley" is too expensive! They could inhabit tiny houses on the parking lots surrounding the buildings—instead of their cars. Is this too simple?

Tiny houses are also useful for what Lean Urbanism calls "Meantime Uses" for the opposite situation: Where the market doesn't justify new construction, so the owners choose not to redevelop open sites. Such housing would help in the meantime. Tiny houses are a step to regular housing. Arrange them well, manage them well, have fun and increase the property's value. When the market justifies more investment, the tiny houses can be moved to repeat the process. This should be an easy option to the very people who are crying for affordability.

Tiny houses should also be allowed in backyards, by the way, because they're less expensive than stick-built ADUs. Housing advocates will be demanding that their cities make them legal.

TCA: Where do we go from here? What are you hoping to achieve in 2021?

AD: The industry needs genuine innovation—ideas commensurate with the scale of need. The problem is so enormous that it is not going to be addressed by tinkering here and there or by just doing more of what we're already doing. Improving tax increment financing is not going to make a great difference. The industry needs radical change. Perhaps this will be led by the generation of 1968—my generation, who were once both idealistic and radical! The old must break through to enable a younger generation to contribute, because right now they don't know how the system works. When was the last time you saw a solo young tax-increment developer? Never. They're all working for big corporations. Their energy and idealism are being wasted. Let's enable them to build housing on their own and for their own. **TCA**