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Where New Urbanism is strong — and where it’s weak

By Robert Steuteville

The New Urbanism is growing nationwide, but in some places more than others, an analysis of the movement’s geographical distribution shows.

Fifteen years after its official founding, New Urbanism remains a planning and design movement that’s distributed very unevenly across the country.

To gauge where New Urbanism is flourishing and where it is still in an earlier, slower stage of growth, New Urban News analyzed two sources: listings in the *2008 Directory of the New Urbanism* and membership in the Congress for the New Urbanism. CNU provided a geographic breakdown of its members, who tend to be the movement’s activists. In the second annual edition of the *Directory*, published by New Urban News Publications, we looked at the locations of projects and offices of practitioners, developers, and builders. There is substantial overlap in the clusters from the *Directory* and CNU, but differences as well (some tables shown below; please see [June 2008 issue](#) for all tables).

Perhaps not surprisingly, we found that on a per capita basis, the District of Columbia has by far more people involved in the New Urbanism than any of the states. As an urban place with more than its share of policy wonks, the nation’s capital is proving to be fertile ground for new urbanists.

Beyond DC, a state-by-state analysis does produce some surprises (see tables, below). Florida is known as a cradle of New Urbanism and has the most projects and people in the *Directory*, and the second most CNU members. (Only Texas has more, largely because the 2008 Congress was recently held there and attracted many new members.) On a per capita basis, however, South Carolina, Colorado, and Oregon rank higher. That’s a culturally and geographically diverse group of states in the forefront of this trend, and there are many reasons as to why they are in the lead. Strong population growth in the last 10 years is one factor common to states with solid ties to New Urbanism. This probably reflects the fact that it’s easier to get innovative development in a place where lots of growth is taking place. But that’s not the whole story — there are many states with strong growth and little new urbanist activity.

South Carolina

The South in general has substantial traditional neighborhood development (TND), but South Carolina stands out. In the early 1990s, Newpoint in Beaufort, by developers Vince Graham and Robert Turner, was one of the nation’s first successful TNDs. “It was a seed project,” says Turner. “A lot of developers came to see it and they said ‘this is working.’” Graham and Turner went on to develop other well-known TNDs and infill developments. The architects and builders trained in those early projects have gone on to work in other developments, and, in the case of designers, to see their work get built throughout the country.

The Palmetto State is rich in historic urbanism, with cities and towns like Charleston, Beaufort, and nearby Savannah. “These preexisting towns and cities were templates that were easy to sell off of,” Turner explains. “Builders have latched on to the Lowcountry style and are more qualified” than those in many other regions.

Colorado

New Urbanism has strong roots in the highly populated region east of the Front Range of Colorado — especially from Denver north to Boulder and a few miles beyond. Like many states with strong growth, Colorado has a

State ¹ CNU ² membership		
Highest total	Highest per capita	Lowest per capita
1. Texas	1. Dist. of Columbia	51. W. Virginia
2. Florida	2. Rhode Island	50. Hawaii
3. California	3. South Carolina	49. Oklahoma
4. Illinois	4. Colorado	48. S. Dakota
5. Pennsylvania	5. Florida	47. Alaska
6. New York	6. Maryland	46. N. Dakota
7. Georgia	7. Vermont	45. Delaware
8. Colorado	8. Texas	44. Maine
9. N. Carolina	9. Illinois	43. Iowa
10. Maryland	10. Georgia	42. Kentucky

¹Includes the District of Columbia.

²Congress for the New Urbanism.

lot of sprawl, but it is also one of the few areas with many superb examples of New Urbanism of many types — infill, greenfield, grayfield, transit villages — within a relatively short drive. Architect Tim Van Meter of Van Meter Williams Pollack in Denver credits the 1998 Congress for the New Urbanism in Denver as having a transformative effect on the region. Colorado has less historic urbanism than South Carolina, but the landscape is key to the state's appeal.

"A lot of people move here for the quality of the environment, and so some of that attitude has translated into appreciation for the urban environment," he says. "We've been able to connect those things." Van Meter also credits good political and planning leadership in Denver and Boulder. Colorado ranks right below South Carolina in per capita *Directory* and CNU representation.

States with most projects¹ in *Directory*

State	Number	% of US total
1. Florida	63	12.4
2. California	46	9.0
3. North Carolina	30	5.9
4. Virginia	28	5.5
5. Colorado	26	5.1
6. Maryland	25	4.9
7. Texas	21	4.1
8. South Carolina	20	3.9
9. Tennessee	16	3.1
10. Oregon	15	3.0

¹ Projects in the 2008 *Directory* of the New Urbanism are selected by New Urban News Publications and include TNDs, TODs, regional plans, form-based codes, infill development, and other kinds of new urbanist work.

Oregon

Oregon has a national reputation for good planning and is the only state with urban growth boundaries (UGBs) throughout. In per capita *Directory* representation, it is right below Colorado. Oregonians may be doing New Urbanism, but they don't necessarily like to be associated with the label — it's number 19 on per capita membership in CNU. "I think in Oregon we are all at heart new urbanists, but since we like to think we pioneered all our famous planning policies ourselves, there is not much acknowledgment of being part of the larger national movement," says Michael Mehaffy, a new urbanist planning and development consultant based in Lake Oswego, Oregon. "At times this makes it hard to get effective collaboration with others around the country and the globe."

The UGB and transit investments around Portland have also encouraged pioneering attempts at New Urbanism, some of which have been very influential. These include Orenco Station, Fairview Village, and the Pearl District. TNDs have been built in some of the smaller cities, like Bend, as well.

Florida

Florida ranks far ahead of all the other "big" states — those with populations above 10 million — in per capita *Directory* and CNU representation. It has more projects than any other state, and the biggest and most active CNU local chapter. The town of Seaside and the work of pioneering new urbanist firms, especially Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company in Miami, have been very influential.

Bringing up the rear

States that are least represented in the *Directory* and that have the lowest per capita CNU membership include Alaska, Hawaii, West Virginia, the Dakotas, and Oklahoma. Except for Hawaii, these are primarily rural states, although they have significant suburban development as well. In some cases, sprawl extends far into the countryside. Arkansas makes the list of states least represented in the *Directory*, though the state does have a SmartCode and several TNDs in the process and in planning, notably in the Fayetteville area.

Some states have planning under way that will introduce New Urbanism in coming years. Van Meter points out that he is designing five projects in Hawaii, including a 12,000-unit transit-oriented development 15 miles from Honolulu.

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