

Visioning
Phil Gyford
2000-04-24

The Congress for the New Urbanism is a collection of people who share common views on the ideal form of our cities and towns. The planners, architects, local government officials and other experts who make up the organisation are against the typical sprawling suburbs that are now so common. They want more dense urban developments inhabited by residents of varied income levels, with a mixture of residential and commercial properties, and integration of public transit, pedestrian and bicycle systems. The buildings and environment should encourage human contact and carefully formed building codes guiding developers should ensure pleasant and sustainable neighbourhoods.

The Congress' vision statement is in the form of a "Charter of the New Urbanism," a 1,000 word document outlining the organisation's views on the form development should take. The first quarter of this is a summary of their beliefs and aims, while the rest is divided into three sections: "The region: Metropolis, city, and town," "The neighbourhood, the district, and the corridor," and "The block, the street, and the building." Each of these three sections has nine principals that policy and practice should follow if it is to adhere to the tenets of new urbanism. They are framed in a similar way to the rules set out in Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, a 1977 guide to creating pleasant cities, streets and buildings. An example of the CNU's principles would be:

Within neighbourhoods, a broad range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.

There are no specific goals, let alone dates by which they should happen. The document is more an expression of values than a description of a specific ideal to be achieved, although that ideal is described in a practical manner with the 27 principles. Perhaps the closest the charter comes to an expression of a pure vision are the following two paragraphs.

We stand for the restoration of existing urban centres and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy.

We advocate the restructuring of public policy and development practices to support the following principles: neighbourhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, and building practice.

While these are admirable statements of the organisation's desires it could perhaps be criticised as a vision statement. Firstly, these are not specific goals to be achieved; there is no way of knowing when the group's goal has been reached. One can imagine of course that the group's goal would be to see every neighbourhood in the country transformed or built to conform with their principles, which is unlikely to happen in the near future. Secondly, it could be that the organisation does have a more vision-like document but this public charter is their more practical public face.

We could also criticise the charter for being almost too middle of the road: it is neither specific nor particularly creative. It lacks the specificity of setting definite goals to be reached, of naming figures and dates. This has the benefit that the principles are flexible, as they would need to be in the real world of town planning and development, but it detracts from their value as components of a vision. At the other end of the spectrum it is, as a charter, a fairly dry document lacking creative colour; there is no attempt to paint an image of what life might be like in a neighbourhood that conforms to the Congress' ideals and little inspirational, rallying rhetoric.

So, in a visioning session for the Congress for the New Urbanism we need to focus on creating an imaginative and exciting vision as a contrast to the practical but dry principles, and also some kind of timeline to set achievable goals. We do not need to spend long working out the organisation's specific desires. The charter is evidence that the organisation is clear about its desires and in other literature the members demonstrate they know exactly what they want, down to minute detail (roof pitches, types of trees, street widths, etc.).

The members of CNU are geographically scattered, and thus there is little chance of a regular series of visioning sessions. For this reason a single day workshop seems suitable, that could perhaps be incorporated into an existing conference or other gathering, with the aim of maximising attendance.

As a warm-up exercise we will look at current trends and also have a brief reminder of what the organisation's general goals are to ensure everyone begins on the same page. The participants will be guided through an incasting exercise to see a vision of their ideal world of 2050 which they will then be encouraged to draw or write about on a large sheet of paper. Some may find 2050 to be too far in the future to conceive of, but given the amount the organisation would probably like to achieve, and the slow pace of change in the planning world, it is hoped this will yield more practical results by the end of the day. Hopefully the Congress' members are used to thinking on longer timescales than many people.

The group may have to split into a number of smaller working groups if there are many participants. Each participant will then share their vision with the rest of their working group and it will attempt to come up with a joint vision based on these. All the working groups will then come together to combine their visions into one single vision, an inspiring and colourful description of the world the group as a whole would like to live in.

In order to create some kind of timeline the group will next engage in backcasting from this ideal vision, setting goals that must be achieved in order to reach this state. Once complete we should have a timeline of events leading from the present to our perfect future.

It would perhaps be desirable to decide on what each individual must do now, in order to reach the first goals on the timeline. However, given we have only allocated one day for the event, this must be left off the agenda. While an unfortunate omission, we have still achieved our aim of creating an exciting and descriptive group vision and a timeline of goals that must be met in order for this vision to be reached.

CNU Visioning Agenda

Time	Activity
8.45	Introductions, agenda
9.15	Warm-up A quick round-up of current trends and what CNU currently stands for.
9.30	Incasting, personal vision creation Each participant is encouraged to draw, diagram or write their ideal vision for 2050 on a large sheet of paper.
10.30	Break
10.45	Group vision development Individuals present their personal visions to others in their small group (about six people). Each group then combines these visions into a collective vision for the group on a single large sheet of paper.
11.45	Joint visions presented to whole group Each working group presents their vision to the group as a whole.
12.15	Summarise group vision Common themes are summarised on a large sheet of paper with the intention of forming a single common vision.
12.45	Lunch
2.00	Settle group vision Review of the common vision as it stands, clarify, resolve disagreements, reach consensus.
3.15	Break
3.30	Backcasting The group works back from this common vision, deciding what events must occur prior to it in order for it to be achieved. This will result in a timeline of goals to be met.
4.30	De-briefing
5.00	Finish